

# FRACTURED

THIRTEEN ACTION-PACKED  
MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

From  
WALL STREET JOURNAL,  
USA TODAY, and AMAZON  
BESTSELLING AUTHORS

JUDITH LUCCI

FIONA QUINN

NICK THACKER

BRETT BATTLES

JENIFER RUFF

DAN ALATORRE

SUZANNE JENKINS

TAMARA FERGUSON

CHRIS PATCHELL

A. J. SCUDDIERE

ED DASSO

ROBERT I. KATZ

AUDREY J. GOLE

# Table of Contents

[Fractured](#)

[RATINGS](#)

[JUDITH LUCCI: THE IMPOSTER](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[FIONA QUINN: WASP](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[NICK THACKER: THE ENIGMA STRAIN](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[BRETT BATTLES: SICK](#)

[An Introduction by Blake Crouch](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)



[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[JENIFER RUFF: THE NUMBERS KILLER](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[DAN ALATORRE: THE GAMMA SEQUENCE](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[SUZANNE JENKINS: SLOW DANCING](#)

# [BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[TAMARA FERGUSON: TWO HEARTS UNSPOKEN TARGETS](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[CHRIS PATCHELL: IN THE DARK](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)



[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[AJ SCUDIÈRE: RESONANCE](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[EDWIN DASSO: DEATH TARGET](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[ROBERT I. KATZ: SURGICAL RISK](#)

[BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)



[BLURB](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[THANK YOU FOR READING OUR BOOKS!](#)

# FRACTURED

• • • •

**THIRTEEN ACTION-PACKED MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS**

• • • •

**JUDITH LUCCI | FIONA QUINN | NICK THACKER | BRETT BATTLES | JENIFER RUFF | DAN ALATORRE |  
SUZANNE JENKINS | TAMARA FERGUSON | CHRIS PATCHELL | A.J. SCUDIERE | EDWIN DASSO | ROBERT I.  
KATZ | AUDREY J. COLE**

• • • •



# BLURB



FRACTURING THE SILENCE ...

...it's a battle of wills.

In the world of medical and psychological thrillers, this collection of authors is unequalled. Thirteen thrillers—written by NY Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today and Amazon bestsellers—load your Kindle with bold experience.

Medical malpractice, natural disaster, murderers and serial-killers, deviant minds on paths of destruction.

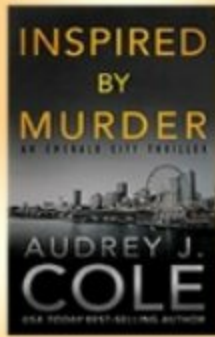
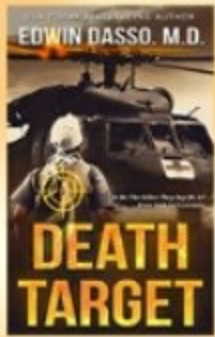
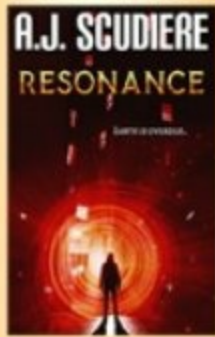
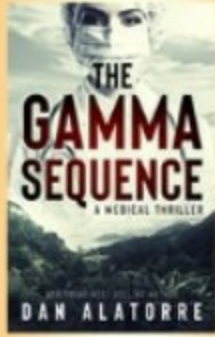
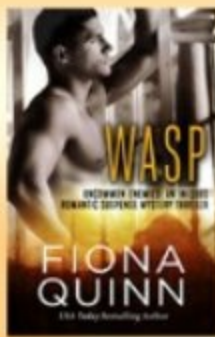
The truth cannot be hidden long.

It's a fight for survival.

These thrillers will keep you turning the pages until the end, and don't worry, the next book will be waiting to keep you entertained.

You'll love this anthology, because the authors are veterans of the craft and the price is a bargain for so many riveting stories.

Which book will you start with first?



Fractured: Thirteen Action-Packed Medical and Psychological Thrillers

Copyright © 2020 Rukia Publishing US by JUDITH LUCCI, FIONA QUINN, NICK THACKER, BRETT BATTLES, JENIFER RUFF, DAN ALATORRE, SUZANNE JENKINS, TAMARA FERGUSON, CHRIS PATCHELL, A.J. SCUDIERE, EDWIN DASSO, ROBERT I. KATZ, and AUDREY J. COLE. Each author retains the copyright of their respective story in this collection.

Cover created by Momir Borocki.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the authors, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.





## LANGUAGE/SEXUALITY/VIOLENCE



FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

**Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.**

Language Intensity:

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

Sexuality Intensity:

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

Violence Intensity

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence



# JUDITH LUCCI: THE IMPOSTER

---

THE IMPOSTER  
BY JUDITH LUCCI

**Author's Rating:**



**Language: \* Sexuality: \* Violence: \*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Copyright notice: All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Bluestone Valley Publishing  
Harrisonburg, Virginia



In the Big Easy, down by the Vieux Carre...

...Jazz bands play as people die.

The higher the temperature, the hotter the crime.

Especially if the killer's insane.

Thorazine cocktails aren't a cure...

When the killer is brutal, deranged, and vicious.

Alex is saddened by a violent attack on one of her staff and when the violence escalates to become the order of the day, it become sticky...

In a world of politics, underworld, and voodoo, Alex experiences things she never expected as a hospital attorney. There are forces at play she never knew existed.

You'll love this psychological thriller, because it will take more than strong character to come out the other side, it will take brains and guts. Alex has both.

You won't be able to put down this psychological thriller because hundreds of people have told us just that. It'll be "just one more chapter" until you turn the last page and find you've been reading all night.... But don't worry, there's another book to follow.





"Holy Crap, Mary, Mother of God! What the hell is wrong with people? Are they crazy, stupid, or just nuts," hollered Jack Françoise to no one in particular, even though he was sure his rants could be heard through the bullpen of the 8th Police District. "Honest to God, two tourists with their throats torn out in the deepest, darkest part of the Quarter. What is *wrong* with these idiots? I don't even go in that part of the French Quarter. No one needs to go down there. No one in their right mind *wants* to go down there, not even NOPD's SWAT team in full combat gear. Holy Shit, can anybody be that stupid or that drunk?! I just don't get it."

Newly-minted New Orleans Police Commander, Jack Françoise, sat behind his massive, but deeply scarred, walnut desk at 334 Royal Street, glaring at two crime reports placed in his in-basket for review. A big, burly man who tended toward overweight, Jack looked distinguished in his commander uniform, and his polished medals matched the glint of silver in his hair. A man's man, Jack commanded the respect of almost everyone he met. He stared out of his tall office windows, already heating up in the August sun, but saw nothing. His attention returned to the crime sheets, and as he reached for his coffee cup, his administrative assistant and PR guy knocked at his doorframe.

"What's up, Jason? Did I wake everybody up yelling?"

Jason Aldridge grinned at his boss. "Well, maybe a few left over from the night beat, but they were due to go home anyway," Jason joked.

Jack shook his head. "Did you check out these murders in the Quarter last night? What the hell?"

"Yeah, pretty bad. Young people, too, from what I heard. Kind of similar to that woman they found in that abandoned warehouse near Canal over in the First District several years ago. By the way, the coroner's office just called, and they want you over there ASAP. It's about this new case, the one they are investigating in the Quarter now."

"Yeah, I just bet it is," Jack muttered sarcastically. "Who's working the scene in the Quarter? Think I'll go over there on my way to see the M.E."

"I think Bridges caught the case, but he's probably gone now. Don't know who the head of the forensic team is. I can check for you."

"Never mind, I don't care. If the M.E. calls back tell her I'm coming, but I'm stopping by the scene first."

"Will do, Capt'n! Whoops, Commander." Jason stumbled over his boss's title and smiled apologetically.

"Just call me Jack. Skip the title. I don't act like a commander anyway. Didn't even want to be one. I was and am happy in the trenches and on the street. But, as you know," Jack said wryly, "I never planned to leave them."

Jason nodded. "Yeah, I know that. I'm sure you'll always be a beat cop, no matter the title. You've never left the streets before, and you're too damned old and stubborn to start at this late date," Jason acknowledged, waving his boss out of the office. His heart swelled with pride, watching the big guy leave the 8th district office.

Jason loved being Jack's right hand man, a job he had just formally assumed several months ago when Jack had risen in the ranks. Jason had more respect for Jack Françoise than he'd ever had for any one man. Françoise could come across as a total police asshole, but deep inside, he was kind and generous and a true advocate for the citizens, particularly the victims of murder and violent crimes in New Orleans. Jack was also tenacious, bull-headed, and hard to work with, but Jason was used to

this as well. Sometimes, Jack's dark moods surfaced when he reached a dead end in the crimes he sought to solve. In Jason's mind, Jack was a hero and always would be even though Jack would never claim fame or recognition for the cases he solved.

Jason smiled while considering the magical way Jack disappeared from press conferences and the media. He was sure Jack planned to keep it that way, even as a commander. He was as humble as he was caring and altruistic, and Jack flat out hated the press. Jason smiled to himself as he reflected on his years with Jack Françoise. *An honorable man*, Jason thought, closing the commander's door quietly as he left the office.



Jack hated the blast of August heat that momentarily blinded him while exiting the 8th District office. He jumped into his vintage police-retrofitted silver Cadillac parked in a no parking zone on the side of the building and headed down toward the Canal crime scene on Burgundy. He parked, illegally of course, at the corner of Toulouse, knowing that all NOPD in the area knew his car and would never ticket him. He trudged down toward the scene, wiping the sweat off his brow with a white linen handkerchief.

Jack, as hardened as he was to street scenes, turned his head away from a man with a needle in his arm and a guy lighting up his crack pipe while sitting in a doorway. He was convinced that neither man had seen the inside of a house or had a meal or shower in days. He quickly glanced inside a vacant, burned-out building on Canal, noting several other vagrants boldly smoking crack, not caring who or what could see them. The bottom of the barrel, the dregs of humanity, hung out in this part of the Vieux Carre. The commander hurried his pace toward the crime scene. He could see the yellow tape several blocks away and thought what a bitch it would be to climb back up the hill in this August heat. He hailed the CSI team's chief processing the scene.

"Yo, Vern, what's your ornery ass doing up so early in the morning?" Jack asked, slapping the forensic chief on the back. "I thought you were working nights!"

Detective Vernon Bridges stood up, turned, and faced Jack smiling broadly. "Why, Commander, what in the world are you doing down here in this hell hole so early? With your big promotion and all, I never expected you'd leave your air-conditioned office on Royal Street," Vern joshed, pumping the commander's hand.

Jack returned the grin, happy to see his old friend. "Vern, you know me better than that. I get the hell out of there every chance I get so I don't have to write reports and go to meetings. I hate all of those damned meetings." Jack shook his head and sighed. "These bureaucrats are crazy. They even meet to decide where to place the water fountains." Jack rolled his eyes, and Vern laughed heartily.

"Well, then, who writes the reports and goes to the meetings? Isn't that why you got the big pay raise?" Vern teased his old buddy.

"Jason goes. He likes meetings and, as my assistant, it's his job to make me happy. So, he goes to the meetings and writes the reports, and that makes me happy. Besides, he's glad to get me out of there so he can do his own thing. So, what do we have here?" Françoise questioned, gesturing toward the crime scene.

Vern pointed to the two chalk-etched bodies on the ground and groaned. "The meat wagon took the bodies away an hour or so ago. Two kids, probably late teens or early twenties. Most likely tourists. They were pretty tatted up, lots of body piercings. Looked Goth, if you ask me, but then what the hell do I know? Black clothes, black hair, black nail polish, and lipstick on the female vic, lots of metal."

Françoise shook his head. "Geez, not again. The report said their throats were torn out, sort of like an animal had attacked them. Anything else?"

Vern searched out his digital camera and flipped to a couple of shots. "They also had their wrists slit."

"Not much blood around here," Jack said. "Has anyone hosed down the streets? Had city maintenance been through here before they were found?"

"No, I don't think so, although they often come through before dawn. We waved off one truck when we got here a little after five."

"Who called it in?" Jack asked.

"Anonymous. Someone dialed 911," Vern said, shrugging his shoulders. "Figures, doesn't it? Probably the sick SOB that did it. I got a funny feeling that he's sitting somewhere close, watching us work the scene. Been thinking that all morning," Vern ended, looking around the area at the rundown buildings and dark alleys.

"Could be. It's happened before. Any possibility they could have been killed somewhere else and dropped here? Any witnesses?"

"Shit, Françoise, you think we got a fairy godmother hanging out down here in no man's land? Nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything, and, the truth is, everybody we've seen is smoking a crack pipe, shooting up, or is drunk or drugged out of their mind."

"Yeah, got'cha. Figures. Get the troops to canvass the neighborhood. You may get lucky. Keep me posted. I am off to the coroner's office. The M.E. sent for me to talk about these two vics."

"Will do. See you, Jack. Hey, by the way, looks like the male may have been upside down on that wrought-iron fence at one point. See the blood on the concrete? Stay out of trouble and meetings," Vern joked as he turned back to the scene.

"Upside down, what the hell?" Jack muttered to himself as he began his hike back to his car. "Damn, it's hotter than the gates of hell already."



When Jack reached his car, he was sweating like a pig. He opened the door of his silver Cadillac and sat down, relishing the plush seats. He turned the AC on full blast, aimed all the vents toward himself, and sat there for a good three minutes taking pleasure in the cold air. Finally, he headed the short distance to the M.E.'s office on Rampart, praying for a decent parking place. He spied one. Bingo! It looked promising as he viewed the street parking. And the parking spot was legal. The day was looking a bit brighter as he slid into the metered spot. Of course, he would never put money in the meter.

Jack squinted from the fluorescent lights as he entered the temporary administrative offices of New Orleans Forensic Center. He was overcome by the smell of disinfectant and bleach. He high-fived the guard at the desk, signed-in, and continued down the back hall to the stark white autopsy room and morgue.

The NOLA Coroner's Office had been under considerable strain lately due to bad publicity in the media. The *Times Picayune* had run a whole series of articles about screw-ups at the coroner's office. The stories had focused on staff losing DNA evidence, filing incomplete reports, and misinterpreting autopsy findings that had never existed. Worst of all, the office had been accused of selling body parts. It was rumored the coroner had made thousands of dollars selling livers, corneas, and bone marrow. These accusations were providing a field day for defense lawyers. Jack clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth just thinking about it. Damn the liberal press!

The coroner's office employees, like most state offices in the many parts of the nation, were underpaid, understaffed, and under appreciated by most people who crossed their thresholds. The NOLA staff was demoralized, and the office had experienced lots of turnover when, in fact, it was also home to some really fantastic forensic pathologists, dentists, and physicians. They were probably some of the best in the country, although you can bet the *Times Picayune* hadn't reported that little detail. He cursed the newspapers again under his breath.

The autopsy room was busy. Three physicians were autopsying recent victims, but he didn't see his favorite medical examiner. Nor did he find his two stiffs from this morning — at least, he didn't think he did, since the victims on the tables all looked pretty old.

"Yo, Fred," he hailed a morgue tech. "You seen Dr. Jeanfreau?"

"Yeah, she's in her office. Straight back, Commander." Fred gestured, giving the commander a big grin. Fred was a favorite of Jack Françoise because he always knew what was going on, never played dumb, and wasn't lazy, all traits which put Fred on his way to meeting most of Jack's criteria for earning praise.

"Thanks, man," Jack said, starting back down the hall, noticing the decrepit condition of the offices. Unlike the bright autopsy room, the temporary offices of the coroner were pretty shabby. Jack eyed the faded, dirty carpet as he wandered down the hall toward Maddy's office. He wondered when they were moving into their new building, although he hated the thought of them leaving his police district. It had been convenient having them so close. Now he'd probably have to hit I-10 to get there. What a pain. Traffic was always bad going out of New Orleans. As a matter of fact, traffic in New Orleans was always awful, and he didn't know all of the illegal parking spots in that part of town.

Maddy's door was partially open. Since she wasn't dictating, Jack decided to knock and interrupt her.

"Yo, Maddy, you rang?"

Dr. Madeline Jeanfreau, Assistant Medical Examiner, stood and walked around her desk to greet Jack. She was a tiny woman. Even with high heels, she was only a little over five feet tall. She hugged Jack and kissed him on the cheek. Jack returned the hug.

"What the hell, Commander? You get promoted, have a party, and don't even invite your favorite M.E.? How do you expect to keep getting special treatment from me or my office?" the diminutive Dr. Jeanfreau queried, as she smiled and shook her short, highlighted hair.

"That wasn't a party, it was just a bureaucratic BS hour. I didn't want to go, and you would have hated it. Think of who you would have had to hobnob with for an hour, all the while getting nothing but punch and cookies. It was grueling."

"Well, you owe me lunch then and it's going to cost you a bunch... and drinks as well," Maddy insisted, giving Jack a grin. "Soon! I want my lunch soon."

"Anytime, Maddy. You're the busy one. You know I just sit around and eat chocolate éclairs all day," Jack commented sarcastically. "What's up? Jason said you wanted to see me."

"Yeah, about those two dead kids that came in a couple of hours ago. Have you got any ID or information on them?"

"No, nothing yet. I just talked to Bridges, the detective who caught the case. We're still looking for witnesses. There was no ID found with the bodies. The detective said they looked Goth and were tatted up. Not much blood at the scene, though probably enough for DNA. Why?"

Maddy shook her head and said, "It's pretty strange. We haven't finished the autopsies yet, but we started collecting body fluids when they first came in, before we put them in the chiller."

"Yeah, so? That's pretty normal, right?"

"Yes, it is," Maddy replied, looking straight at Jack. "Problem is, they didn't have any."

"Didn't have any what? Maddy, I am not getting this. What are you telling me? The stiffs didn't have any fluids?"

"That's right, Jack. They didn't have any blood. It's likely the C.O.D. will be death by exsanguination." Maddy stared at Jack.

Jack's shoulders slumped and stared back at his friend. He felt the fear crawling out of his pores. Maybe not fear, just uncertainty perhaps? *What The Fuck! Not again! Please, not again*, he thought to himself. Their eyes locked, each reading the meaning on the other's face.

Maddy finally broke the silence. "Yeah, Jack. Here we go again. Just like 2009, 1984, and 1933."

Jack was suddenly overcome with fatigue. He shook his head. The day really wasn't getting better after all. "Well, keep me in the loop. Hopefully, these are the only two. We'll know more when we ID them." His voice sounded worn and tired.

"If you ever do ID them," Maddy replied. "Remember, we never had an ID for the case in 2009. I'll handle the autopsies personally. There could be another cause of death, but it's unlikely with the two of them and the fact that they were young and healthy."

"Yeah, I know," Jack replied, while checking a text message that had just come in. "I've got to go. I just got a 911 from CCMC. I hope there's nothing major gone wrong over there." He groaned, hugged Maddy, and left her office. But he knew better. He knew something bad had happened. Whenever he got called to Crescent City Medical Center, it was always something bad.

"Oh, Jack," Maddy called after him, "the vics had a receipt on them for \$116. From *Howl*."

Jack turned around, looked at her, and shook his head. "Great, this day just keeps getting better," he said sarcastically.





It was a little after midnight and Angie Richelieu was just finishing her nursing shift report when the red light went on in the corner of the nursing station at Crescent City Psychiatric Pavilion, signaling an All Staff Alert. "Damn!" she muttered under her breath. Flashing red meant all hell had broken out somewhere on the unit. Sadly, she knew what that meant for her and picking her daughter up on time. Her shift had ended at 11, but paperwork had taken her an hour after that. Now who knew when she would get out of there?

Cursing under her breath, she unlocked a small metal cabinet and took out a syringe filled with Vitamin G. She laughed a bit as she thought about the Vitamin G — a nickname for Geodon. A powerful anti-psychotic agent, it could settle down a horse almost immediately. G for goodnight! She placed the syringe in the pocket of her blue uniform top and cautiously opened the security door that led onto the Psych unit. Never knew who was hanging around, just waiting to get into the office.

The coast was clear, and Angie saw everybody heading toward the east corridor. She heard an angry "Get the hell off of me! I'm a policeman!" coming from that hallway. *Big Jim!* she thought to herself.

She was surprised and not surprised at the same time. James McMurdie, the former NOPD cop, had been a model patient up until now, so she was surprised that he was involved. She was not surprised because she had almost seen something coming earlier in the evening.

It had been a great shift on the unit until that new administrator, Lester What's-his-name, had shown up. He wasn't even a real employee. Don Montgomery, the CEO, had contracted with him to run the Psych Pavilion. Lester was weird, just as weird as some of the patients. The patients had been quiet until he came onto the unit. Once the patients saw him, a sort of agitation had set in like a wolf walking into a field of tasty sheep.

Plus, he was creepy. Angie shook off a chill when she thought about the way he'd looked at her. He was gross and struck her as a real leech. He'd stayed most of the evening on the unit. He was working in his office between the general psych and the prison units when he wasn't on the units talking with the patients. She remembered the other nurses saying how inappropriate it was that he talked so much with the patients. He'd spent a lot of time talking with Jim in the day room. A lot of time.

Angie hurried past the shuffling patients, and when she turned the corner and looked down the corridor, she saw a sight that was both tragic and comical. Jason, the lone security guard, whose best asset was his enormous weight, was lying on top of Jim in the hallway. Ben, the orderly, had control of Jim's right arm and Amy, a petite Asian-American patient care assistant, was trying to control his left arm. Amy was wrapped around the arm like a python while he threw her up and down as if she were weightless and he tireless. Amy grunted each time Jim slammed her onto the dirty green tile floor.

Ben looked up as Angie ran down the hallway. "Hurry up! He's beating the hell out of Amy!"

Angie looked to Jim's left arm where Amy was clinging like a tired squirrel to a tree trunk and saw that Jim's sleeve had ripped at the shoulder, exposing his taut deltoid muscle. Without hesitating, she sat down on top of Amy. Mercifully, their combined weight kept the flailing left arm pinned to the floor as Angie plunged the needle into the deltoid muscle and pushed the Vitamin G into Jim's body. She withdrew the needle and waited.

As she sat perched on Amy and the softening arm, Angie thought about what a joke the Psychiatric Pavilion was. The "Pavilion" was really an old three-story storage warehouse that CCMC had hastily renovated into three psychiatric units about eight years ago when psychiatric and substance abuse services had actually been moneymakers for the hospital. Now they weren't and the building had been sadly neglected. It was beginning to have the look of a "blighted" building that Angie remembered from her community health class at LSU where she had recently received her Bachelor's degree in nursing. *Fat lot of good that did me*, she mused.

But Angie knew in her heart that her degree did matter. She chose to work at the Pavilion where the salary was at least fifty percent more than the medical units because the patients were so sick, scary, and dangerous. The Pavilion was actually three nursing units. Pavilion I was now the prison unit and housed some of the most dangerous, criminally insane inmates from the Deep South. Pavilion II was now general psychiatry where chronically psychotic patients were committed by temporary detaining orders. They were kept there "until they promised not to try to kill themselves or others again." Angie thought it was criminal that these sick patients were generally discharged in two days. Jim was one of the exceptions. Pavilion III was the substance abuse unit where patients were detoxed and "cured" in three days, and then discharged. The absolute worst was the CCMC Pavilion management. Don Montgomery, the CEO of CCMC, had contracted with the state hospital over in Mandeville to take their forensic psychiatric patients several years ago when a public outrage from the good citizens of Mandeville had succeeded and the hospital closed. Even though CCMC received a premium for housing and caring for the forensic patients, none of the money went back into the safety and security of staff and patients at CCMC. Angie shuddered and felt a chill when she thought about the patients she'd worked with over the past year. Some of them had nearly frightened her to death. She had thought Jim was one of the safe ones —until now.

While plunging the needle into Jim's shoulder, she had made the mistake of looking into his eyes. The eyes were there, but Jim wasn't. It was as if he were somewhere else. He hadn't recognized her. Recognition was the basis of human interaction and is what separated friend from foe. Those empty eyes terrified her.

"What set him off tonight?" Angie asked Ben as she came back to the present. "He was one of the good ones — I thought."

"Louis and Jim were playing Battleship in the day room. Louis won and Jim said he was cheating. It was so strange. Normally Jim didn't care if he won or lost. Not this time. Next thing, Jim said Louis was sleeping with his wife. Crazy! Louis hasn't had a hard-on in ten years. Next thing, Jim lunged at Louis and missed, and Louis ran into the hallway yelling. Jim followed with murder in his eyes. Louis ducked under Jason's arm and Jim ran smack into that arm. Knocked him down and Jason got on top of him. I came out of the day room and jumped on Jim's arm."

"Thanks, Louis. Many thanks to you, Jason. And Amy — what you did was above the call of duty. I think you're going to be pretty sore. If you need to call off for your next shift, I'll vouch for you," Angie said as she looked at the poor battered Asian-American woman.

"Thank you, Miss Angie," replied Amy in broken English.

"Okay, let's get a stretcher and get Jim into the seclusion room. I've got to go back to the office and write up the report for this incident." Angie got up and hurried back to the office, carrying the capped syringe with her to deposit in the Sharps Container.



It was after two a.m. when Angie finally stood in front of the first of two locked metal exit doors. This one bore the scars of countless chair and table strikes. The institutional grey paint was scratched, and the graffiti had not been washed off for a week. She fumbled with her keys, finally got the key in the lock, and urged the heavy tumbler to turn. "Damn," she cursed, glancing at her watch and noting the time. She wished she had called the childcare center in the main hospital to tell them how late she would be picking up Jessica. *Oh my God, I'm three hours late*, she thought. *They're going to kill me over there*. She felt her pulse race with anxiety as she considered how upset her sixteen-month-old daughter was going to be when she woke her up to take her home.

*I've got to get a new job*, she thought. *This psych unit is killing me*. She closed the door and heard the reassuring click as it locked. She walked down the short hallway to the second locked door. This one only bore a couple scars, but they were deep. She didn't remember who it was or when, but one of the patients had followed a staff member through the first door with a broken off chair leg in hand. Most of the blows had landed on the unlucky staff member. A few had landed on the door. The door had survived — the staff member had not.

*I never get off on time*, she thought. She glanced behind her just once to make sure nobody was in there with her, then she unlocked the second door. Once through that door, there was a long hallway, then an exit door with a push bar. The second door closed behind her and she made sure it was locked before she walked down the long hallway. *Boy, it's dark out there*, she thought, peering through the glass windows of the hallway. Sensing freedom, she pushed on the bar to open the door to the outside. The elation was short-lived.

The heat smacked Angie in the face as she walked into the August night. The air was close and heavy. A crimson-tinged bolt of lightning highlighted the sky for an instant then things went dark again. *Thunderstorms*, she thought. *I've got to get home soon. Jessica is scared of thunderstorms and she will freak out if it happens in the car*. She walked quickly down the darkened path toward the parking lot. She looked around and told herself she was alone. *It's pretty spooky out here*, she thought. For a moment, she considered calling security, and then she remembered that it would take at least thirty minutes for the guard to get over to the Pavilion. Besides, if he were busy, it could be twice that time.

With the cutbacks heralding the new health care act, there was only one security guard on the night shift now. There used to be three or more guards — even on weekends, and now there was only one roaming guard, and one — Jason — in the forensic psych unit where Angie worked. After all, it is New Orleans and even post Katrina, the crime rates were startling.

Angie continued to reflect on the Pavilion as she walked to her car. Now psychiatry was a money-loser, a liability to the bottom line — and CCMC, a world-class hospital, wasn't about to spend large sums of money to safeguard patients or staff. Managed care payment systems made it almost impossible for you to be crazy, have a breakdown, or recover from prescription or street drug abuse or alcohol. Reimbursement had all but disappeared and with health reform on the horizon, it would only get worse. The mental health system in the U.S. was sadly and severely broken, irretrievably so, perhaps. In fact, with everyone getting care under the new reformed system, it was predicted that mental health care would increase steadily with shorter-term admissions.

Angie shook her head when she considered just how awful the mental health system was in the U.S. Depressed, deranged, and addicted psychiatric patients could no longer come in for a few weeks

of therapy, get their meds regulated, have a few art classes, and play some board games to learn to control their anger. Why, just last week they had discharged a newly diagnosed Bipolar II female patient who had attempted suicide and been in a coma for ten days with an aspiration pneumonia. She only stayed on the psych unit for two days because the patient promised, "I'll never do it again. I don't know what came over me." Of course, her insurance didn't want to pay either, but the hospital would have been ethically bound to keep her if she had asked to stay. In Angie's mind, that bordered on gross negligence. Suppose that woman went home and "offed" herself with her small children in the home? Worse still, suppose in her psychosis, she killed herself and her family? It had happened before. What safeguards had been put in place? *Oh, I forgot*, Angie admonished herself. *She had two days of counseling and three days of Lithium*. At least that's what the attending shrink had told Angie when she questioned the discharge. That should do it. *Yeah, sure*, she thought. She was disgusted with the entire U.S. mental health system. How in the world could anyone get better in only days? These poor, mentally sick, often physically ill patients were discharged back on the streets of NOLA, or even to their homes, with no regulated medicines or skills to fight back against the demons that endlessly plagued their minds.

Her walk in the black night seemed endless. Even this late, the southern air was stifling and viscous. She was sweating, but she felt cold on the inside. Angie continued to think about the dangerous patient population at the Pavilion. Many of CCMC's psychiatric admissions were initiated at the hands of the New Orleans Police and the local magistrate who had them committed after they had been picked up for a crime or some sort of outburst. Angie quivered again when she thought of some of the deeply psychotic patients trying to live on their own. They also had to medicate several of the most violent patients prior to bedtime. Angie had doled out six Thorazine Slurpees like they were health food drinks, but even then, the brutality was awful. She thought about it and then deliberately pushed it from her mind.

When she was honest, Angie admitted to herself that she hated working in psychiatry. She hated it because she was afraid. And she knew the patients knew. It was almost as if they could smell it on her. She could see the recognition in their eyes when they realized it. They seemed to give her a secret smile. Many of their eyes seemed to have an evil glint. Besides, on the critical care units or in the emergency room, you could predict physiological changes in patients. You knew if a patient was going to "go bad" and have a heart attack or throw an embolus. You knew what to expect. But, in psych? You just couldn't tell. You couldn't anticipate the interworking and short circuitry in the minds of the profanely and criminally insane. They'd go off at the drop of a hat over nothing. You could hand them their fork the wrong way and they'd come after you. It was frightening. Many of the patients were violent criminals, who had committed heinous crimes, yet CCMC cared for them, and she didn't mind caring for them. She just wanted to have enough staff to work in a safe place.

Angie continued her musings on the way to her car. Her background was critical care and emergency department but there'd been an opening on the psych unit where she could work just weekends and get paid for full time. This was ideal in many ways as it allowed her time with Jessica. She could be the kind of wife her husband wanted — at least most of the time. Besides, the money was good. Everybody at CCMC knew the Psychiatric Pavilion was the armpit of the hospital and that nurses were paid a premium to work there because it was dangerous. The Pavilion was also isolated, turbulent, and chronically understaffed. Usually Angie didn't mind so much. But the past three nights had been particularly stressful for her, more so than usual. She had been on a different unit each night, and besides, Jessica had a cold and she always felt bad leaving her baby in daycare when she was sick. Her Catholic guilt kicked in every time.

It was darker than the blackest of nights, as an ominous feeling of dread hung thick in the night air. Thunderstorms earlier in the evening had created a mass of low, overhanging clouds that completely obliterated the moon. Suddenly, Angie felt a chill come over her. She looked over her shoulder as a quiver ran up her spine. Her legs tingled. Did she hear someone breathing? She strained her ears. The hum of the cicadas and other night insects was deafening. Angie picked up her step, making a pact with herself never to walk to the parking lot alone again. Not ever. It was scary and unsafe. What in the world was wrong with her? Why had she made such a reckless decision? After another minute or so, she heard another noise. It sounded like a set of keys hitting the pavement or, perhaps, like metal hitting metal, she thought. Then, she heard a cough and a sigh of what seemed like satisfaction.

Angie's autonomic nervous system kicked in. Fight or flight! She started running for her life but was no match for her assailant. He quickly overtook her, grabbed her by the hair, stuck a rag in her mouth, and pulled her over into a crop of trees to the right of the road. Her attacker seemed huge and had a large scarf tied over his face. His head was covered with a hat. Angie looked into her attacker's face as he leered over her. Her eyes widened in disbelief when they adjusted to the darkness. She knew this man! Her heart was firing erratically, and she was dizzy and weak with fear. Her assailant looked at her and laughed. She saw a large metal spike in his hand. It looked like a huge nail. Terror raced through her heart.

"So, you recognize me, you little slut bitch. We can't have that now, can we?" Her assailant spat the words at her.

Angie was paralyzed with fear. Her hands were pinned down, and her assailant's knee was in between her legs. Her captor outweighed her and was strong. She couldn't move, but struggled against him anyway, trying to overcome his strength.

He let one of her hands go for a second while he pushed one of the metal spikes into the soft ground.

Angie's hand ripped the hat off her assailant's head, and she dug her nails into his hair, pulling as much hair out as she could. She had wanted to poke out his eyes but had missed.

"You little bitch. I could kill you for that! How dare you touch *me*. You *are* one of them." The man slapped her, dislocating her jaw.

Angie felt the bone pop near her ear. The pain was overwhelming, and she started to gag. This further enraged her captor and he slammed her face into the dirt, ripping off her uniform pants. His intent was clear, but all Angie could do was lie there and focus on the smell of the rotting vegetation on the side of the road. She tried to detach herself from her surroundings. It didn't work.

She heard him grunting while he pushed three more stakes into the ground, singing quietly to himself as he moved methodically through his tasks, clearing old leaves and trash out of his way and away from her. It was like he was cleaning house. For a moment, she thought he had forgotten about her and she felt a bit of hope. But it was far-fetched. He turned to her, smiled sweetly, and bit her on her shoulder. Angie screamed, and then her attacker hit her in the head with a piece of metal pipe.

Angie felt the searing pain rip through her head and down into her neck and shoulders with the first blow. The second blow didn't seem to hurt so much. Her last conscious thought was how pretty the twinkling lights looked in the intensive care unit in the main hospital building. She could see them clearly from where she was, and she wished she were working a double shift up there where everything was predictable, where the patients were harmless and appreciative. Then, finally, blessedly, she lost consciousness.





“Oh, no, no... no... oh, no... it can't be. It just can't be. This has to be a joke and it isn't funny. Stop telling me these things. Angie's at home right now taking care of the baby. She worked last night, she only works on the weekends. Today is Monday," Bridgett insisted.

A short silence followed as Bridgett continued to listen to the voice on the other end of the phone. Her voice was confused, skeptical as she responded, "You've got to be kidding me. This is wrong, wrong, WRONG! It's not funny!" Bridgett's voice reached a fevered pitch as she continued to argue with the person on the other end of the phone for playing games with her about her sister. Finally, she slammed the phone down and marched into Alex's office, all legs, high heels, and long, blonde hair.

Alex, the legal counsel for Crescent City Medical Center, looked up from her desk, startled to see her normally good-natured, fun-loving secretary glowering at her, full of rage. Bridgett could best be described as a blonde bombshell. She was tall and beautiful. She wore bright colors and survived a full day in the highest stiletto heels Alex had ever seen.

Bridgett's big blue eyes flashed anger, and her voice was clipped as she addressed her boss. "I'm so mad, in fact, I'm pissed. Somebody from the E.D. just called and told me Angie is all beaten up and a patient there. It really isn't funny and it's a sick joke. I know Angie's at home taking care of Jessica." Bridgett glanced down at her watch and added, "Besides, it's 10:00 in the morning, and she worked *last* night over at the Pavilion. I know, because I talked to her."

Alex stared at Bridgett, confused by the conversation. "Who called you, Bridge?" Alex asked, her voice soft and concerned.

"I've no clue. I didn't hear their name. I'm sure it's a mistake, but I am still pissed because they got the wrong person. They need to be more careful over there. Besides, I'm too busy for this stuff today. I love to have fun and cut-up, but not about sad stuff. This just isn't funny. It pisses me off," Bridgett fumed, her blue eyes stormy with anger.

Alex and Bridgett heard a knock in the outer office and stared as the door to Alex's private office slowly opened. Crossing the threshold into her office were Dr. Monique Desmonde, the chief of psychiatry at CCMC, Commander Jack Françoise of the New Orleans Police Department, and Alex's old nemesis, Bette Farve, the chief nursing executive at CCMC.

Alex felt a cold, numbing twinge in the pit of her stomach, and the hair on her arms began to rise. She knew something was very wrong and surmised what was coming next.

Dr. Desmonde gave Alex a hard look, shook her head negatively and then turned her attention to Bridgett.

Jack moved into a position behind Bridgett and gently directed her toward the elegant sofa grouping in Alex's office.

Alex felt as though she were watching a perfectly choreographed production.

Bette Farve stood uselessly to the side of the group for a moment, studying her bright red manicure, and then took a seat in a Queen Anne chair.

Alex's heart was thudding as Monique motioned for her to join them on the sofa.

Bridgett seemed transfixed, unable to talk. She looked like a beautiful Barbie doll.

Dr. Desmonde began slowly, "Bridgett, I'm afraid I've some bad news for you."

Bridgett's eyes were blank as she stared at Monique, a beautifully groomed, dark-haired woman in her forties.

Dr. Desmonde spoke gently. "Bridge, can you hear me? We must talk, now."

Bridgett nodded her head slowly.

Alex could feel fear and uncertainty crawling up her spine. Her knees began to shake, and her heart was pounding madly. It was the same feeling she always had when something bad had happened. Alex felt her knees jerking so badly that she was sure they would cause her feet to jump out of her 4-inch heels.

Jack touched her knee, realizing Alex's discomfort and offering support.

Alex gave the police commander a small, tight smile.

Dr. Desmonde continued, her voice soft, her eyes meeting Bridgett's straight on. "Angie worked yesterday, Bridgett. She worked the 11a.m. to 11 p.m. shift on the psych unit."

Bridgett interrupted Dr. Desmonde. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I tried to call her last night. I called early in the evening, but she was working on the prison or forensic unit or wherever. We never spoke, at least last night," Bridgett continued, the irritation in her voice unmistakable. "The idiot from the E.D. said she was over there and had been beaten up or something, said she couldn't speak so I didn't believe them." Bridgett turned and noticed Commander Jack Françoise at her side and addressed him, her brilliant blue eyes full of anger. "Commander, can you do something about this? Someone is harassing me about Angie," Bridgett said as she started to rise from the sofa. "I've got to go. I have a ton of work to do." Bridgett rose from the sofa to leave, as if nothing real had just happened.

Jack looked over at Dr. Desmonde who gave him a thumbs-up sign. He took Bridgett's hands in his own and said, "Bridge, it's not a joke. Someone hurt Angie after she left work last night. She was attacked, and we didn't find her until this morning and..."

Alex's heart lurched at the sight of Bridgett's big blue eyes. They were filled with terror and uncertainty. Her pupils were huge, surrounded by liquid pools of white. Her long blonde hair created a halo around her head. Alex wasn't completely sure if Bridge understood what the police commander had said.

Dr. Desmonde interrupted, "Angie's over in the E.D. They're going to take her up to surgery, and I thought you might like to see her before she goes." Monique's voice trailed off, uncertain of Bridgett's level of comprehension.

"Yes, yes, I would. Is she okay?"

Monique continued, slowly as she shook her head, "No. Not really. She is very sick. In fact, she is in critical condition. She has a machine breathing for her, a ventilator, and she has some head injuries. She's lost a lot of blood. She also has some internal injuries, and Dr. Goshette wants to do an exploratory to be sure she isn't bleeding on the inside."

"How'd she get hurt?" Bridgett asked in a dazed and child-like manner as she looked around the room. It was clear to all of them that Bridgett really wasn't getting it.

Alex couldn't help but be amazed at how good the brain was at screening out bad news.

Being the psychiatrist that she was, Monique tried hard to work through Bridgett's shock and denial. She started again, "Bridgett, Angie was attacked and beaten last night after work. She's very ill. Do you understand?"

Bridgett nodded impatiently. "Yes, you told me. I'd like to go see her now, if you don't mind. You said she was going to surgery, right?" Bridgett stared at Dr. Desmonde as if she was a moron for not understanding her.

"Yes," Monique sighed. "Bridgett, you must understand that she has bruises and cuts on her face and that..." Monique stammered, searching for words. "You must understand that she looks very different. Someone beat her badly. Are you sure you're up to seeing her?"

Bridgett nodded her head impatiently. "Of course, Dr. Desmonde, of course I am. But it isn't all that bad, not nearly as bad as you say. Angie and I are twins. If she were hurting badly, I'd be hurting too. It's always been like that, since we were babies." Bridgett smiled and continued, "I'm really not worried, let's go." She looked around the group. "Hurry up! I just need to get my purse."

Alex, Jack, and Monique looked at each other while Bridgett went into her office.

Bette Farve had completely removed herself from the situation and was flipping through a copy of "Architectural Digest" she'd removed from Alex's coffee table.

*What an uncaring bitch,* Alex thought silently to herself.

Monique rolled her eyes at Bette, shrugged her shoulders, and said, "Well, Bridgett doesn't really get it. Angie looks pretty bad and believe me she's really hurting. The reason Bridgett isn't feeling any pain is because Angie is in a coma."

Alex was startled. "Oh no, is it really that bad?" She searched the faces of her good friends and colleagues. Her crystal blue eyes locked with Commander Françoise's dark ones. "Please say it isn't, Jack," she implored.

"Wish I could, Alex, but I can't. It's bad. It's real bad. I'll fill you in later. Let's get Bridge through this part first." Jack lifted his large, bulky frame from the chair and moved into the outer office to help Bridgett gather her things.

Dr. Desmonde added quickly to Alex, "Jack's right, Alex. Angie is pretty beat up. She may be bleeding internally. She has a skull fracture and some seriously broken bones. Her jaw is broken, as well. She was out there for hours before anyone found her. She lost a lot of blood, and Lord knows how long she's been unconscious. Her crit, CBC are way down."

"Shsssst!" Monique put her finger to her lips as Bridgett and the commander returned to Alex's office. "We'll catch up later."

Bette looked up from her magazine and spoke for the first time. "My secretary called Bridgett's husband and he'll meet us in the E.D. They're looking for Angie's husband. He is supposedly on his way." Farve's voice was flip and tinged with sarcasm.

Alex immediately moved into Bette Farve's personal space to confront her, but Monique waved her away while she motioned for Jack and Bridgett to wait in the hall for them.

"Later, Alex," she cautioned. "We have enough going on here, and you're not dying on the Bette Farve hill right now." Monique glared at Bette Farve. "See me later, Ms. Farve. I want to discuss the concept of empathy with you. And I *do* mean it."

Alex smiled to herself as she watched Bette bristle with anger and then felt ashamed for enjoying the exchange. Dr. Desmonde was probably the only person at the medical center who disliked Bette Farve as much as she did, and this behavior was so unlike Monique it was a bit shocking. They both had Farve's number and supported each other when the nurse executive ran roughshod over the staff. Bette was uncaring, incompetent, inept, and not very smart. Unfortunately, the CEO, Don Montgomery, didn't share their opinion of Bette — most likely because they were very much alike. If you were to believe the hospital scuttlebutt, they were lovers. Gross, yuck, is all Alex could think about that rumor. It made her feel slightly sick.

As Monique and Alex joined Jack and Bridgett in the hallway, Alex began to feel angry about what had happened to Angie. For three years, Alex repeatedly asked the hospital executive committee to move the psych units closer to the main hospital, if not into the main medical complex itself. Of course, Don had a shit fit over that one. He would never tarnish his "world-class, prestigious medical center, soon to be a health sciences center" with the likes of the crazy lowlifes of New Orleans and criminals with HIV. He had even declared at the board of trustees' meeting that he would never turn

CCMC into an insane asylum or increase the number of beds for the psychiatric community. Alex doubted if he ever knew how much he had appalled the board or that he had made an enemy of Monique Desmonde for life, which was probably not a good thing.

Needless to say, Alex had met massive resistance from both Farve and Montgomery, who had issued a joint press release suggesting that "psychiatry, while a necessary albatross to any hospital, was CCMC's gift to the sick, poor, and disenfranchised mental cases of New Orleans." Monique had seethed with anger and it had taken her and Alex several bottles of Virginia wine to settle both of them. Alex had always been afraid that an accident like Angie's would happen and that someone, whether a patient, visitor, or staff member, would be seriously attacked in or around the Pavilion. Now it had happened.

All four were silent as they waited for the elevator to reach the ground level E.D., which seemed to take forever as it stopped on each and every floor. They were met at the nursing station by Sandy Pilsner, the nursing director of the emergency department.

Sandy eyed her friends for some nonverbal direction. She moved close to Bridgett, took her hand, and said, "Bridge, Angie looks bad. Her face is black and blue, her eyes are swollen shut, and she's hard to recognize. We have IVs and bags of blood hanging and she has a tube down her throat, hooked to a machine that is breathing for her. She'll be going up to surgery in a few minutes. We think she's bleeding internally because her lab results are so bad."

Bridgett smiled brightly at Sandy. "Is Angie talking you to death? I know how she is. She has never even been in the hospital, except for when Jessica was born. Do you think we can even count that?" Bridgett was totally out of it.

If Sandy was surprised at Bridgett's lack of understanding, she didn't let on. She said very clearly, "Angie is not talking. She's not breathing on her own and she cannot talk to you. Bridge, do you understand me? She is very sick. Maybe she can hear you, but she cannot talk to you. There's also a possibility her assailant raped her."

Bridgett didn't respond. Her expression showed no emotion and her affect was flat.

Sandy glanced at Alex and Dr. Desmonde, who shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head.

"Let's go, Sandy," Monique said gesturing forward with her hand. "We've got to break through this denial somehow."

Jack's face was impassive.

Alex knew him well enough to know that he was feeling phenomenal stress. She patted his hand for reassurance.

The sounds of the E.D., the newly renovated patients' rooms, and the spanking clean floors brought no comfort to Alex. As physicians and nurses glanced at her and offered tight smiles, she felt their pain. They all knew Angie, and many had worked with her over the years at CCMC. They'd celebrated her graduations from nursing school — first from Delgado at Charity Hospital and then LSU. They'd celebrated her marriage and the birth of Jessica. They'd worked side by side with her every day. Angie was one of the team, one of their team. She was their friend. She was one of their own, one of CCMC's highly skilled and coveted nurses, and one of the millions of caregivers all over the world who gave endlessly and selflessly of their time, talents, and gifts every day.

Alex noticed that Monique was eyeing Sandy carefully. They both knew this was especially hard for her. Angie had worked in the E.D. prior to the birth of her baby, and Sandy had hosted her baby shower. Sandy had already lost her good friend and mentor, Diane Bradley, during the tragic accident in the emergency department just before Mardi Gras earlier in the year. Sandy seemed to be holding up pretty well.

*Nurses are tough creatures*, Monique thought to herself. *Much tougher than we docs.*

As they entered the patient bay, they walked slowly toward the bed.

Bridgett looked hard at the patient in the bed and said angrily, "What in the world is going on? I don't know who this is, but it certainly isn't Angie. What kind of sick joke is this?" Bridgett's eyes flared with anger at Alex.

The next few seconds seemed like eons and finally Monique said gently, "Yes, Bridge, it is Angie. Look carefully. Her face is swollen, her jaw is broken, but it is Angie."

"It is not, it is *not!* Why are you all doing this to me? I thought you were my friends." Bridgett's enormous blue eyes brimmed over with tears as she stared at the faces of her friends around the bed.

Sandy reached to remove the O.R. cap from Angie's head.

When Bridgett saw the long, mussed up curly blonde hair, just like her hair only matted with dark, dried blood, she knew and she began to scream, "Oh, no! Oh, no, no... PLEASE, no, it can't be. Angie, Angie, talk to me, please, Angie, please answer me." Bridgett touched the long knife wounds extending from her sister's forehead all the way around her face. She looked at her friends around the bed. "Who did this? Who did this? It must be a monster. It looks like someone tried to cut off her face!" When she noticed her sister's Mother's Ring with Jessica's birthstone, she began to sob. "Oh, no, she wanted that ring for so long, and Johnny just gave it to her on Mother's Day." Her sobs became uncontrollable and could be heard throughout the E.D.

Sandy and Monique pulled the sobbing Bridgett away while Alex and Commander Françoise stayed by Angie's bedside, continuing to observe her injuries.

Alex, numb with shock, turned away, attempting to control her emotions.

Jack gently touched her on her shoulder. "All right, Alex, we can go. You've seen enough."

"No, just give me a moment." Alex drew a deep breath and turned to face Angie again. As she worked hard to dissociate herself from the body of her friend, she noticed some funny shaped marks on Angie's left shoulder, visible where her hospital gown had fallen to the side. She eyed them curiously and looked at the commander. "Jack, what are these? They look weird."

Commander Françoise shuffled uncomfortably. "It's a damned bite mark, Alex. The SOB bit her at least three times. He's a sick son of a bitch. I'd like to kill him. I will kill him when I find him," Jack hissed, as he felt for his holstered gun under his coat.

Alex looked at Jack with alarm. He was working himself into a frenzy. *Not good*, she thought to herself. Ever since the spring, when Jack had finally gone to Dr. Robert Bonnet complaining of chest pain, Alex had been afraid that Jack's stress level and stressful job would cause him to have a heart attack or stroke. He'd done absolutely nothing Robert had recommended. Typical, stubborn Jack. He was still overweight, had high blood pressure, and had high cholesterol. He drank gallons of black coffee every day, and his diet was horrendous.

Jack had spent his life living on the edge. He had been a football star in high school and at Tulane University, where he had played linebacker. Shortly after graduation, Jack had joined the service and gone Army Spec Ops. Alex assumed Jack had been engaged in Black Ops but didn't know for sure. Jack didn't talk about it much, but she knew that he had been everywhere in the world where there had been a skirmish until he finally retired from the reserves about ten years ago.

Of course, now, he was a police commander in New Orleans, working in the city with the highest crime per capita of any city in the U.S. Plus, he now was commander over the district with the most crime. This was further complicated by the fact that Jack was an honest cop and still clung to his ideologies, even after all his years of investigating murders, assaults, drugs, and abuse. Jack didn't even need to be in the trenches anymore. He was a commander, for God's sake! But Alex knew that

Jack would never leave the trenches. It wasn't in his genes. He didn't go to meetings, ever, if there was a way he could get out of them. He cared about the victims and worked endlessly to avenge the dead and maimed. Besides, Jack liked to get even, and Jack liked to get back at the perpetrators. It was who Jack was and what had earned him the nickname of "Get Back Jack."

For a fleeting moment, Alex considered calling Dr. Robert Bonnet, the chief of surgery at CCMC. Robert and Alex were close to Jack and shared concerns about him. Six months earlier, Jack Françoise had saved both of their lives as they were being pursued through the French Quarter by an assailant intent on murdering them. Consequently, a short while later, after he'd been shot by that same man, Robert had overseen Jack's surgery. Robert had been injured as well, by a gunshot injury to the medial nerve in his right arm that could still cost him his career as a surgeon.

Robert couldn't operate. The verdict was still out on his injury. Additional surgery and physical therapy would render a determination of Robert's future in a few months. Hopefully, he would be able to operate again. If not, he'd be an excellent medical doctor, as Alex had told him repeatedly. Robert was a natural healer, but he was NOLA's most outstanding surgeon.

The police commander, the surgeon, and the lawyer had become close at that time and forged a bond that would never be broken. The three had traveled to Alex's family home in Virginia with her grandfather, Congressman Adam Patrick Lee, and her grandmother, Kathryn Rosseau Lee, for a well-earned vacation and deserved respite. Alex and Robert had been married while attending the University of Virginia. They divorced later but had begun to build a new relationship in New Orleans.

Alex's thoughts briefly returned to her relationship with Robert Bonnet, back when the two were still married. Alex had loved Robert without reservation. They met when Robert was a surgical resident and Alex was a doctoral student in clinical nursing. They dated for over a year, became engaged, and married at the University Chapel on the Lawn in Charlottesville in a very proper circumspect ceremony. The marriage had merged two of the most powerful political families in the South — the Bonnets of Louisiana and the Lees of Virginia. Robert's family had been prominent in the social, cultural, and political fabric of the state since the French had discovered Louisiana in 1769, and his ancestral grandfather had been the first governor of French Louisiana. Robert's father, a former governor, presently served as a United States Senator for the great State of Louisiana.

Alex's Virginia heritage was equally impressive. She could trace her ancestry to Richard Henry Lee, father of Robert E. Lee, Commander and Chief of the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Her uncle still owned the ancestral family home, Stratford Hall, in Westmoreland County. Another relative owned a historic plantation on the James River near Richmond. Alex's grandparents owned a large estate in Hanover County, Virginia — not far from Scotchtown, the home of Patrick Henry.

Congressman Lee, a diehard law and order politician, had been overwhelmed with respect for the then Captain Françoise's integrity, character, and investigative skills. He had tried unsuccessfully to lure Jack into a high-level position with the FBI in Washington, D.C., but Jack was resistant. He told the congressman quite bluntly, and on several occasions since then, that he "wasn't working for no damned bureaucrats," that he was not for sale. Congressman Lee had loved the response and had tried even harder to recruit the burly, fearless New Orleans policeman. In fact, the congressman was still trying to get Françoise to come to Washington and work on some special law enforcement projects, particularly anything related to terrorism, but Jack still refused. Alex knew Jack would never leave NOLA. Alex felt an arm on her shoulder that halted her daydreaming. She turned and looked at Jack Françoise.

Alex's mind returned to the grim situation at hand. She stared again at Angie's battered body. Alex noted how pale, almost waxen, Angie's face looked and turned to Jack. "Jack, she is so pale. She

looks like a corpse. Feel how cool she is."

"Yes, I see." Jack was thinking back to the pale young corpse he had seen at Dr. Jeanfreau's morgue last week. She had looked just like Angie.

Alex continued to stare at Angie's face and said, "Most of these areas look like bruises, but they aren't discolored like I would have thought they should be. Bruises are generally discolored from blood perfusion. These slice marks look superficial, and there is little blood. Jack, it looks as if she has been cleaned up and prepared for burial. I guess her eyes are swollen from her brain swelling. We call those raccoon eyes," Alex exclaimed, remembering her own ICU nursing days, feeling more angry and agitated than before.

Just at that moment, Sandy re-entered Angie's room with the O.R. transport. "Gotta go, folks," Sandy said, as she helped disconnect and reconnect Angie's tubes to portable equipment and push the bed out of the bay.

Alex and Jack watched respectfully as Angie was wheeled from the E.D. Alex shook her head and looked at Sandy. "She just looks awful — why, she already looks dead. She's so pale. How much blood did she lose?"

"I've no idea. Her head wound is a closed fracture, so no blood loss. Her blood values, specifically her H & H are 5 & 18, really low, almost incompatible with life. We're thinking there must have been a ton of blood at the scene because we frankly cannot explain the blood values. Several of the docs think the attacker thought she was dead when he left. Did you notice the rope burns on her wrists? They were bleeding a little. One of her wrists was slit."

Alex felt her poise and composure completely leave her. She knew she had to get out of the E.D. She looked at Jack, whose face was a mask of outrage and fury. "Sandy, I've got to get out of here before I lose it. Jack, let's go to the cafeteria. We'll talk, and you, you can fill me in." Alex smiled at him and firmly, but gently, removed him from Angie's bedside. Sandy hugged Alex as she left the E.D.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Jack looked at his watch. It was almost noon. The thought of something sweet improved Jack's mood significantly. "Do you think they have any jelly donuts left? I didn't get one earlier. Maybe if I get my blood sugar up, I won't be so damned angry." Françoise looked at Alex sheepishly.

She laughed and said, "Yeah, maybe, but I doubt it. If they do have donuts, I may fight you for them. I need some comfort food." As they walked toward the cafeteria, the pair reminisced a little. It seemed like a good way to diffuse their incredible stress and anger.





"I'll never forget the first time I met you, Jack Françoise. You were brutally interrogating a nurse and eating a jelly donut. Might I remind you how rude you were to me? I was not impressed!" Alex's voice was stern and emphatic, but her blue eyes were laughing.

"It's all in the past now, Miss Lawyer Lady. I had to check you out good, you know, and you finally earned your stripes!" Jack teased then turned his attention to the food line. Ahead he could spot the donut case. "Oh, good. This day's getting a little better — two jellies left."

Alex shook her head as she watched Jack help himself to the remaining two jelly donuts and a cup of black coffee. She helped herself to decaffeinated black currant tea and a bagel. She decided to spare the commander any lectures on his health. The day had been difficult enough, and it had barely started.

As they moved through the line toward the cashier, Commander Françoise said, "You pay, Alex. You make the big money. Besides, I don't get a hospital discount, although I should considering how much time I spend in this place."

Alex laughed and nodded in agreement, handing her CCMC ID badge to the cashier, who scanned the amount and charged it to Alex's account. The two selected a private table in the back of the physician's dining room. They munched in silence for a few minutes, each caught up in their own thoughts about Angie and Bridgett. Finally, Alex broached the inevitable topic. "Well, Jack, what you got?"

Jack shook his head. "Not a lot. These kinds of cases make me sick. Nurses should never be expected to walk that far alone at night. It's at least two blocks from the psych unit to the parking deck. It's unlit, heavily shrubbed, and unsafe. It's a perfect setting for a brutal crime like this one. I'm surprised there haven't been more crimes over there."

Alex and Jack were interrupted by Dr. Desmonde who joined their table with a cup of tea. Her voice reflected Jack's anger. "I agree. You're right, Jack. I've been screaming at Montgomery and Farve for three years to do something about the location of the psych units, or at least the parking. I would have been satisfied with some lights, for God's sake."

Monique said, "Alex, you've known my concern about this for a couple of years! We both tried to get administration to move toward making the psych areas safer. This hospital doesn't give a rip about psych because it isn't a money maker." Monique slammed her teacup down on the table in frustration.

Alex eyed her friend carefully. Monique was a beautiful woman in her mid-forties. She was clearly distraught over Angie. The tall, thin psychiatrist was impeccably dressed as always, but her luxurious dark hair had fallen out of its neat chignon. Her normally pale, lovely face was flushed with anger and frustration. Her voice, usually low and controlled, was close to hysterical, or as close to hysterical as Monique would ever be.

Alex nodded. She knew Dr. Desmonde was right. She didn't challenge her at all. Monique Desmonde was uncharacteristically upset. After giving her friend a chance to recover and compose herself, she asked Dr. Desmonde how Bridgett was.

"Bridgett's gone home with her husband. I gave her a sedative and a prescription for later. They were going to get Angie's baby, who I might add was in the hospital nursery all night. Damn! Those nursery workers should become suspect if a nurse never shows to pick up her child. Damn, these people." Monique's deep voice was loud. Several physicians looked at her curiously from their tables in the private dining room.

Alex intervened and changed the subject. "What do we have as far as evidence? Did forensics get anything good?"

Jack answered, "Just the normal stuff — you know, pubic hair, oral, anal, vaginal, and rectal swabs, that kind of stuff. We also got some skin and blood that we found under her nails. She must have gotten one swipe at him before he beat her into submission." Jack paused for a few moments while Monique and Alex watched the emotions of hate and rage cross his face. He continued, his jaw clenched, "I'd like to kill the SOB." Neither Monique nor Alex doubted the intensity of Jack's desire for true justice.

"Is there any forensic evidence other than what you've just told us, Jack?" Alex looked at him, expectantly.

"Labs aren't back yet. We don't know if we're even going to get the PEPA and the PGM — you know, those semen tests — because too much time may have gone by." Jack shook his head. "I sure hope we can nail him with the forensics."

"You've got to catch him first, Françoise," Dr. Desmond reminded the commander.

Jack raised his eyebrows and glared at the shrink. "Not to worry, Doc, not to worry. I'll get 'em. In fact, I plan to get him soon. You know me, Get Back Jack," the stocky police commander declared to the psychiatrist.

Alex was deep in thought. As a nurse and an attorney, she knew the proper collection of forensic evidence was critical for a court conviction of a rapist. She also knew that semen usually contains three genetic markers at levels adequate enough to allow for routine typing for evidence. Unfortunately, PEPA decreases within three hours after intercourse and PGM would not survive for more than six hours. Consequently, the early gathering, testing, and analysis of the semen specimen were pivotal to building a successful case. The semen genetic markers were ABO blood group antigens and testing was done by quantitative electrophoresis analysis. Since the genetic markers occur in variable amounts in different populations, their presence or absence in combination with each other often were used to arrive at a percentage or likelihood of whether the suspect is the rapist or not. Hopefully, the comparison of the crime scene evidence with blood and hair samples from the suspect would provide compelling evidence in court and would render a guilty verdict.

Alex continued to review her knowledge of forensic medicine and asked, "Jack, how do the experts handle the bite marks on her back and shoulder? Who did you call in to look at that?" She shuddered as she thought about Angie being bitten by her attacker.

"Damned bastard, a real animal. SOB must be crazy. Probably one of your patients, Monique! Have you thought about that possibility?" Jack turned toward the psychiatrist, flashing his angry, dark eyes.

"Yes." Monique practically hissed at him. "I've thought about it, Françoise! Do you think I'm an idiot? That's all I have been thinking about since this morning! I've got the team working on it now, looking at charts, and putting together a profile among the in-patients." Dr. Desmond glared at the commander from across the table, barely able to conceal her anger.

Alex ordinarily would have interceded between the two but knew Jack and Monique had been friends since childhood and were actually pretty close. Alex also knew that Jack was uncharacteristically affected by this rape because of his fondness for Bridgett and Angie. It would be difficult for the psychiatrist and the police commander to be completely objective on this one. *And, me as well*, Alex thought. *Angie and Bridgett have been my friends since I've been here.*

Alex asked again, "What about the bite marks, Jack? What do you make of them?"

"Don't know yet. The crime guys photographed them and were smart enough to include a reference scale this time." Jack rolled his eyes and told Alex and Monique about the time the NOPD crime team had forgotten to use a reference scale with the bite mark. "When we got to court, the evidence was useless because there was no reference scale with which to compare the size of the bite with the mouth and teeth of the suspect. As you can imagine, the evidence was inadmissible. It was a big loss to the prosecution. Lots of heads rolled on that one."

"I bet they did and they should have," Alex said. "A huge error of omission. I bet the prosecutor was enraged." Alex could imagine the colorful and politically astute Harry Connick Senior, the New Orleans prosecutor, being caught with his pants down. *The man just hates to lose, just like me*, Alex thought. *I do hate to lose.*

"Are you all sure you did everything right this time?" Alex inquired, with a hint of that old Virginia Southern drawl slipping passed her lips.

"Yeah. Best I can tell. We took the photos, included the scale, and called in a forensic dentist. The crime team also asked that casts be made to use later to identify the perp. I think we're covered. One thing the CSI team said is that one of the forensic nurses noticed some puncture wounds on each side of Angie's neck. She said they were hard to see because they were in the slice wounds going around her face."

The three sat in silence for a few moments, pondering the horrific attack on Angie. Finally, Alex said, "Puncture wounds. Why would she have puncture wounds? Have you ever seen that before, Jack?"

Jack thought for a few minutes and answered, "No, I haven't. I really didn't notice them in the E.D., but we'll crosscheck that with other similar injuries in the database. We may get a hit."

"Did they mention a lot of blood at the scene?"

"Nope. It didn't come up, but I haven't been to the scene yet. If there was, it'll show up in the crime scene photos," Jack replied, looking at both women.

After several minutes of silence, Dr. Desmonde asked Alex, "What do you think the liability of the hospital is on this?"

Alex shook her head. "I don't know yet, probably significant. Personally, I feel that we should provide a safe place for our staff to work and that we should provide security for them to get to and from their cars, which we do—"

Monique interrupted her angrily, her face flushed, "Dammit, Alex. You sound just like a Main Street lawyer! You know as well as I do that the location, staffing, and administrative management of the psych department are unsafe. It's a joke!"

"Unsafe to you and me, Monique, nevertheless, the standard of care." Alex sighed. This was getting difficult. She hesitated a little and then continued, "Well, the nurses can choose to call security to escort them to their cars when they get off and—"

"Stop it, Alex. That's shit." The usually tranquil chief of psychiatry at CCMC was livid, her pale face colored with anger. Monique rarely used bad language. "You and I both know it! Escorting nurses to their cars during the off hours is the lowest security priority in the entire hospital. Last night Angie Richelieu stayed late. There was some sort of patient commotion. One of the patients attacked a woman in the day room. I don't have the details, yet. Anyway, the patient incident got the entire unit in an uproar. Angie stayed late to help the nightshift calm the unit down. She didn't have to. She doesn't get paid for staying late anymore. In exchange for staying three hours overtime, she's told it'll be thirty to forty-five minutes before security can escort her to her car! Alex, for heaven's sake, give it up. You know it's wrong!" Monique's voice and hands were shaking.

Alex sat quietly and said nothing. She knew it was a losing conversation.

Commander Françoise placed his big callused hand over the psychiatrist's small manicured one. He said to her, "Monique, you've got to calm down some. Things are terrible, but for us to help Angie and her family, we've got to get ourselves together. You're an important player in this. Right, Alex?"

"Right, Jack." Alex looked at Monique. "I agree with everything you say, Monique. You're singing to the choir. Don't forget, I'm a nurse! I've been on your side the entire time about everything — about relocating the Pavilion, putting up lights, increasing staff. This will give us an opportunity to really address these things and make some changes. Let's take the lead on this for now. First things first."

Dr. Desmond retorted angrily, "Alex, don't give me any of that psychobabble. That's my job!" Monique hesitated for a moment, thinking. Then, she said to Jack and Alex, her voice uncharacteristically sarcastic, "So what did the esteemed leaders of the hospital do for the psychiatric service? They contracted it out and gave us to strangers to manage. People who have no knowledge of New Orleans, our culture, heritage, or diversity. Give me a break! We now have contract management in psychiatry, which is inadequate to say the very least, and the patient care conditions, safety, and units are less safe now than they were last year. This is totally pathetic and self-serving of hospital administration. The contract administrator has actually cut staffing."

Monique paused briefly and continued angrily, her voice becoming higher and higher, "I'm sure the bottom line has come up. The place is probably making money now, but what a dump. That contract administrator, Lester Whitset, looks like a patient. He even gives me the creeps. I'd like to give him a frontal lobotomy." Monique tossed her head angrily, her dark hair bobbing, her tone of voice acrimonious.

Alex and Jack sat quietly and watched the conflicting emotions trail across Monique's usually well-controlled face.

After several very long moments, Monique finally reached for Alex's hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry and you're right, Alex. I'm overwhelmed and incredibly tired, and I am being a total bitch. Angie shouldn't be fighting for her life, and her husband shouldn't be wondering if their young daughter will ever have the mother that she once knew. The whole thing just stinks, and I hate that it's happened. And even though I've got concerns about Lester and the contract management group that is handling CCMC's psychiatric services, they came well recommended and are leaders in Behavioral Health Services. Perhaps I am over-exaggerating, but it seems to me our administration and the contract management service is much more concerned with money than with patient and staff safety. I'm afraid that with our growing, acutely ill, psych population we could be in for more trouble, particularly with health reform coming onboard. The delivery system they've implemented is simply not safe for our patient population. We are the only inpatient facility in the state that houses such dangerous psychotics and the criminally insane. It is truly a dangerous place."

Alex nodded and said, "I couldn't agree more, and I couldn't be more concerned. Let's meet soon and talk about it. I've been concerned about the Pavilion for several months. Plan on my office at 10 o'clock tomorrow, okay?"

"You've got it, Alex. If things settle down, I'll be there. Do you want to invite Farve? For what it's worth, I'm sure it will be a waste of our time, but a lot of the safety issues obviously concern the nursing staff."

Alex shook her head negatively and shrugged her shoulders. "When has she ever helped the nursing staff? Why would we even want to include her? Let's get Dr. Ashby." Alex stared at Monique strangely. "I am surprised you asked, Monique. Do you really want her at the meeting?"

"Hell, no! I don't want her," Monique retorted. "She's been a pain in my butt for years. I have loathed her from the first day I met her, but we should have her there. If we can get her on our side..."

Jack grinned at Monique and said sheepishly, "Come on, Monique. Don't hold back. Tell us how you really feel!" Jack and Monique started to laugh, and Alex joined them.

"You're right, everything you say is correct, Monique. I guess we should invite her because it's politically correct and her role should concern the safety of all staff." Alex hesitated for a moment and continued, "We'll have to include her, it's the best thing to do. She'll be mad as a hornet if we don't, and we *will* hear about it." Alex's tone of voice was almost apologetic as she looked at Monique, who was once again seething with anger at the very thought of Bette Farve.

"Invite the obstructionist bitch, I don't give a damn. I'm going over to the Pavilion. Call me if there's any change in Angie's condition." Monique grabbed her lunch tray and slammed it on the tray rack as she headed toward the door.

Alex and Jack looked at each other in amazement as Monique exited the cafeteria.

Jack spoke first. "Man, I've never seen Monique so blown away. This just isn't like her at all. I sure hope she gets it together."

"She will," Alex assured him. "This is Monique's worst nightmare. She has been waiting for something like this to happen for months and now it has, and she feels responsible. Trust me, that's exactly what's going on here because that's the way she is. Jack, by any chance, did you check out that guy, Lester, who is managing the psych services? I've never seen him or met him, but I hear he's pretty weird. If you haven't, maybe you should question him."

"Not to worry, Alex. I'm questioning everyone, and he is for sure on my list."

"Good," Alex said looking thoughtful and continued, "Let's see what the psych team puts together. There may be in-patients who have a history of rape or assault. We should know more about them later, and we also need to do a historical chart review of former psychiatric patients who have been on the unit. What do you think?"

Françoise was slow to respond. He stared at his coffee and looked longingly at the plate that held his last jelly donut.

Alex could tell by the look in his eye that he really, really wanted it.

"Well, I don't quite know what to make of this crime yet... this guy is a pervert who crosses the categories of defined rapist. If you've got a few minutes later on today, a representative from our sexual crimes division will be coming over to the Pavilion, sometime around lunch time. We're going to meet in the executive conference room. Why don't you join us if you can?"

Alex glanced down at her watch. "It's almost noon now. Would you be willing to meet in my office, since I don't have a secretary or administrative assistant today? I really need to get back to see what's going on."

Jack looked hesitant for several moments.

Knowing Jack as she did, Alex added, "I'll have lunch sent into my conference room. Does that help you make up your mind?" Alex asked, smiling.

"It absolutely does. You win. You know I'll never turn down a free CCMC lunch, particularly if Don Montgomery is footing the bill and won't be attending. I'm gonna make tracks over to the Pavilion and pick up Nadine. She's our sexpert — you know, our expert on sex crimes," Jack added hastily, noting the frown on Alex's face. "She's also a registered nurse."

Alex's voice was frosty as she said, "Jack please don't use that word. Let's just refer to her as an expert on sexual crimes. In some way it sounds demeaning, the word 'sexpert.' To me, it sounds demeaning to both Nadine and Angie."

Jack looked forlorn. He hated it when Alex corrected him or seemed disappointed. "Okay, okay, okay, you got it. I didn't mean to sound disrespectful," Jack said quietly as he rose to leave.

Alex smiled at him and teased, "It's okay, Jack. I'll forgive you this one time, but only this one time. Now get your butt moving over to the Pavilion and then get it back over here for lunch."

Jack stood and said, "Will do. See you shortly." He saluted her on the way out.



After placing her tray on the rack, Alex headed toward her office but decided to stop in hospital administration on the way.

Latetia, Don Montgomery's secretary, was working quietly at her desk. She looked up at Alex sadly and said, "Ms. Alex, how are Bridgett and Angie? I just heard a little while ago and it's just awful. Do you think Angie will be okay? I just know Bridgett must be terribly upset. Is there anything that I can do?" Latetia's liquid brown eyes were kind and reflected deep concern for her friends.

"Latetia, Angie's in surgery and you're right, Bridgett is beyond herself with grief. I wish there was something that we could do to help her and her family, but right now I think it's just a game of waiting and watching and praying." Alex watched Latetia's eyes overflow with tears as she moved from behind her desk to give her a hug.

"Sure, sure. I know you're right. We're planning to send food to Bridgett's mom's house for the next week or so. Check the Meals to Go in your email so you can participate. I'm sure that Bridgett and Angie's mom will be keeping the baby. I would imagine that Bridgett, her husband, and Angie's husband will want to be at the hospital."

"The food is a great idea, and I'm happy to participate. Love the idea of the Meals to Go. By the way, do you think you can find me a temp while Bridgett is out? I would anticipate she will be out for several weeks."

"Sure. Want me to try for Mona again?"

Alex nodded in approval and said, "Yeah. That would be great. She was pretty good during those several weeks last month when Bridgett and her family were vacationing on the Gulf Coast. And she knows me. That's half the battle right there."

"I'll do my best, Ms. Alex," Latetia said, reaching for her temporary staff file.

"Thanks. By the way, what's Don doing? Does he have anyone in his office?" Alex added, as she inclined her head toward the executive's office.

Latetia glanced at her phone. "He was on the phone, but now he seems to have hung up. By the way, you may want to think twice about going in there. He's in a pretty foul mood, so you might want to be careful. The July revenue projections came in and they were low, much lower than we expected." Checking out the look on Alex's face, Latetia added, "Are you sure you want to go in? I wouldn't if I didn't have to. I'm actually thinking about taking the afternoon off to get away from him," she smiled, rolling her eyes. "I know you. You're always up for making him mad," she teased.

"Yeah, I'm going in. He doesn't scare me anymore. It'll only take a minute and will make his day much worse," Alex added as she moved toward the door and knocked.

"Oh, that's just great. Thanks a bunch, Alex." Latetia groaned, as Alex knocked on the CEO's door.

"Enter." Don Montgomery was seated behind his massive, walnut desk, his head buried in computer printouts. He looked surprised and irritated at Alex's interruption.

"Alex, do we have a meeting?" He quickly scanned his Outlook calendar on his computer. "Nope, we don't. I didn't think so." He looked smugly at his legal counsel, always happy to be right and one up on the lovely attorney. "What do you want? I'm busy." Don glanced at Alex briefly and returned to his papers, a blatant act of dismissal. When Alex didn't reply, he looked at his watch and said angrily, "Really, Ms. Destephano! I'm very busy, and don't have time for you to stand there and gawk at me."

Anger crept up Alex's spine and she said, "No, Don. We don't have a formal meeting scheduled, but we do have a situation we must discuss."



"Let it wait. I'm preparing for the next trustees' meeting."

Alex's impatience could be heard in her voice. "That meeting is two weeks away. There's lots of time to work on that. I want to talk to you about Angie Richelieu, *now*."

Don looked up, irritated. "What? Who?"

"Angie Richelieu, the nurse who was attacked, beaten, and raped last night between the Psychiatric Pavilion and the parking deck."

Don was clearly annoyed. "Oh yeah, her. What a pain. Bette Farve told me about it. Too bad. Tawdry affair. Deal with it, you're the hospital's lawyer." Don shook his head, dismissed the incident quickly, and returned to his printouts.

Alex was furious at the nonchalance in Don's voice. She glared at him, her anger reflected in her face. Montgomery was a pompous man, a real horse's ass, a weak, self-serving leader and completely useless in times of stress. Alex had hoped he would leave Crescent City Medical Center after a conspiracy against the hospital earlier in the year had nearly put the medical center out of business. Unfortunately, Don had siphoned bits and pieces of the catastrophe and used them to his advantage. He'd given several interviews to the press and had emerged in the news as a media hero — a man intent on saving his hospital, preserving quality, and keeping it private and solvent in the changing health care environment. Don was a proverbial cat, always landing on his feet.

Alex's voice was calm, but forceful, as she addressed him. "Don, this situation is precarious. Angie Richelieu has been an employee at CCMC for years and is an excellent nurse. She's in the O.R. right now, fighting for her life. The hospital could be at fault here for not providing her safe access to her car—"

The CEO interrupted her rudely, "That's bullshit, Alex. Farve told me that all the nurses had been instructed to call for a security escort after hours. She did not. It's her fault if she was raped. It certainly is not the fault of the hospital."

Alex wanted to jump over his desk and rip out his carotid arteries. "You're wrong, Don. Totally wrong. How appalling you are." Alex's voice was clipped. "Her fault? How could it possibly be her fault? That's ludicrous."

Montgomery dismissed her, "Really, Alex, I am pretty busy. Can you make an appointment with Latetia?" He picked up his phone to make a call.

Alex's fury mounted. "Really, Don. Are you this dumb? How do you think a jury would view this? We've got a nurse who stayed overtime for three hours and didn't get paid for it because the hospital no longer pays nurses, or anyone, overtime. She stayed late because of patient violence on the unit. Then she's raped and beaten on the way to her car... really, Don. For God's sake, what is wrong with you? Think about it. It's not a pretty picture."

Don was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking.

Alex continued, "We've had numerous meetings about the safety of staff, patients, and visitors traveling between the Psych Pavilion and the main hospital. We've had tons of complaints from physicians, nurses, and visitors that are on record. We've got to make some changes. I'd like a meeting this afternoon with Dr. Desmond and the administrator that manages behavioral health under the contract agreement. Elizabeth needs to be there as well, as does Dr. Ashley. We have to handle this appropriately with the media."

Don interrupted her, "No way, Alex. Not going to happen today. I'm too busy. What is it that you don't understand? I am busy! I am running this hospital, and I don't have time to stop for a stupid, 'called' meeting. Forget it."

"No, I'm not. It's a huge image concern and we all know how you worry about..." Alex said, her voice trailing off momentarily, "...the hospital's image." With these words, Alex hit her boss where it hurt him the most. Don lived and breathed, breathed and lived, CCMC's image. It was his lifeblood because, after all, in his mind it was his hospital and no one else had anything to do with the place.

Don straightened up and looked alert. "Huh, an image thing. How's that?" Don was thinking. Nothing got his attention more quickly than an incident that could affect the world-class image of CCMC.

Alex seized the opportunity. "Heavens yes, yes, definitely an image concern. And, mull this over, Don. There is a distinct possibility that the attacker could be either a patient or, even worse, *a hospital employee.*"

"What, what kind of bullshit is that, Alex? All of our staff has criminal checks done on them. It couldn't be an employee," Don retorted angrily, a self-righteous smirk on his face. "Sometimes I cannot understand why we pay you the big bucks. You'll get your meeting at 3:00. Here in my office. Now get out of here," Don said disparagingly, pointing toward the door.

Alex knew she had been dismissed, but continued to stare at the CEO, noting his impeccably coiffed hair and custom-tailored suit. She reminded herself again that the man didn't give a flip about anything except how much money the place made. He'd told her earlier that he considered patients and staff "widgets", and his job was to make the widgets work as cheaply as possible and, at all costs, make the widgets productive. Alex closed the door tightly as she left.

Latetia shook her head as Alex reemerged from the Lion's Den. "That went well, right? From what I could hear, it was pretty loud in there."

"Yep. I ruined his day," she proudly told Latetia.

Latetia smiled, gave her a thumbs up and told her that Mona would be in after lunch.

Alex thanked her and walked slowly to her office, deep in thought about the difficulties surrounding the hospital and medical center.



Alex relaxed in the inner sanctum of her office. She laid her head on her desk for a few moments to fight off the headache she always seemed to notice after meeting with Montgomery. She had just called the O.R. to check on Angie and ordered lunch from dietary when Jack Françoise entered her office, accompanied by a trim, dark-haired woman. Alex judged the woman to be about thirty-five-years old. She stood behind her desk, smiled, and extended her hand in greeting to the woman as she said, "Hi, I'm Alex. Please sit down."

Françoise made the introductions. "Alex, this is Nadine Wells. She's an investigator and the NOPD expert on rape and sexual crimes. She's a forensic nurse analyst. Nadine, this is Alex. She is the legal counsel for CCMC. She's okay... for a lawyer, I guess." Françoise grinned and winked at Alex.

Alex waved her hand to quiet Jack. "Hi, Nadine. I am a lawyer, but most of all, I'm a nurse. I don't know why Jack never says that when he introduces me," Alex said, giving Jack a reproving look.

"Whoops, sorry, Alex." Jack apologized for the second time that day.

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Destephano. The commander has spoken highly of you." Nadine Wells accepted Alex's hand.

Alex was a bit confused and wondered who the "commander" was. Oh, yes, Jack's new job. But Jack wasn't doing anything differently as the commander than he had done as a captain. "Please, Nadine, call me Alex. It took me a moment to remember who the commander was." She gave Jack a teasing glance. "I'm not much on formality. Do you have any information on the possible rapist?" She looked hopefully at Nadine, admiring her petite looks, her fresh appearance, and the fact that she was a nurse and a forensic expert.

Nadine hesitated for a moment, looking at the commander.

Françoise spoke up. "Alex, this meeting needs to be off the record. All we have is preliminary information. The guys downtown would freak if they knew we were talking to the hospital lawyer."

"Wow, Commander, I thought you were the guy downtown," Alex said laughing. "Of course, it will be off the record. I'm here as Angie's friend. Not to worry. This is completely between us. Let's sit at the conference table."

Nadine looked relieved. "Sorry, Alex. We just had to ask. Protocol and all."

"I know, Nadine. No worries. Please share."

"Well, this case is more complex than some. It presents a little differently. We usually classify rapists into three categories. The first category is the anger rapist who uses physical brutality to express rage, contempt, and hatred for his victim. The attack is usually unplanned, and the rapist is seldom sexually aroused when he initiates the attack. Anger rape is usually quick, this wasn't. The medical information suggests that Angie was raped more than once. Usually with an anger rapist, the assault is one of physical violence to the whole body."

Alex was listening attentively and making notes on her legal pad. "Yeah. What about the other categories? Do they better fit with what's happened to Angie?"

Nadine continued, "Well, a power rapist initiates the attack to overcome feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. For them, to accomplish sexual intercourse is evidence of personal conquest. These attacks are planned and premeditated. There is usually no injury beyond the attack itself, although it may occur over an extended duration of time. Power rapists outnumber anger rapists two to one."

Victims of power rapists have relatively minor injuries." Nadine stopped for a moment as Alex held up her hand.

"This doesn't work. Angie has extensive injuries. It seems like her attacker has attributes in both categories." Alex put her hands to her face. "You know, this stuff is sickening."

Nadine Wells nodded in agreement.

Jack Françoise suggested that Nadine describe the third category of rapists.

Nadine sighed deeply as she continued, "In contrast to anger and power rapists, the third category is the sadistic rapist. These rapists eroticize physical force. The rape may be long and involve torture, mutilation, or murder. Often times, this is the only way the rapist can achieve sexual satisfaction. Fortunately, this is the most uncommon type of rapist."

"Not for Angie Richelieu! Would you categorize her rape as one of a sadistic rapist?" Alex's blue eyes, crackling with intensity, penetrated Nadine's soft brown ones.

Nadine shook her head. "No, probably not. At least, he's not a pure sadistic rapist. Angie's rapist, at this point at least, seems to embody some of the characteristics of both the anger and the sadistic rapist. Certainly, the perp is sadistic. He bit her, beat her, crushed her skull, and sliced up her face. But he was angry. I think our rapist is a cross between an anger rapist and a sadistic rapist."

Alex's heart was pounding in her chest. "Jack, what do you think? Do you agree with Nadine?"

"Nadine is the expert. I do agree with her. I think the son of a bitch is angry. I think he was enraged, crazy, psychotic, even."

Alex nodded "Yeah, for sure. Nadine do you think he meant to murder her?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. If he had planned to murder her, he would have. He had the opportunity. He simply wasn't motivated to kill her. He wanted to disfigure her, to scare her beyond belief."

Jack grunted. "That doesn't mean he won't come back and try to murder her, especially if it's someone she could identify or recognize. Bastard!"

Alex was anxious. "Oh my goodness, Jack, you don't think he will try to hurt her while she is in CCMC recovering, do you?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know for sure. Possibly. Nadine, do you have an opinion?"

Nadine's voice was uncertain. "I don't know, I just don't know. This case is a bit different. He could. Perhaps he thought she was dead or at least would be by the time she was found. It's hard to say. There are so many unknowns in Angie's case. We need to be prepared in case he does, Commander."

Jack nodded. "I'll take care of it."

"My Lord, what kind of profile do these rapists have? Is there a profile for this type of crime?" Alex's face paled as she considered the perp coming back and attacking Angie while she was at CCMC.

Nadine and Jack looked at each other sadly. Jack nodded while Nadine answered Alex's questions.

"Yes, these profiles usually reveal that the rapist is mentally ill. Violently, mentally ill. They are often psychotic."

"Great Day! It's looking more and more like it could be a patient from the Pavilion. Do we have any in-patients that have such a profile?" Alex's headache was getting worse.

"Don't know yet. There are several patients in the Pavilion now that are violent and have diagnoses that could suggest such a profile. However, rape is not noted in their medical histories. Dr.

Desmonde and the psych team are analyzing the records that we pulled. We should know something by this afternoon. I'm sure she will talk to us then," Nadine assured them.

The conversation was interrupted by a dietary aide delivering the lunch trays. Alex, Nadine, and Jack stared at the food as the aide departed. The food looked good, but no one was particularly hungry.

Finally, Jack spoke. "Alex, there's one more thing. You ain't going to like it. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes, of course, Commander." Alex's formal tone was indicative of her distress.

"This kind of rapist likes to revisit his victim. He likes to come back to terrorize them over and over. It could be here at CCMC or after she's recuperated and gone home. It could be in five years, who the hell knows. But they do often return and stalk their victims."

"Oh, no. We can't let this happen! No! What do we do?" Alex's voice was approaching a hysterical level, and her head was beating outside of her skull.

"When he comes back, he'll try to kill Angie. I am sure of it." Jack was feeling again for his gun. "Don't worry, Alex. In the meantime, we'll place police protection outside her room. When he comes back, we'll get him. Count on it. It's a given." Jack's face was red with anger.

Alex stared at her plate of uneaten food. She felt nauseated and was startled when Jack's cell phone rang.

He looked at the number. "I've got to go." He turned to Nadine and said, "We caught the double homicide this morning in the Quarter. A young couple. I got to get down to the coroner's office."

"Commander, you're handling that? I hear that's a bad case." Nadine's face was grim.

"Yeah, Nadine, it is. It's looking real bad. But then, this case is bad as well. Today has been nothing but bad." He looked at the lunch he had been so eagerly anticipating and said, "Sorry, ladies. I just lost my appetite."

After Jack left, Alex and Nadine talked quietly and picked at their food.

Nadine told Alex that she would be sure police protection for Angie had been arranged, "just in case". She also reminded Alex that she and Jack were operating only on a theory and that they had no hard evidence. Nadine promised to keep in touch and the two women parted, leaving Alex tearfully depressed in her office.

Shortly after Nadine left, Alex remembered that she'd forgotten to ask her about the puncture wounds on Angie's neck. She'd call and ask her later. But, right now, Alex needed a little time alone.



Jack's brain was bursting as he started his drive back down to Rampart to see Maddy Jeanfreau. He was doubly concerned about Angie's safety and felt there was a risk the perp would try to finish her off, if she made it through surgery. Why did bad things happen to his friends? He'd made a ton of friends over at CCMC in the spring, and the group had gotten together several times over the previous months to keep their connection alive. Several of the CCMC folks had been piqued that he hadn't invited them to his commander celebration. As it was, Jack had barely tolerated the evening. He'd only invited the few folks necessary to be politically correct. Alex, Robert, and Monique Desmond had all attended, the latter two having been his friends since childhood. He figured that if he had to suffer, his closest friends should suffer with him.

As Jack slowed his Caddy to stop for a red light, he allowed himself to think of what reason Dr. Jeanfreau could have to call him downtown for the second time in one day. He prayed it wasn't about what he feared it was. He had been ignoring the possibility since he had left earlier this morning, but the phone call from Maddy had almost confirmed his fears. If what he thought was true was in fact correct, he wanted to bleep himself into oblivion for a few months or at least visit an obscure planet he'd never heard of.

As he wheeled his Caddy into a parking space, his spirits lifted. Two legal spots in one day. That must be a record for him. *Things couldn't be too bad, right*, he convinced himself. *After all, I am parking legally for the first time in months. That has to be a good omen.* But there again, it was probably his old Catholic upbringing coming back to trick him.





Maddy was washing up in the autopsy room. She looked like she had aged five years since this morning. It must be a very bad day in the morgue. She saw him, brightened a bit, smiled, and pointed with a soapy hand back toward her office.

"I'll be back there in a few minutes. Got to finish getting cleaned up. Enjoy the Hershey Kisses in my candy bowl... as if you needed an invitation," she admonished.

Jack gave her a half smile and said, "I might just do that," remembering that he had turned down lunch and a second jelly donut. Besides, he deserved it. It was a shitty day.

He made himself at home and sat at the little round table in Maddy's office near the candy bowl. He looked around. Maddy had pictures of her husband, who was a noted urologist in town, and her twin daughters, who looked just like ten-year-old Maddy miniatures. He picked up a picture of them taken at their weekend home in Pass Christian over on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. The four looked great: tanned, fishing poles sticking out of the sand, sitting under an umbrella on the beach, with the Mississippi Sound in the background. Maddy looked fantastic and carefree. Something she certainly didn't look like today. Jack was reading her numerous diplomas, degrees, and commendations when the petite M.E. joined him in her office. She saw Jack holding her family picture.

She shook her head. "I'd love to be over in the Pass now. Anywhere but here in this depressing morgue cutting open dead people all day."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I bet. Me, too. I still want to take you up on that fishing trip offer when it cools off."

"You bet. Right after the lunch you offered this morning." Maddy grinned at him and asked, "What's up at CCMC?"

Jack shook his head. "Not good. An attack last night on one of the nurses who works in the Pavilion. She was raped and beaten up pretty bad. Laid in the bushes for hours until someone noticed her early this morning."

Maddy shook her head. "Oh my, I'm not surprised. The Pavilion is a festering, snake-pit time-bomb. I've autopsied two patients who have gotten killed over there in the last couple of years. We're lucky it hasn't been worse. Monique Desmonde deserves multiple gold medals for staying in that hell hole."

"Oh, do you know Monique? I didn't know that."

"Of course, I know Monique. I love her. We female docs have to stick together, particularly in this godforsaken, good old boy network town. I don't see her as much as I'd like, but we do get together fairly often."

"Good to know. I'm afraid the perp could be one of her patients."

"Boy, Commander, I feel real sorry for you. Monique will protect her patients like they are her children. She's a marvelous physician and psychiatrist. If you ever need an advocate, she is there for you."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know. There could be a struggle. I've already figured that out. Now, why did you call me down here again on this hot as hell day when I could be eating chocolates in my air-conditioned office?" Jack smiled, but his dark eyes were serious.

The two locked eyes for several moments, and then Jack knew without Maddy telling him. He shook his head and said, "Oh no!"

Maddy just stared at him and said simply, "He's back. St. Germaine is back."

Jack looked miserable. "Yeah, I thought so. I was afraid of that. What the hell, here we go again."

He could feel his gut tighten up and cramp. He was instantly depressed and despondent.

Maddy nodded and said, "Yeah, you're right. Here we go again. And we got zip from the bodies. We still need to identify them."

"So, I guess you're telling me that their throats were torn out just like the lady in 2009?"

"Yeah, and their wrists were slit, as well. We could get no fingerprints off the bodies so, hopefully, your team got some. You were right. The bodies had some pretty scary tattoos on them. They were definitely into the occult. They had less than 200 mls of blood that we could drain out."

Jack looked glum. "This sounds identical to 2009 and 1933, at least as far as we can tell from the police report from 1933. And God knows how many more that we never found. Anything else?"

Maddy gestured negatively and said, "Oh, there may be one thing. I don't think they were killed in the Quarter. There were scrapes to both victims' legs that were post mortem. It looks like they had been dragged. There was grass and pebbles embedded in their clothes that I am sure didn't come from the Quarter. The female's shoulder was broken, possibly from being shoved into a small space or, perhaps, she was dropped from a balcony. I can't be sure."

"I'll have the guys check around. Can you maybe pinpoint the grass or rocks?"

Maddy nodded. "Will do my best. We're running them through the database. We're also data-mining everything we know. Jack, have there been any sightings of St. Germaine lately that you've heard about?"

Jack shook his head. "Only the ones from tourists who have been on cemetery tours or have over-indulged. We are always getting St. G. sightings from drunks, at least a couple a week. We investigate, but there is nothing. We've found nothing substantive since just before the 2009 murder," Jack reported and sighed with fatigue. "Damn, I feel about two hundred years old now. We don't need this Maddy. Keep it to yourself. We don't need any media hype of this stuff. You know the mayor will have a fit, and we'll get the BS about hurting tourism."

"Got'cha. Okay. I'll ask the tech to keep quiet, but you know I can't promise anything. Word, no matter what you do, travels in cases like this. Just be prepared for a media onslaught."

Jack nodded. "Just do your best and keep in touch."

"You, too." Maddy hugged Jack for the second time that day. "We've got to stop meeting like this," she quipped.

"Yeah, for sure. Thanks, Maddy," Jack said as he left her office.



Jack couldn't wait to get into the solitude of his luxury automobile, cut on the air, and be alone for the second time that day. He unlocked his car, laid his head back on the Cadillac's thick cushions, and closed his eyes, grateful for the darkly tinted windows. After a few moments, Jack once again forced himself to review the legend of St. Germaine. He really didn't want to, but he knew he had to.

If there was one thing Jack knew a lot about, it was New Orleans's dark and murky underworld. Witches and black magic, voodoo, and the occult, they were all part of New Orleans's sensual, shadowy underbelly that Jack had learned to navigate as a rookie cop. While most cases were readily solved, it was true that the St. Germaine cases remained an enigma to even the most senior members of the NOPD, including Commander Jack Françoise and his dad, retired NOPD.

St. Germaine sightings were reported either by sober, imaginative, and/or terrified locals or by drunken tourists walking the dark streets of the Quarter at night. Legend had it that Comte St. Germaine, a Frenchman of royal lineage, had lived in Europe for many years before immigrating to New Orleans shortly after the city was settled. St. Germaine was known to be an extraordinarily wealthy man with amazing abilities, who had left France shortly before the French Revolution, fearing for his life. It was rumored that St. Germaine was a musician and could play any instrument but favored the piano and the violin. The comte was also well versed in linguistics and was fluent in many languages. In addition, he was charming, eloquent, and an excellent conversationalist. St. Germaine had a reputation for liking the ladies, although he never married. It was also said that he liked men as well.

As Jack continued to review his knowledge of the comte, he remembered his grandfather talking about St. Germaine when he was in his eighties, expressing how unfair it was that his good friend never showed his age. In fact, no one ever knew St. Germaine's age because he never seemed to change physically. He was and always purported to be about forty years old, although he remained that age for at least a half of a century according to octogenarians who had known St. Germaine in their youth. Many of New Orleans's finest citizens had partied with St. Germaine in their early years and swore his face never aged.

In addition to being ageless and rich, St. Germaine was known to have wonderful dinner parties where his friends would dine for hours on the very best cuisine that New Orleans had to offer. Germaine was never seen to take a bite. He never ate. He only sipped red wine, pleading a sour stomach and a taste for only "white" food. The comte loved the ladies, but never had a steady girlfriend or mistress. Many New Orleanians reported he visited the brothels almost every night. In fact, Germaine was on the A list for years, much loved and revered in his adopted city. A dinner invitation from the comte was to die for, until one night when things seemed to go amiss.

St. Germaine had hosted an amazing dinner party that included guests from Europe as well as the locals. After everyone had left, he asked a very lovely lady to have a nightcap with him on his balcony. All seemed well until the lady murmured that she must leave to prevent gossip about them. Suddenly, St. Germaine lunged for the beautiful lady, grabbed her tightly around her shoulders, and tried to bite her neck while pressing her slender body against the ornate wrought iron balcony. Fortunately, for the lady, the balcony was rusty and gave way. She plunged to the ground and landed in azalea bushes, apparently unhurt, and ran through the Quarter for safety.

The incident was reported to the police the next morning, but when the police invaded St. Germaine's home, the comte had disappeared. The police searched his home and only found

tablecloths with large red splotches that appeared to be wine, although it was later determined to be part wine and part human blood. In his wine cellar, St. Germaine had stored hundreds of bottles of red wine with French and Italian wine labels, but a random testing of the cache proved them to be a mixture of wine and blood. Several cases of this wine had remained in the NOPD evidence room until it washed away in the Katrina waters a few years back, along with almost all the evidence from the St. Germaine case. But, the proof was clear that the bottles contained wine and blood.

As the air conditioner continued to purr softly, Jack felt himself falling asleep and gave into the feeling. It had been a pretty rough day, and it wasn't getting any better. He deserved a few minutes of shut-eye. He continued to drift off until he was rudely awakened by a blaring horn of a presumably irate driver. After flipping the driver off, Jack shook his head to wake up and shake out the cobwebs remaining in his brain from his short nap. Jack also managed to convince himself that St. Germaine was a legend and only a legend, just another good old NOLA ghost story. But, then reason and logic set in and he was forced to confront the number of unsolved murder cases and deaths where the bodies were discovered upon autopsy to have no blood or just a minimal amount of blood. The most recent case had occurred in 2009, but three other cases had occurred in the 1980s, shortly after Jack had joined the NOPD. Police records also had similar crime reports that dated back to the early 1900s. Unfortunately, a lot of those files had been lost in the floodwaters of the storm.

The unsolved cases perplexed Jack beyond belief, and it pissed him off that he had been unable to solve the crimes. He also wondered about the hundreds of people who had disappeared in NOLA over the years, never to be heard of again. Of course, many of them were prostitutes and druggies, but they didn't deserve to disappear without a trace. There were also hundreds of bodies that had washed up on the shores of the mighty, muddy Mississippi, too decomposed to identify. Fortunately, now they could often identify the corpses via DNA evidence, but even that evidence had been lost in the storm. He was no closer to solving the St. Germaine legend than he had been in the 1980s, and he didn't like that feeling. It irritated him beyond belief. Then he returned to his theory that St. Germaine was a serial killer who preyed on the vulnerable and downtrodden. He continued with that thought until his cell phone rang. *Damn*, he thought as he listened, *here we go again*.



After lunch, Alex made several attempts to analyze pending malpractice claims. She was totally not into it and her attention kept returning to Angie and the night before. She called the O.R. and learned that Angie was in the recovery room. A little after 2:00 p.m., her temporary secretary, Mona, checked in and Alex asked her to transcribe the depositions that were left over from yesterday. Unable to work, Alex decided to go off-campus to the psychiatric units to learn if the team had uncovered any possible suspects.

The heat was unbearable as she walked the distance between the main hospital and the Pavilion. Alex noticed the cordoned-off crime scene. The yellow-taped area showed her exactly where Angie had been assaulted, raped, and beaten. Several detectives were still trying to uncover any bits of evidence that could possibly exist. Alex wasn't surprised to see Commander François directing them. Jack waved as Alex passed. She looked at the shaded areas and shuddered when she thought of how dark it must have been last night and how scared Angie must have been. The crop of trees where Angie's body had been found was dense, and the overhanging moss gave the area an eerie feeling, even during the day. It must have been awful for Angie. Alex said a quick prayer for Angie and her family.

The Pavilion loomed in front of Alex, and she couldn't believe how ominous the building appeared, even in the daylight. The psychiatric hospital was a two-story converted storage building, painted grey in color, with most of the windows barred or shuttered, either to protect against the summer heat or to keep patients from looking out — or, more likely, jumping out. Alex wasn't sure which. Probably more to keep patients from jumping out of the windows, she finally decided. Some of the bars in the windows shone brightly in the Louisiana sun. They were a gunmetal color. Everything was grey. How depressing. *It was all absolutely, totally depressing*, Alex thought to herself as she entered the building.

The foyer of the Pavilion presented as much as the outside, grey and dreary. A pair of metal benches with grey, fake leather cushions was on either side of the door, and a bank of elevators stood to the right. The walls were painted grey. Alex wondered what had happened to hospital green. That used to be the color in hospitals. The doors to the stairway and several other areas were locked. *Good*, Alex thought to herself, as she tried to open them.

The silence in the foyer was deafening. Alex could hear herself breathe. As she looked around, she thought about all the sick, deranged, and criminally insane patients who had crossed through this space. Deathly quiet. It was as if the walls were waiting for her to say something.

She pushed the elevator button and it slowly crept down toward her, making a slow rattling noise. *Geez, the elevator sounds like someone rattling chains*, she thought to herself. *There was nothing normal or comforting about this place*, she surmised, as the metal albatross rolled to a banging stop, and the door crept open. The elevator was unmanned. There was no operator onboard. Usually, the elevator would be manned by a psych tech or mental health worker to usher people up and down the floors of the old storage building — for safety reasons, of course. As she began the slow ascent to the inpatient units, she wondered if the lack of an elevator operator was also part of the budget cuts. She sighed sadly to herself.

Exiting the elevator, Alex walked over and rang the bell for admission into the closed unit. She was instantly admitted and escorted by a large man, presumably a psych tech. As they walked down



the hall toward the day room, Alex was surprised by the silence. It was as silent as a tomb on the unit. Deathly quiet and dark, the sun shuttered out by long drapes.

She spoke to two psych techs, one from the day shift and one from the evening shift counting sharps. Sharps were globally defined as anything that patients could use to harm themselves. Hopefully, most sharps, along with cell phones, were confiscated on admission, but psychiatric patients who wanted to die were ingenious at finding things to kill themselves with. Razors, scissors, glass perfume bottles, aerosol cans, and any other instrument the patient could use were kept in the nurses' station. Patients could use their razors during admission but only under the supervision of a staff member.

A quick conversation with one of the psych techs alerted Alex that all sharps were accounted for, except for one razor. The tech had laughingly informed her that one sharp was always missing — nothing to worry about. "We're always missing at least one," he'd joked.

Alex didn't share his macabre sense of humor over the missing razor. In fact, she was concerned at the tech's nonchalance and casual dismissal of a dangerous instrument. Alex asked him where the staff and patients were. He directed her toward the community room on the North Hall, where the patients and staff were holding a group meeting.

Alex walked down the hall trying to remember what a therapeutic community was when her cell phone rang. Mona was calling her to tell her that the three o'clock executive meeting was canceled. Alex felt a tinge of impatience as she continued down the hall. She knew Don had not wanted to meet and figured that Farve had probably talked him out of it. She shook her head in disgust.

Finally, she remembered the definition of a therapeutic community. It was a model of behavioral health care that allowed psychiatry, nursing, social work, and patients to work together to establish a trusting environment at the hospital. In an effort to establish a psychiatric milieu, each group had an equal voice in the operation of the unit. The therapeutic community addressed issues and concerns that affected patients and staff. Alex paused outside the door and listened for a few moments.

Today's discussion was centered around the attack on Angie. The group leader was attempting to get patients to verbalize their feelings about the attack and share any knowledge of how it happened. About twenty faces stared at her as she entered the community room. Alex scrutinized the group, looking for a friendly face, but there were none. Only suspicious faces stared back at her.

She was surprised at the mixture of patients. Both genders and all ages were represented. Some patients looked acutely ill, psychotic in fact. A few had tardive dyskinesia, usually caused by the effects of long-term phenothiazine or anti-psychotic therapy. These patients were easily identifiable by their pill rolling mouths and shuffling gaits. One little, old, white-haired lady looked like Mrs. Santa Claus. She sat attentively in the circle, her hands clasped around her 1950s vintage pearl pocketbook. She smiled sweetly at Alex and nodded. Finally, a friendly face. She spotted Monique in the group and gave her a faltering wave.

Dr. Desmonde, once again her unflappable self, signaled her in.

Alex entered the community room and Monique introduced her.

"Group, this is Alex. She's a nurse and the attorney for the medical center. Alex is a friend of Angie's and she wants to help us understand what happened." Dr. Desmonde looked carefully at the group, gauging their reaction to Alex. She was unsure what their response would be to a stranger and an attorney in their presence. She waited calmly for their response.

After a short silence a male patient angrily retorted, "I ain't saying nothing else. Why does she need to be here? She ain't part of this here. I ain't never seen her before!"

Dr. Desmonde looked nonplussed and replied, "Anthony, Alex is Angie's friend. She's here because she cares about her. She wants to know who hurt her. She's not here for any other reason."

Anthony continued to look angry and uncertain as he muttered, "Yeah, yeah, sure. What other BS you got for us, Doc?"

Alex, unsettled for a moment, responded. "Dr. Desmonde is right, Anthony. Angie's my friend. Her twin sister, Bridgett, works with me. I'm concerned about her and what's happened to her." Alex eyed each member of the group. The silence seemed endless, an eternity. Of course, Alex remembered, silences in psychiatry were meaningful. Right? It probably wasn't an uncomfortable silence, it was simply a long silence, but for sure uncomfortable for her. Each patient looked at her speculatively. Some of them seemed skeptical and uncertain of her presence. Others looked interested in having her there. Alex met each of their stares with a straightforward look.

Finally, a female patient spoke to her in a friendly voice. "Hi, Alex. I'm Penny. I am a schizophrenic, so they say. So, I guess I must be. Anyway, I'm doing good now. It's okay with me if you stay." Penny looked around the room and then addressed the group, "She looks okay to me." Penny nodded her approval of Alex. "Whaddaya say? Can Alex stay?"

A dozen heads nodded affirmatively over what Alex perceived as a long period of time.

Only Anthony seemed unsure. He snarled at her and said, "Why in the hell would she want to be with us? We're castoffs, crazies, don't nobody want to be with us." His eyes glittered angrily at her.

Alex looked directly at Anthony and replied calmly, "Anthony, I admire your courage and your ability to voice your objections. I want to stay because I want to hear your thoughts on what happened to Angie. You know people around here. You may have information that could be useful in helping us solve this terrible crime. Angie didn't deserve what happened to her. She worked here because she cared about you." Each group member seemed content with what Alex had said. Only Anthony continued to stare at her suspiciously.

"Yeah, so you say." Anthony's voice was mocking her. "Angie got a paycheck for comin' here. She may have cared some, but the money was why she came. She's okay, I guess. But, don't hand me no bullshit. She didn't care that much. Besides, she was scared. Angie was scared of us. I know that. All of us do." Anthony looked around at the group, grinning as he spoke. His look was sinister. Several of them nodded their heads in agreement with him. He glared at Alex and growled, "I'm sure that whoever hurt her knows, too. Anyway, we know we cooperate with you or we stay here longer. I'm in for now." Anthony, still mistrustful, gave Alex a shifty look, glared at her, and then looked at the floor.

Alex said simply, even though her heart was beating full force, "Thanks, Anthony. I'll take what I can get. Don't let me interrupt. Just continue as if I wasn't here." Alex felt frenzied, uncertain. She turned to Monique, her eyes pleading with her to take up the reins of the group therapy meeting. Monique nodded at the group leader to continue. Alex was definitely out of her comfort zone and she knew the patients on the unit knew it.

The group leader continued the meeting. "Now, group, before we were interrupted, we were sharing our feelings about what happened to Angie. Rose, I believe you were talking."

Alex turned her head toward the patient identified as Rose. She looked to be in her thirties, was waif thin, and had long, stringy brown hair. Alex thought Rose looked afraid of her own shadow. She wondered if she'd been abused at some point in her life. Rose literally seemed to shrink and almost become invisible as the group stared at her.

"I... I... feel so awful for Miss Angie." Rose's voice was soft and hesitant. "She was nice to me. We talked last night, just before Jim started that fight in the day room." Rose looked around at the group and saw them staring intently at her. Her voice faltered, and she began to cry. Then, she said,

"Angie and I could have talked longer, but Jim ruined our conversation." She gulped, her thin shoulders heaving in despair as she burst into sobs.

Anthony's voice was hoarse with anger and resentment. "Why are you crying, Rose? You're such a little crybaby bitch. Ain't nobody hurt you yet. You're such a cowardly little piece of crap. You're a slut, just like all the women. You remind me of my..." Anthony's voice had become louder and louder as he screamed at Rose, his face livid with rage. Suddenly, he stood up and lunged toward the frail, pale woman, who seemed to shrink away from him. He was going for her neck.

"Oh, no! No! No!" Alex could only exclaim. She was unable to move, paralyzed in her chair.

In a flash, Donna Meade, the nursing manager of the general psychiatry unit, a behavioral health tech, and Dr. Desmonde wrestled six-foot Anthony to the floor, pinning his arms behind him. Donna Meade left for an instant to ring the "all staff alarm" red button located by the door. The ASA was to psychiatry what a code blue was on general hospital units. It announced a psychiatric emergency and requested that all available staff report immediately to the location. Within seconds, two additional male psych techs and a second RN appeared with the syringe of Haldol, which, after a nod from Dr. Desmonde, was administered into Anthony's upper arm. The two psych techs led Anthony away to the seclusion room while the rest of the patients stared.

It was then that an acute realization hit Alex. These people, these patients, had their own culture, their own pecking order. They had their own leaders and power structure. Anthony was the power structure. Now that he was down, no one was going to say much or offer any significant help.

Alex felt safe for a moment. Then she realized, with a sinking feeling, that she was in a very dangerous situation. Suppose the other patients acted out? Didn't that happen often? She tried to remember from her nursing school days. Didn't one patient incident spark other patients to act out? Like an avalanche? Of course they did. She felt her heart rate pick up quickly, and the hair on her arms stood up. She felt chilled. Yes. That is what happens. That's exactly what happened last night in this very place! Alex looked around furtively.

Several patients were agitated, rocking back and forth in their chairs in perfect rhythm. Another patient was plucking invisible particles from the air. Alex felt her heart fill with panic. Just to her left was another large man. He suddenly began screaming and pulling at his hair. Then he stood up and started pitching empty chairs against the window, hollering that he had to get out and save his baby.

Donna Meade looked at the patient, calmly touched his arm, and said in a soft, steady voice, "Jim, stop throwing the chairs. You're okay now. You're in the hospital and nobody's going to hurt you. Please, you're upsetting the other patients." Donna's voice was calm and quiet. She slipped her hand into the crook of Jim's arm just as he was about to toss another chair at the barred windows. He immediately replaced the chair on the floor.

Jim gave Donna a confused look. Then recognition seemed to appear on his face. "Oh, oh, oh! I gotta get outta here. I gotta go. I'm sorry, Donna. I didn't mean to cause no trouble." Jim's eyes were terrified and were full of tears. He looked ashamed of his behavior. The huge man was literally cowering before the staff and the patients.

"I know, Jim. You just couldn't help it. Let's go to the quiet room and rest awhile." Donna continued to hold his arm gently.

Then, to Alex's amazement, the large man allowed the petite Donna Meade to walk him to the secure quiet room.

Donna motioned to Monique that she needed some medication and then said to Jim in a quiet voice, "I want you to rest for a little while. We'll talk about this later."

Alex shifted her eyes from Jim and glued them on Monique. If Monique left her in the community room, there'd be no staff member at all to subdue any patient outbursts. In fact, they had been lucky that Donna had been able to quiet Jim. It would have been impossible for Alex, Donna, and Monique to wrestle the enormous man to the floor.

Several minutes ticked by. It was finally quiet. The only noise in the room was the click, click, click sound of someone clicking their tongue against the roof of their mouth and the squeaking of the two rocking chairs as the patients continued rocking back and forth.

Monique made a decision. She spoke to the patients in a cool, calm voice, glancing at her watch. "Our time is about up. Why don't you all take a break and then report to where you should be at four o'clock. Rose, you can go to my office because we have individual therapy at 4:15. The rest of you know your schedules."

The patients left the community room quietly. Only the two rocking patients remained. Alex breathed a sigh of relief. She was impressed with how Monique had handled the situation. Dr. Desmonde's firm tone of voice had waylaid any further patient outbursts. The psychiatrist had taken control of a potentially dangerous scenario by neither acknowledging nor discussing the situation and by redirecting energies of the patient group in a positive manner. Her behavior and poise were highly professional.

Alex glanced around, still uncertain of her surroundings. "Monique, we've gotta talk—" Alex began.

Monique lifted her index finger to silence her. "Yes, but first I've got to make sure Donna got Jim to the quiet room. Wait for me. I'll send some medicine and a psych tech back here to deal with these two." She gestured at the two remaining patients.

Alex left the community room and walked into the central nursing station, behind a door and glass windows, where she felt much safer. She was relieved to see the patients playing board games and watching the soaps on TV. She wondered to herself just how therapeutic watching soap operas could be, but figured it was better than beating up on each other and the staff. She decided to keep her mouth shut about what she thought was therapeutic. She turned and saw Dr. Desmonde in the medication room and followed her. She watched Monique select a 3 ml syringe from the locked cabinet, snap the top off an ampule of Haldol, and deftly fill the syringe. Monique continued to draw up Ativan for anti-anxiety and Cogentin to combat the side effects of the Haldol.

"Alex?" Monique intoned as she nodded toward the hall.

Alex and Monique walked deliberately down the hall to the quiet room, where they found Donna and Jim talking quietly. Jim had been crying. As they entered the quiet room, he spoke.

"Donna, I don't know what gets into me. These tempers just come. I don't know what to do. I need help. I'm scared. I never know what I'll do next." Jim was so upset, he began to sob, his voice coming out in great gulps.

Donna patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Jim, we're gonna try to help you. We care about you here in the Pavilion, don't we, Dr. Desmonde?" Donna's acknowledgment of the physician's presence drew Jim's attention to Monique.

He looked at Dr. Desmonde sadly and said, "Sorry, Doc. I just need more help. I don't know what's happened to me. Is there something else you can do to help me? A new pill or something?" Jim's voice was desperate.

"I know, Jim. I know you don't understand your outbursts and, yes, we will continue to help you." Dr. Desmonde looked sad as well. "We'll keep working on it. We've made some headway. I've made you a shot that'll help you rest. Where do you want it?"

"Can I have it in my left arm? Last time it was in my right." Jim pointed toward his left deltoid muscle.

"Well," Monique hesitated, "this needle's a little long. How much muscle do you have in that arm?"

"Doc, I got muscle. I just don't have no brains!" Jim smiled for the first time.

Alex was surprised at how handsome he was. He had a beautiful smile, dark hair, and perfect, brilliant white teeth. She guessed he was in his mid-thirties. He looked to be of Irish descent. *The Black Irish*, Alex wondered to herself, acknowledging her knowledge of Jim's bad temper. How very sad if he is really one of them.

Dr. Desmonde returned his smile as she injected the needle and said, "You've got plenty of brains, Jim. They're just a little scrambled right now. We'll get them fixed!"

"Thanks, Doc, Donna, and Alex. I'm pretty tired now. I guess I'll sleep awhile. See you soon." Jim turned over in the bed of the quiet room.

Alex was impressed that Jim had remembered her name and said so to Monique and Donna on the way down the hall.

Donna said, "Jim's very bright. I'm not surprised at all. I like him. He wants to get better, and I want to help him." Donna's voice was concerned, her interest in helping the patient obvious.

Dr. Desmonde looked narrowly at Donna. "Don't let personal feelings get in the way of professional judgment, Donna. Jim's very ill, psychotic. Don't set Jim and yourself up for disappointment. Don't get too involved in this case." Monique's voice was sharp and a little accusatory.

Donna's face turned red and she replied hotly, "I hope you're not suggesting I have feelings for Jim that are other than professional! There are no boundary issues here for you to be concerned with." Her voice was cold and defensive. "It's just that most of our patients are chronic and we never really help them. Besides, most of 'em don't want help. Many are so manipulative that they can't be trusted. I doubt many of them even want to get well. Jim does. That is the impetus driving my 'involvement' in this case." Donna was enraged and felt attacked.

Monique was quiet for a moment and then spoke. Her voice was repentant and reassuring. She'd accepted Donna's rebuke with grace. She shook her head and said, "I'm sorry, I apologize. I know how you feel, Donna. I have a special place for Jim myself. But we have to keep it all in perspective. I am sorry if you think I suggested that your involvement is anything other than professional." Dr. Desmonde's voice was pensive and apologetic. She hugged Donna around the shoulders and added, "Nice job in there, gal."

Donna hugged her back. "Thanks, Monique. But you and I both know we've gotta do something about this place and the staffing. That situation could have gotten completely out of hand — the one last night did! My nurses are scared. Several are terrified and are planning to leave the Pavilion." Donna stopped for a minute and then admitted, "I'm scared too, and that's not even factoring in what happened to Angie. The patients are getting sicker and sicker and more and more violent, especially since we started taking the ones from the state hospital that Lester Whitset contracted for. We're not staffed for those types of admissions."

Dr. Desmonde sighed. "Yes, yes. I know, Donna. I'm trying to get more positions allocated even if they are only muscle positions. I'd be thankful to have strong bodies to help us in emergencies like this one today. Since we've been under this contract management, it's next to impossible. We need more behavioral health techs to help us out when we have these outbursts of violence."

Alex nodded in agreement with Monique and said to Donna, "I'm concerned about your staffing, too. You don't have enough staff to handle such severely ill patients and control these kinds of situations. What's your typical census?"

Donna responded quickly, "We've got twenty-two general psychiatry beds and average about eighteen or nineteen patients. Usually, eight or so of them are overtly psychotic and have histories of violence or acting out behavior. The rest are acutely depressed or have organic brain syndrome and/or Alzheimer's disease."

Alex nodded in understanding. "How long have we been mixing the elderly and the adolescents with the others? I thought they used to be separated." Alex asked, looking questioningly at Monique and Donna.

Donna shook her head and answered, "We started mixing them at the time the contract manager started. Whitset cut our staff twenty percent, making it impossible to run an age differentiated behavioral health unit. He maintains that a therapeutic milieu can occur with all ages together, so everyone can 'learn from each other'! Isn't that some crap? We've even had to eliminate geriatric and adolescent tract therapies. We couldn't staff them!" Donna's voice reflected her dismay.

"How's it working?" Alex asked.

"Not well, not well at all I'm afraid," Donna said. "The patients just don't identify with each other because of their ages. Mrs. Smithson, the elderly patient with the apple cheeks, is appalled when the adolescent female patients talk about their sex lives and how they have to have 'it' every day. The way they talk about sex is disgusting to Mrs. Smithson, and I know it horrifies her. In fact, her son told Angie last night that he thought she was worse. He said he was gonna transfer her to Ochsner's private geriatric program. I don't blame him. She could get better care there, at least more care directed toward her age group. I'd move my mother over there, as opposed to here, so she could get better care. No question about it." Donna shrugged her shoulders.

"Is Mrs. Smithson the little lady who looks like Mrs. Santa Claus?"

Monique and Donna nodded.

"Why's she here?"

"She's in for a reactive depression. Her husband died in April and her only daughter, her caregiver, has rheumatoid arthritis and breast cancer. It's very sad, but also very typical for people in her age group. Her son is correct when he says we haven't helped her. Older patients need a different kind of care that is more structured to their place in life and their late life losses. Do you think we have been effective with her, Monique?" Donna looked carefully at Dr. Desmonde.

"Perhaps the meds have helped some, but basically we haven't helped her much. You're right, Donna. What we are doing isn't helping. I'm philosophically opposed to mixing these patients, but in view of managed care and reimbursement, we have no choice. I guess some concentrated care is better than none at all. At least we can watch her for suicide attempts — at least, most of the time." Monique looked sheepishly at Alex and Donna.

"What do you mean, most of the time?" Alex asked, her voice anxious.

"Face it, Alex. I usually have two RNs and two psych techs on the day shift. There is even less staff on evenings and nights. We have no security and not a lot of muscle to wrestle these people down if they have outbursts. My RNs have to assess each patient, do paperwork, run groups, give meds, handle emergencies, and participate in community meetings. The psych techs supervise the daily care of the male patients and, together with the RNs, monitor the five-step patient responsibility level. Maybe it will get better when the new health reform act goes into effect. I heard that it may."

"Five step what?" Alex asked.

Donna explained, "Well, it's really not five steps anymore, not since the length of stay decreased to three or four days, sometimes even less. It's a system of patient responsibility level used as a gauge to grant individual patient privileges. As patients improve, they're given more responsibility and freedom. On level I, patients are restricted to the floor. On level V, they may leave the floor unescorted and take unaccompanied trips off hospital grounds—"

Alex's legal mind was racing. Her thoughts scared her. She interrupted Donna, "Are you suggesting that we could have possibly sanctioned an activity where one of the psychotic patients could have left the hospital last night and attacked Angie, with CCMC's blessing?" Her eyes were wide with worry.

Dr. Desmond intervened. "No, we haven't had a patient on level V for several years, mainly because insurance won't pay. They figure if the patient can be off hospital grounds, he can be out of the hospital. Most of our patients reach level III, meaning that they can leave the unit in a group, escorted by a staff member. They go to the coffee shop for meals, the gift shop, and so on. Right, Donna?"

Donna looked pleased. "Good, Monique. Very good. You are the first attending shrink that ever understood the system! I'm proud of you." Donna grinned at Dr. Desmond.

Alex smiled as the nurse and physician high-fived each other.

"I don't know if admissions will ever return to the pre-HMO days when a psychiatric admission actually changed behavior. According to news reports, mental health services are supposed to get better under the new health care system. Supposedly, thirty-two million additional mentally ill people will receive psych benefits and the benefits of the thirty million Americans who already have them will improve. I just don't see how that is going to happen, but it surely sounds good," Monique added. "Of course, I am totally clueless on how we are going to care for them. We have no space for more admissions now, and I'm pretty sure we have more than our fair share in Louisiana," she added.

"Yes," Alex agreed. "It sounds good in theory, but it's all determined on how states interpret the "rules" set forth by the president. Some states could make as many as 500 drugs available for the mentally ill, while other states may only allow access to 250 drugs. Benefits will occur on a state-by-state basis. The same will be true for in-patient care for the acutely mentally ill and for substance abuse treatment. Some states may allow longer acute care stays or better rehab programs than others. It remains to be seen how all of that will settle out, particularly in Louisiana."

Monique looked at Alex and repeated, "Yes, particularly in Louisiana. I think we already know and shouldn't look for much to improve. There will be no silver linings for us," she added regretfully. "We'll just have many, many more patients with no place to put them. I'm not looking for any great fixes to occur in the next few years."

"Anyway," Donna continued, "getting back to your question about patients leaving the unit, each staff member is allowed to take five patients off the unit at one time. And, believe me, the patients raise hell if they've earned level III and they don't get to go. It goes back to basic trust in the building of the therapeutic environment. If our psych techs are out with patients, it's hard for the few who are left caring for the others to monitor everything. There are just not enough of us. We do usually monitor the seclusion, suicide, and quiet rooms, though. We're pretty good at that, unless there's a patient or staff emergency on the floor." Donna looked a little sheepish.

"I'm happy to hear that," Alex said wryly to Donna. "I'll do my best to get you some more help."

Donna smiled, looked grateful, and said, "Alex, I don't mean to kick a gift horse in the mouth or anything, but Sarah Chassion, the nurse manager who heads the prison unit, is in worse shape than I am. Her patient population is much worse and more violent. Many of them also have medical needs.

Lots are HIV-positive and/or recovering dopers. That's not even mentioning the serial killers, rapists, and murderers they care for over there. As a matter of fact, Sarah swears there is a dope line coming into the prison unit. She has the same staffing ratios I do, and although my job is hard, hers is even worse." Donna looked at her watch. "I gotta go. It's almost five o'clock, and the daycare gets ugly when you're late picking up your kids. Thanks for your time." Donna waved at them on her way out.

Monique turned to Alex. "I've got to go also. Rose is waiting for me in my office. Do you have time to catch a bite to eat with me in the cafeteria around six o'clock? I'd like to talk about things."

Alex nodded. "Sure. By the way, Don refused to meet with us today. Big surprise, huh? He says he has little authority on psych because of the contract management."

"Yeah, gee, what a surprise," Monique agreed sarcastically.

"Sure, I'll meet you. Is it okay with you if I review some of the charts up here? I'd like to know a little about the patients."

Monique smiled at her and laughed. "Alex, you know darned well you don't need my authority to review charts. Help yourself. But, thanks for asking! See you at six o'clock!" Monique flashed her a smile as she dashed off.

"Pick me up in the nurses' station," Alex said, watching the elegant Monique Desmonde rush off. She again found herself admiring the psychiatrist and her commitment to the deranged and mentally ill. *It's a heck of a job, Alex thought to herself. I'd never do it.*





There was no one that Alex recognized on the evening shift. She introduced herself to the RN in charge who was supervising level II patients in the day room. The nurse identified herself as Joanne Waters, an agency nurse, who was helping out. Joanne laughingly asked Alex to fill her in on the patients after her review of the patient charts. She admitted she hadn't had a chance to look at any of them. Joanne also reported that one psych tech had taken five patients to dinner in the hospital cafeteria and that the other tech was making rounds. Further questioning by Alex confirmed that Joanne had never worked psych at CCMC. Joanne also admitted she knew little about psychiatric nursing and was pretty scared to be up there after what had happened "last night."

Alex shook her head as she entered the nurses' station, taking several records with her into the staff lounge. She hated temporary agency help. Why not pay their own nurses more and not spend \$150 an hour for temporary nurses? *This type of care is unsafe*, she thought to herself. *This place is a catastrophe waiting to happen*. At least Farve could hire agency nurses with a background in psychiatric nursing! Of course, as Alex remembered, Farve was a believer in the warm body theory. As Farve saw it, if you had a warm body and a nursing license, you could practice anywhere in the hospital. Alex continued to reflect on the unsafe, risky environment in the Pavilion, imagining how catastrophic things could become. Her imagination in no way prepared her for the reality that was to set in a few short hours later. Psychiatric services at Crescent City were explosive, to say the very least.

Alex had reviewed three charts and was looking at Jim McMurdie's chart when a voice behind her asked coldly, "Who, may I ask, are you?"

Alex turned around in her seat and saw a tall, cold-faced man, who was obviously furious. His face had the appearance of cold granite, his dark eyes looked like chipped, black ice. She stood up to meet his stare. She felt a bit unnerved, but her voice was strong. "My name is Alexandra Destephano. I'm the lawyer for the hospital. Who are you?" Alex's voice was equally cold and formal.

The man had soft features. His black hair was thick and curly, with abundant grey at the temples. His nose was sharp, and his lips were thick and pouty. He had a high forehead. All in all, his appearance was effeminate, and Alex didn't like him. She didn't like him at all.

Alex squirmed under the man's scrutiny. His cold black eyes canvassed her tall, graceful body. Alex suppressed a shudder as his eyes stopped and surveyed her breasts, and then continued down to stare at her hips and long legs. The man was positively undressing her before her very eyes. She was totally humiliated and furious at the same time.

The man extended his hand. "Oh, I should have known. I've heard about the beautiful, auburn-haired CCMC lawyer ever since I arrived. I am Lester Whitset, the onsite contract manager over the psych, oops, I mean behavioral health department here at CCMC. I'm surprised we haven't met before."

Alex accepted his hand. It was cold, so cold Alex likened it to a corpse. It had a clammy feeling and gave her the creeps. Lester Whitset was so white he looked positively dead. *Ugh*, she thought to herself, as she shivered slightly in disgust. There was something malevolent about him. He totally grossed her out.

"I believe I was out of town when your group took over the operation of the CCMC psychiatric services. That was in March, wasn't it?" Alex knew she was right. That was when she, Jack, and Robert Bonnet had spent three weeks in Virginia, resting up from Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

"Yes, it was. I've heard a lot about you, Ms. Destephano. The grapevine has it that you're a pretty good sleuth. Are you looking through the patient records so you can find our rapist?" Whitset eyed her carefully, a thin smile on his lips, his eyes cold and unwavering.

Alex was stunned by his question. "Actually, no. I witnessed a potential disaster here today, a fight between the patients, Mr. Whitset. I'm glad we've met each other. We have some work to do up here."

"Please, call me Lester. We're colleagues, are we not? I'd be pleased to call you Alex."

Alex was uncomfortable at the thought of Whitset being a colleague. "Yes, I guess we are. In a sense." She stammered her reply, caught off guard for a moment. The man repulsed her, and she wasn't sure why. He gave her the chills. She began again. "Mr. Whitset, I'm concerned about the staffing levels here on the behavioral health units. I understand you cut staff twenty percent when you took over?"

Whitset glared at her and said nothing.

"I'm convinced that staff numbers aren't appropriate to provide safe care to patients or protect the staff. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure we're meeting a minimum standard of care." Alex continued to belabor her point, uncomfortable under his stare.

Whitset's look froze Alex in her tracks.

His voice was equally as cold. "I assure you, Alex, that safety and standards are being met here in psychiatry. My company was hired to reorganize the psych department and to make it fiscally sound. I've been successful in doing just that. We are experts in behavioral health and behavioral health care. Behavior health at CCMC was a money loser before we took over. I've managed to put it back in the black in six short months — an accomplishment greatly appreciated by your CEO, Donald Montgomery."

Alex was not to be bested. She gave Whitset a hard look. "Perhaps you have, but at what cost? I'm not so sure. I plan to assess the conditions here, do a risk assessment, and determine just what the care is like, from a risk management perspective, of course. I may hire a team of risk appraisers from outside of Louisiana to review our practices." Alex watched his face darken, suffused with anger, and then continued, "Furthermore, I'd like a copy of your management policies and documents to review as part of the investigation."

"Anything you want, Alex." Whitset's voice was controlled, and only the pulsing of his right carotid artery gave any indication of his rage. He continued, "My office is your office, any time." His eyes wandered over her body. "Anything else you need?" The man was positively leering at her, and his intent was clear. His voice remained cold. He gave her a sly smile as he touched her hand.

Alex was startled by his touch and pulled her hand away. The man was positively vile. There was something about him that was malignant. "No, nothing. Please send your internal documents to my office ASAP." Alex turned away from him to continue her chart review.

Whitset persisted, "Alex, I'll be happy to. Can I interest you in a cup of coffee in my office? It's a gourmet blend, one of Louisiana's finest."

"No, thank you. I'm leaving shortly." Alex didn't look at him. Her reply was short, to the point.

"Don't work your pretty little head too hard now. All work and no play makes Alex a very dull girl." Whitset's voice was hushed and Alex could feel the chill of his body behind her. Finally, he left the room, his heels clicking in a military-like fashion.

*What a weird dude,* Alex thought to herself. It took her several moments to relax after he left. Her heart was hammering so hard her chest wall was hurting. There was something about him that was

repulsive, but she couldn't articulate it. She continued to think about him for a few minutes then returned to Jim McMurdie's chart.

She was surprised to learn that Jim was a former New Orleans police detective. He was presently on disability from the department due to mental illness. The chart indicated that he had snapped when his wife of twelve years left him several months ago, taking along their six-year-old daughter. His wife had been pregnant with their second child at the time she left. An interview with Mrs. McMurdie revealed that Jim had become more and more aggressive in his behavior toward her. In fact, he had suddenly begun accusing her of having extramarital affairs when she was three months pregnant. It was documented that Mrs. McMurdie had become increasingly frightened of Jim and had gotten a restraining order against him. Jim had become so angry at this that he had tried to beat her, which is what had precipitated her filing for divorce. Jim's medical record indicated the treatment team was hopeful that he could control his rage, anger, and jealousy through psychotherapy and with psychotropic drugs. Alex was about to read the physician progress notes in the chart when Monique Desmonde tapped her on the shoulder.

Alex jumped at the touch.

"Good Lord, Alex. I did not mean to scare you! Are the charts making you nervous?" Monique laughed at her.

"No, Monique. I guess I was just so engrossed in Jim McMurdie's chart that you startled me. Let's go. I'm famished."

As Alex and Monique left the attending chart room, Alex was surprised to see Lester Whitset sitting in the day room talking with the patients. He was joking with Jim and Anthony, who were both still pretty doped up, but out of seclusion. Both patients were laughing uproariously with the administrator. Alex moved a little closer to the entrance of the day room and saw that the three were playing cards. Rose was looking at them disdainfully, in obvious disapproval. Mrs. Smithson was knitting a sweater and smiling benevolently at them.

Alex nudged Monique's shoulder. "Is it usual for Whitset to converse with the patients? I think that's inappropriate."

Monique's eyes traveled to the day room. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head in disapproval. "Yep, he comes in most every evening. The nurses hate it. They say he usually stays until after bedtime. Sometimes he's here all night. He's available in the late afternoons and evenings mostly. Angie told me several weeks ago that he seemed to upset the patients from time to time. I've asked him to stop, but he maintains it's part of his system of quality assurance."

"That's total BS. Can't you keep him out? It seems unprofessional to me that he should visit with them."

Monique shook her head. "I couldn't agree more, but the answer is no. I can't keep him out. I've asked him not to be so familiar with the patients, but he just smiles at me. He knows it makes me mad, so now I don't say much about it. Actually, most of the male psychiatrists disagree with me. They've heard positive things about him from their male patients. The female patients don't seem to like him. I can't garner enough support from my male colleagues to complain to Don. The whole thing actually disgusts me. Some of the male psych attendings are such pissers," Monique said, obviously piqued by her male colleagues' behavior.

Out of the blue, Alex retorted, "I don't like the man. He gives me the creeps. I just get an uneasy feeling from him. He's so cold. Yuck."

Monique looked at her curiously. "What do you mean cold? Why does he give you the creeps?"

Alex shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know for sure. I guess it's the way he looked at me. He pretty much undressed me with his eyes."

"Yeah, I know that feeling," Monica intoned. "You, me, and all the female staff. I agree. He's inappropriate as hell, but how can you reprimand someone for looking at you, not that he comes under my review? All he ever does is look. He never says anything lewd or vulgar. I wish he would because I'd love to get him out of here on a sexual harassment charge," Monique replied. "That would make my day."

"I'd love to help you, but the guy is way too smart for that. My guess is that he plays it to the hilt without ever doing anything wrong. I just don't like him. And he is so cold." Alex shivered when she remembered her conversation with him.

"What do you mean 'cold'? You've said that twice now," Monique asked.

"Well," Alex thought a moment. "When he extended his hand in greeting and I accepted it, his hand felt cold, dead, like there was no blood running through it. You know, like somebody who's had a stroke or something. It was just gross, like touching a dead person." Alex shivered at the memory.

Monique nodded. "Not sure I noticed that. I try my best not to touch him. Thank goodness, I don't see him much. He's mostly around when I'm not. By the way, Jack's going to eat with us. I didn't think you'd mind."

"Of course not. How did that happen? Does he have any info about Angie or the rapist?"

Much to her surprise, Alex saw a faint blush crawl over Monique's pale face. Her friend looked a bit guilty, as if she had been found out.

"Well," she said with some hesitation, "Jack and I are pretty good friends."

"Yes, well Jack and I are pretty good friends, too, but I don't blush when I talk about him," Alex retorted, confused by Monique's response.

"Well, we sort of decided... well, we're special..." Monique rambled, stumbling for the best way to describe the change in her feelings for Jack.

Alex was losing patience. Then she slowly began to understand. "What? Great day, you and Jack!" She could hardly believe it. Commander Françoise and Dr. Desmond! Jack and Monique! Two of her favorite people. They were an item! She hugged Monique in her excitement.

Monique couldn't stop smiling. She was ecstatic.

"I just can hardly believe this. What a surprise!" Alex smiled brightly at her friend, and the oppression of the Pavilion lifted for the moment. She continued, "Monique, tell, tell, tell. Are you and Jack seeing each other?" Monique didn't respond, so Alex continued to prod her. "Your non-verbals are telling on you, Dr. Desmond. Now, spit it out!"

Monique smiled and turned bright red. "It's not what you think, Alex. We're just good friends. We've had several dates. Well, I guess you would call them dates. Do people date at my age or is it called something else?"

"Of course you date. You can date when you are ninety years old. How did it happen? Oooh! This is the best thing I've heard in days. Tell me!" Alex retorted, unrestrained in her excitement.

"Shhhhh. I'll tell you downstairs. Way too many ears up here. Let's get the elevator." Monique hushed her as she eyed one of the psych techs staring at them.

As the unwieldy elevator labored up to the second floor and then down toward the lobby, the two women chatted excitedly. Taking a seat on a drab, grey bench located in the lobby of the Pavilion, Monique reached for her purse as her iPhone beeped a text message signal. She checked the text message and said, "It's him. He's gonna be late. I'm going to call him back and see when he thinks he

can get here. I'm just going to step over here so I can hear a bit better." Monique walked away from the bench and stood near a large potted plant in the corner of the lobby.

As she examined Monique from the bench, Alex was mesmerized by her changing body language. Monique's erect posture relaxed, her speech became less calm and controlled, and she looked ten years younger. Alex could have sworn she heard her giggle. Even her dark hair, pulled up into its everyday chignon, seemed to gleam brighter in the small stream of sunlight that broke through into the otherwise drab, grey lobby.

Alex was overjoyed. *Wow, this is unbelievable. I'm loving it. She loves him. I am so happy for her.* But, for just an instant, Alex felt a pang of jealousy. She reprimanded herself, bristling with self-anger at her jealousy. She wished she had someone she could fall in love with, someone she could care for. She hadn't had a date since... well, since February, when her love life had once again ended tragically when Mitch has died.

She and Robert saw each other frequently for dinner, but that relationship was questionable and uncertain at best. It seemed unlikely that Alex and Dr. Robert Bonnet could rebuild their relationship. After all, they had been married for almost five years. She worked hard at keeping her depression at bay, refusing to let it overtake and engulf her.

Her thoughts returned to Robert. He had been a brilliant surgeon. Robert lived to heal, to put people back together after major trauma. A rising star at CCMC, and in the medical community at large, Robert was a luminary to the local citizens of NOLA. But in Robert's mind, he was a crippled surgeon and was totally useless. He suffered bouts of depression over his arm injury and potentially lost surgical career. When Alex had reminded him that all physicians were healers and that he could heal people medically, as well as surgically, Robert had become angry with her and shut her out. As a result, he was often depressed and moribund. She didn't know it, but Robert was seeing Monique professionally in an effort to rebuild his personal and professional life.

Robert had been the one who wanted the divorce, not her. She doubted she would ever recover from that rejection. It had destroyed her for a long time. Besides, it had been years since they had been together. They could be good friends now, but lovers? Well, who knows, but she certainly doubted the possibility. Anyway, after the spring, Alex had decided to shut herself away from romance for a while.

She was jerked back into reality from her musings when Monique rejoined her on the bench. Monique was positively effervescent after her call to Jack, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright, and her spirit lifted.

"Jack wants us to meet him at the Palace Café. He wants to celebrate that someone knows about us. He's naturally pleased that it's you. We were gonna tell you and Robert this weekend, but now that you know about us, can we go celebrate? Can you go? Should we call Robert and invite him for dinner?"

Alex hugged Monique again. "It's your call, Monique. It's your party. I'm up for anything, as long as it involves fun. We deserve some after today!"

"Yes," Monique agreed. "For sure. Today was a bomb. I think I will. Do you know Robert's number off-hand? Never mind, it's in my cell. Where's my brain?"

Monique saw Alex's hesitation and asked, "It is okay with you if Robert comes, isn't it?" Monique returned to her doctor mode and tried to detect Alex's emotions.

"Of course it is, you crazy fool! Call him." Alex watched happily while Monique fished her smart phone out of her purse and walked toward the window to call Robert. She could tell that Monique was leaving a message on his cell. Monique was breathless when she returned.

"I left a message. Can't get to his phone, I guess. I didn't tell him anything. I just asked him to join us. When we get to the Palace, we'll call and text him again. I'm so excited about sharing our secret. We're in the open! No more clandestine relationship. It feels so good. Come on."

Alex giggled to herself about Monique's being in the open remark. "Really, Monique, it's not like you and Jack have come out of the closet!" Monique laughed as they walked toward the parking garage. Alex noticed how dark it was already though it was only seven o'clock in the evening. The trees, together with the moss that hung from them, blocked out any remaining daylight. Angie must have been so scared when she walked alone in the early hours before dawn. As the two women approached the crime scene, Monique squeezed her hand.

After they passed, Monique continued to chatter gaily. "You know, Alex, Jack and I have known each other for years. In fact, we lived in the same neighborhood. Of course, he's older, but we even dated a few times in college, when he was at Tulane and I was in pre-med at LSU. We were never really serious, but we really liked each other."

"Really! No, I didn't know that. What happened?"

"Nothing, really." Monique looked pensive. "I think we just eventually drifted apart. There was no precipitating event, no argument, or anything. I was in medical school. Jack went into the service, came home from the wars, and became a rookie with the NOPD. Later, of course, you know that I married — a disastrous affair." Monique noted Alex's raised eyebrows at this piece of information.

"I never knew you'd been married, Monique. What happened? How long did it last?" Alex was curious.

"Oh, seven years. Seven very long years. I, for one, am a big believer in the theoretical seven-year itch. My husband was a stockbroker. He left me high and dry about ten years ago for a very voluptuous blonde and a career on Wall Street. I call it the chick du jour experience, better known to my close friends and family as Tartlett. So much for forever after." Monique looked disgusted when she described her ex-husband and his affair.

"Great day! That was pretty awful. How tacky! Did it take you a long time to get over it? I'm being snopy, I know. You don't have to answer if it makes you feel uncomfortable."

Monique looked thoughtful. "To be honest, I'm not sure I'll ever get over it! It felt like I'd been stabbed with a knife. It took a long time for the intense pain of betrayal to go away, but it finally did. The thing that remains is the sense of a loss of trust. I really trusted Jeff. I never would've expected him to do that. I thought we had the perfect, professional yuppie marriage — minus the kids, of course." Monique was quiet for a moment. "I guess it sort of makes me afraid to love someone else, to make that kind of commitment. But I do love having someone in my life to share things with."

Alex was nodding her head continually as Monique was speaking. "Yes, I certainly understand that... perfectly. I felt the same way with Robert. I knew we were growing apart, but I never thought he'd want to divorce me. I was devastated."

"I'm sure you were. I think Robert knows now he made a terrible mistake." Monique gave Alex a knowing look out of the corner of her eye.

"Yes, I think he does. Well, tough for him. Now it's water under the bridge. Actually, I know he does. He told me that recently, but it's just not a relationship that I can jump back into — besides, we have lots of other things to work on. We each carry enormous baggage from that marriage and the breakup, not to mention me losing Mitch, and Robert possibly losing his surgical career. I think we're both fighting demons we need to work through. Anyway, what else about you and Jack? How did all this happen?" Alex waved her hands and Monique laughed.

Monique began her story. "You know we saw each other earlier this year, during the disaster at the hospital. Well, anyway, we had coffee a few times during that..."

"Coffee and jelly donuts?" Alex couldn't suppress a smile.

"Yes, yes, oh my God, those damned jelly donuts. Anyway, I didn't see him for several months after Mardi Gras. In May, I was green grocery shopping at the French market and had stopped for café au lait at the Café Du Monde, mainly to tourist watch. I love to watch tourists in New Orleans. Jack was there, too. It was a beautiful day, not too hot. We spent the afternoon together and even had dinner. Ever since then, we've been seeing each other. It feels so good to share this with someone. I'm so glad it's you, Alex. I know how highly Jack prizes your friendship. He loves you, you know." Monique changed the subject as they reached the parking deck. "Did you drive in today, Alex?"

"No, I walked today. I have no wheels, except for Martin. Should I call him?"

"Oh, no. I have my car. It's on level four. Let's take the stairs, work our leg and butt muscles."

Alex groaned, but agreed.

Monique and Alex continued to talk as they climbed the stairs. Alex could feel the four flights of stairs, but Monique wasn't even winded. She continued talking as she skillfully steered her grey Volvo out of the CCMC garage and onto Canal Street, heading for the Palace Café. The two friends chatted incessantly during the short ride to the restaurant. Life was good for this hour.





Monique maneuvered her vehicle right to the carpeted entrance of the Palace Café, one of Alex's favorite places to dine. The Palace was a local favorite and was owned by the famous Brennen restaurant family. Food at the Palace was to die for, and the award-winning restaurant had been serving Creole cuisine in the old Werlein Music building on Canal for years. Monique generously tipped the valet at the door. She and Alex entered the beautiful eatery and spied Jack at a coveted corner table. The maître d' greeted Monique by name and accompanied them to the police commander's table.

Jack rose and kissed Monique on the cheek. He hugged Alex tightly and said, "Yo, Alex, now you know my deep, dark secret! I've had a hard time hiding this from you because I'm so happy I can hardly stand it."

Alex had tears in her eyes as she hugged Jack. "This really is a huge surprise, a gigantic one in fact!" She gazed into the happy, flushed faces of her dearest friends. "This is just perfect. My favorite peeps. I'm so happy for you all and, to be honest, a bit jealous."

Jack nodded, his face beaming. "I know, Alex, and I understand your feelings. Your day is coming, Miss Lawyer Lady," Jack teased. "Just have patience. I never thought this would've happened to an old, fat, nasty bastard like me, but, well, I'm living proof. If I can snag someone, you surely can." Jack smiled lovingly at Monique, who once again blushed at his look.

"You've got that right, Commander. I am amazed that anyone would want anyone who is as big a pain in the butt as you. You're one lucky man," Alex taunted as she high-fived Monique.

"Jack, we want to call Robert and have him join us. Will you do that?" Monique insisted, pulling at his jacket.

"Of course, honey. If it's okay with Alex. Is it, Alex?"

"Absolutely, okay." Alex nodded her head, still shell-shocked at the big, burly, fearless policeman calling her eminent, elegant, psychiatrist friend "honey". Alex had many descriptors for Monique, but honey was certainly not among them. She laughed. "You guys are flipping me out. I really need a drink. This is just great!" Alex's face glowed with happiness for Monique and Jack.

"Champagne, ladies? I've been ordered to make a phone call." Jack pulled his cell from his pocket as he signaled for the waiter.

As the commander left the table to call Robert, he appreciated the lovely decor of the strictly old-line New Orleans restaurant. He ordered a bottle of Cristal in the surprisingly quieter bar, and in less than two minutes, Alex and Monique were toasting each other with beautiful leaded glass champagne goblets.

Robert responded to Jack's call. After a brief chat, Jack returned to the dining room and was happy to see Alex and Monique having such a wonderful time. Françoise was wise in the ways of life, and he knew that bad times far outnumbered the good times. He also knew that the heartache of Angie's attack and rape would surface again in the morning. He had a suspect with a psychological profile that was promising, and it was one of Monique's patients. To preserve the good feelings and the festivities of the evening, he'd made a pact with himself not to allow the dinner conversation to turn to the case. After all, this was a celebration honoring him and Monique.

Jack continued to observe the two lovely women from a distance. He felt his hard policeman's heart fill with love for both of them. Of course, the love was a different kind of love for each woman. Jack had known Alex for less than a year and was very fond of her. He smiled as he remembered how

the tall, beautiful, auburn-haired lawyer had stood her ground against his macho police captain's ego earlier in the year. The then 'Captain' Françoise had treated her rudely, undermined her presence, denigrated her position as the hospital attorney, and had generally been a bastard. Of course, this was the barometer the hard-nosed cop used to check people out. Alex had responded to him in a courteous and professional manner but would not allow herself to be bullied. She immediately earned his respect, not an easy thing to do in Jack Françoise's world.

As events continued to unravel during Mardi Gras at CCMC, Françoise finally admitted to himself that Alex was some young woman. His grudging respect for her had increased. He admired her courage and cursed her fearless and stubborn spirit. Jack's fear for Alex's life had culminated in life-saving heroics for both of them, which had created a bond between them for life. Commander Jack Françoise loved Alex like a sister and best friend.

Jack continued to look at Monique. How could a gnarly, overweight, arrogant cop earn or deserve the love and attention that Monique offered him? What could she possibly see in him? Jack couldn't believe his good fortune. Sometimes, he still pinched himself when they were together. Monique was just stunning. Jack was a bit older than Monique, but she looked twenty years younger. Her long hair was still dark and her face unblemished by sun and age. She was tall, a little taller than he was, and she was positively the most exquisite woman Jack had ever met. She was sensitive and completely without pretense.

Monique already knew exactly what he was thinking and even knew how to respond to and handle his dark moods. He was so lucky. He had decided he'd take Robert's advice to lose weight and get himself back in shape, because who knew where this relationship could lead? He wanted to spend a lot of years with the lovely Monique Desmonde, and he wanted to look and feel his best every moment they were together. When he returned to the table, both women were laughing heartily. Jack kissed them both on their cheeks.

"Ladies, I've good news! Robert can join us. He's leaving shortly — should be here in about thirty minutes. He can't stay long because he has to make late rounds, but at least he'll be with us for a short time."

Alex felt her heart flutter for a second and then was angry for feeling excited. *What the hell*, she thought. She admonished herself and then convinced herself how neat it would be for Robert to learn about Jack and Monique. Robert had known them since childhood. He and Monique had grown up in the Garden District. Jack had lived close by in the Uptown area of NOLA.

Monique smiled at Jack. "Good work, Commander. I knew you could get him. Did you tell him that Alex was with us?"

"I sure did. No offense, Alex, but I think he'd have come anyway," Jack teased her.

"Robert's going to be thrilled for you all. Did you tell him?" Alex asked as she looked at Jack.

Jack answered, looking pleased. "Nope, played it down. I wanted to surprise him. I've been dreaming of this night for weeks." Monique smiled and patted Jack's hand.

Alex's heart warmed at the gesture.

Jack squeezed her hand and turned his attention to the menu. "I suggest an appetizer for now then wait for Robert to order. I'm sure he'll be able to stay later than he thinks. He's not operating, so he can't have too many patients to see, now can he, Alex?" Jack looked inquiringly at her.

"I wouldn't think so. But, you know, it could be an excuse. He could have other plans," Alex speculated, changing the subject. "What should we have for appetizers?"

"I doubt that," Jack replied, as he consulted the menu. "The Creole Shrimp is good. So is their baked spinach dip. Let's start with those," Jack suggested, as he sought approval from the ladies.

The three friends were enjoying their second glass of champagne and appetizers, unaware that they were being watched from the lobby by Dr. Robert Bonnet. Robert stood behind a column at the restaurant entrance. He was curious and intrigued by what he saw. Alex looked lovely. She always did, even on the worst of days. Seeing Alex always made his heart race, but he couldn't get over the change in Monique Desmonde. She seemed to have undergone a veritable metamorphosis. Her eyes were twinkling, her normally pale cheeks were flushed, and her entire body was relaxed. He'd never seen Monique look so beautiful, not even at their senior prom at Sacred Heart high school where she had been his date. And, to think, he'd thought Monique had been reasonably pretty at seventeen. But now, words couldn't capture how captivating she was this evening! Then, his glance shifted to Jack. Jack was laughing, smiling without reservation — very different from the day-to-day, stressed-out police commander.

What in the world was happening here, Robert wondered. Jack looked happier and more relaxed than Robert had ever seen him. His worn face, the deeply furrowed forehead, and dark eyes had all lost their anxiety and fatigue. His silver hair was shining as he nodded toward the two women. Robert continued to watch his friends as an awakening thought invaded his consciousness. At the same moment, he saw Jack cover Monique's petite hand with his big, calloused one. Then he knew! Jack Françoise and Monique Desmonde were in love. Two of his old childhood friends. This was inconceivable, but it was wonderful.

Robert felt tears jump into his eyes, but hastily wiped them away. He'd found himself much more emotional since his injury, and he was overcome with delight. Monique and Jack were as different as day and night. Why, Monique was the exact antithesis of the commander. She was quiet, reserved, dignified, and cool as a cucumber. Jack, on the other hand, was loud, boisterous, volatile, and earthy. Wow, this was incredible! Robert felt his pulse quicken in delight for his two old friends. He quickly strolled toward them.

Jack saw Robert first, his policeman's intuition kicking in. He stood up, heartily shook Robert's hand, and hugged him.

Robert, charming as always, clasped Jack's hand tightly and bent to kiss Alex and Monique on the cheek.

Alex could not help but notice how handsome Robert looked. His sandy blond hair gleamed in the light of the chandeliers. His light tan suit and pale yellow shirt and tie were perfect for the sultry New Orleans evening. His sensitive, warm brown eyes quickly alerted Alex that he had discovered Monique and Jack's secret. They exchanged knowing nods. Alex felt it amazing that they still communicated so well emotionally even though their marriage had been over for years. They were often on the same emotional plane. For some reason, that pleased her. Plus, she had to admit to herself that her former husband was a hunk and very, very sexy. Her heart quickened with memories of their times together.

Robert smiled at Monique and Jack and said in his cultured Creole accent, "I've been spying on you all. I think I've been invited to a celebration. It seems there is love in the air!" Again, Robert smiled broadly at the threesome, showing his perfect white teeth. Monique blushed again and Robert couldn't stand it. He laughed at her and put his arm around her.

Alex felt her heart quicken again at the sight of her former husband. He was so charming, so handsome, and they *had been* so perfect.

"Good Lord, Monique. You look like a sixteen-year-old girl on her first date! What in heaven's name is happening! Fill me in, Commander," Robert demanded. "You've never been at a loss for words!"

The huge commander looked a bit sheepish, as well as a bit embarrassed. "Yo, Robert. What can I say? Dr. Desmonde told me she has a crush on me. Me! Can you believe it? Big, ugly, uncouth, gnarly me?"

Robert looked at Monique, his eyes twinkling. "Nope, Jack. Actually, I can't. Tell me, Monique. This just couldn't be true. You could like this big, old, ill-bred, uncouth ox?"

Monique was laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes. "Yes, yes, yes. I totally love the uncouth man. Every bit of him! Perhaps I need a shrink," she joked.

Robert and Jack both nodded in agreement.

Alex's heart warmed and she felt tears springing into her eyes as the commander bent down and kissed Monique. She didn't know if she'd ever seen such a beautiful declaration of love.

Robert was enjoying every minute. "Well, I'm glad I'm here to see this. It's pretty special and, boy, what a surprise it is! This is a reason for celebration! I vote for another bottle of wine." Robert motioned the hovering waiter.

Robert sat down next to Alex and touched her hand. "What do you make of this turn of events?"

"I'm astonished, to be truthful. But I think it's wonderful. I'm happy for them both," Alex replied, enjoying the touch of Robert's hand and then wishing she didn't. *What is wrong with me?* she asked herself. *He is a hunk and he wants me...*

Robert proposed a toast to the happy couple and the four friends talked animatedly throughout dinner. Over coffee and dessert, Monique asked, "Robert, do you know how Angie Richelieu is doing? Did you oversee her surgery?"

Jack took Monique's hand in his. "Are you sure we want to talk about this tonight? This is our night. Let's wait until tomorrow," Jack pleaded.

Monique was quick to reply. "I do, if you don't mind. It won't put a pall on my happiness. What about the two of you?" Monique looked across the table, eyeing Alex and Robert. No one objected so she continued, "Well, let's just talk for several minutes, get an update from Robert. After all, we have the best and brightest minds at CCMC, right here, right?" Monique asked, rolling her eyes.

Jack smiled at Robert. "Dr. Bonnet, you know we don't have a chance against Dr. Desmonde and the lawyer, two of the most perceptive ladies in New Orleans, if not in the world. I guess I'll have to tell you what I know, although it's just a theory at this point." Jack noted the attentiveness of the group. "Alex, are you okay about discussing this?"

"It's okay with me. I'd like an update," Alex said, turning toward Robert.

Robert cleared his throat but didn't look particularly happy. "Post-surgery, she's okay, stable, but she's been through a lot. Dr. Goshette sutured up multiple lacerations, mostly stab wounds and the majority of those were superficial. We called in Neurosurgery and they had to do a craniotomy with bur holes for her head injury. She had elevated intracranial pressure and her coma had deepened. We put in a temporary VJ shunt hoping to keep the pressure out of her head. She did have a great deal of internal bleeding simply from trauma."

Jack looked impatient. "VJ what?"

Alex ignored his question. "Do you think she will wake up?" Alex asked.

"I hope so. Our main fear is that she was so hypovolemic from blood loss that we had to transfuse her repeatedly with blood. Hopefully, she doesn't have brain damage from the extensive loss of blood."

"I would imagine she lost a lot of blood at the scene. Maybe she bled out," Alex surmised. "I knew she was anemic in the E.D. Sandy thought she was bleeding internally."

"So did we. And, she was. Her blood values are stabilizing somewhat."

"Okay, dammit, okay. Enough medical talk. What is a VJ shunt and what is the H thing?" Jack was piqued and impatient. He always was when he didn't understand.

Alex smiled at the memory.

Monique laughed at Jack. "So sorry, Jack. We do talk doctorease don't we? A ventricular jugular shunt will pump the blood and fluids from her brain through a tube into her heart and then to the rest of her body, which will keep fluids from filling up in her head compressing her brain and causing brain damage. The H & H is the hemoglobin and hematocrit, blood tests that screen out such things as anemia and how your blood clots or doesn't, among other things."

Robert smiled at Monique. "Hey, that's pretty good for a shrink. I thought you all forgot everything about real medicine," he teased.

"Listen, Dr. Bonnet. I could save your life anytime. Don't you forget it." Monique smirked at him. "Remember, I'm double board certified in medicine and psychiatry!" She then turned her attention to Alex and Robert. "We have to get her through the attack trauma and rape. That is going to be hard work."

"Do you think so, Monique? She's pretty levelheaded and feisty. I hope she will be okay," Jack opined.

Alex shrugged her shoulders. "Monique, how do you think Angie will deal with this? What's been your experience in cases like this?" Alex questioned.

Monique shook her head. She looked incredibly tired and dispirited. The warm glow of the evening had burned off. "I don't know. A lot depends on her physical condition and the support her husband will give her. It's hard to predict how a woman will recover from rape and this is supposing that she does wake up."

Alex and Robert mulled this over but didn't respond.

"Robert, what about the slice wound around her face? Did you call in plastics?"

"Yep, Alex. They sutured it. They think there will only be minimal scarring. And she's got the kind of skin that heals well. This whole thing is horrible. Malicious. It looked as though the rapist was trying to deliberately disfigure her or wipe out her face. The guy is clearly a wacko, a real sicko. Those bite marks were harrowing!" Robert's outrage at the crime was clear in his voice.

Alex could see the flush of anger under his tanned skin. *I bet he's been on his sailboat over at Gulf Shores. He looks really good.*

Alex refocused and felt herself shudder as she remembered Angie's injuries. The psychotic activity she'd seen in the Pavilion freaked her out and gave her chills. As she glanced at Monique, she could tell she was fighting with herself about revealing any possible suspects among her patients.

"Let's just hope she doesn't remember everything." Robert interrupted. "Let's be sure she wakes up first. That is still an *if*."

"Yeah, really. Do you think she will, Robert? What's the prognosis?"

"It's guarded, Alex. There are clear concerns based on the blood loss and head trauma. We are hopeful, though," Robert added, remembering that he had just said this earlier.

Alex felt depressed. "Let's hope she wakes up soon. The sooner, the better."

Robert and Monique nodded in agreement.

Jack looked annoyed. He obviously felt left out of the conversation. "Does anyone want to hear about my theory?"

"Absolutely. We all do," Alex answered for all of them.

"Okay, it's about time. I am pretty done with the medical talk. I guess I'll have to tell you what I know, although it's just a theory at this point." Jack noted and appreciated the attentiveness of the

group. He continued, "Monique, two of your patients in the Pavilion are possible suspects..." He was immediately silenced by the look on Monique's face. She was enraged.

"Jack, how could you suspect two of my patients when you haven't even talked to me? That's outlandish speculation on your part!" Monique's voice was cutting and derisive.

Alex had never heard Monique speak in that tone of voice.

"Now, Monique," Jack chided her. "I told you. This is purely speculation on my part. You asked and I'm only telling you what I think. Besides, do you think I need you to develop a theory on what happened during a crime?"

Monique looked contrite, but Alex knew she was still seething. In fact, Monique was irked.

Jack nodded and continued, "Nothing's official. Do you want to hear, or do you want to change the subject?" Jack looked at her darkly, his voice impatient.

Monique looked apologetic. "I'm sorry. You're right. I guess I spend so much time defending my patients and fighting for them that my response was purely instinct. Go ahead..." Her face was flushed with either anger or embarrassment.

Alex couldn't tell for sure.

"Okay. Remember, *it's a theory, not a reality*. I talked to one of the psych techs who told me it'd been reported on the 7:00 a.m. shift that the side stairwell door had been left open during the night. Consequently, it's plausible to think that—"

"What? The door was open! That's impossible! The whole building is secured at eleven o'clock at night by CCMC security. Besides, that door is attached to a fire alarm so if anyone had exited through it, the alarm would've gone off. It's inconceivable that—" Monique was even more angry now.

Robert and Alex caught each other's eye. Robert was looking strained, his deep-set brown eyes displaying his anxiety.

Commander Françoise threw up his hands. "Okay, that's it! No more," he said to Monique in a loud voice. "Change the subject."

There was a heavy silence. Finally, a waiter came over to offer after-dinner drinks. They all ordered Irish coffee. They needed something to fortify themselves against the uncomfortable silence. Monique excused herself to go to the ladies' room, and Alex immediately began to explain Monique's position to Jack, who waved her justification aside.

His voice was impatient. "Stop it, Alex. I don't need to hear this. Monique and I have to talk about this sooner or later — either officially or unofficially. She has to open herself up to reason, for God's sake! Angie was brutally raped. The SOB may as well have killed her. She'll carry scars, inside and out, for the rest of her life... if she lives or wakes up... and, dammit, I'm gonna catch the pervert that did it! I don't give a flying shit if it is one of her patients or the president!" Jack stopped for a moment as if to contemplate his next thoughts. He shook his head and continued in a calm voice. "Besides, we've got to learn to communicate about unpleasant things, don't we?" Françoise was so disgusted that he pushed away from the table and went outside to smoke.

Robert and Alex looked at each other across the table. He said gently, "You know, he is right, Al. They've got to talk sooner or later. It's all part of building a relationship."

Alex knew Robert was projecting their own trouble in communicating with the difficulty Jack and Monique were having. She sighed and said, "I know, Robert. I just wished we had gotten through dinner and we hadn't started in with this stuff. The day's been emotional enough."

Robert touched her hand and said, "Monique will be okay. You can bet she's pulling herself together right this minute, and she'll be back to continue this. She's not one to let feelings of any sort hang around. Tricks of her trade, I guess. Do you think we should stay or leave?"

Monique interrupted him from behind.

She was cool and collected, but Alex could detect the fake gaiety.

"You'll stay, of course! You're right, Robert. I'm gonna get this thing sorted out now, once and for all. Where's Jack?" Monique looked around.

"Outside smoking, I guess," Robert said as he gestured with his finger out the window.

Monique looked impatient. "He's trying hard to quit. He has taken your advice to heart and cut down."

"Good, he'd better. He has ten times more reasons to live now that he has you. Now, go get the big guy and tell him to get his tail back in here so we can get this over with. I'm paying the bill," Robert said as he motioned for the waiter.

Monique started to protest, but Robert waved her protests away and demanded again that she get the commander.

Alex smiled. Robert really was good with people. *Maybe I will learn to love him again*, she thought. *I guess anything's possible. Maybe once I work through the hurt of losing Mitch, I'll be able to love Robert like I loved him once.* The idea seemed settling to her. She continued to think positively as she said, "Good job, Bonnet. I've never seen you push both a shrink and a policeman around in less than five minutes. I'm proud of you!"

Robert looked at her with a smile on his face and said, "Not just a policeman, Alex. A police *commander*." He grinned. "Seriously, these people are like family to me. Even though I have a big family here in town, Monique, you, and Jack are my best friends."

"How are your parents, Robert?" Alex was fond of the elder Bonnets, one of the first families of New Orleans. The Bonnets were of Creole extraction and had lived in the Crescent City since it was settled. His mother was a gracious lady who had kept in contact with Alex even after the couple had divorced. In fact, Elisha Bonnet was one of the main reasons Alex had decided to accept the legal counsel position at CCMC. In many respects, the two women were soul mates. Alex had done exactly what Elisha had always wanted to do. She had moved away from the traditional bounds of matrimony into a profession. Elisha had never been brave enough to do so and had lived a very traditional life.

Robert's family lived in the family mansion on St. Charles Street in the garden district, where they led an active social life. The older Bonnets were young for their sixty plus years and were very wealthy. They had extensive property holdings in the French Quarter and on the riverfront. They also owned several of the finest hotels in New Orleans.

Alex had lunch with Elisha often and knew the elder Mrs. Bonnet hoped, although she would never say it, that Alex and Robert would reunite. It was ironic. Her grandmother had also encouraged Alex to reconsider reconciliation with Robert. Alex had great respect and love for her maternal grandmother, and Robert's mother, but she knew the choice was hers and hers alone. Alex had been raised by her grandparents on their farm in Virginia. For all intents and purposes, Kathryn was Alex's mother.

Robert responded to her question. "My folks are fine. Dad said he hadn't seen you lately. They want us to come for dinner on Sunday. What do you think?"

"Sure, Robert. I love your parents. I'd love to come," she said, as she looked across the dining room and saw Jack and Monique. "Uh oh, here they come. Let's hope all goes well."

Jack and Monique were laughing and holding hands as they returned to the table. Patrons at nearby tables eyed the couple curiously.

Alex figured that several of the diners recognized either Jack or Monique.



After profuse apologies from the two lovers, all of which Alex and Robert waved aside impatiently, Monique said, "I've assured Jack... actually, I've given him my ironclad word, that I won't interrupt him or misbehave in any way until he is finished with his theory."

The commander looked at Monique sideways. "Does that mean you're gonna misbehave when I'm done? If so—"

"No, no. I promise!" Monique was so emphatic that the entire group laughed.

"This, this, I've got to see," Robert said. "Monique could never stay quiet, you know that Jack! She was always in trouble when we were little. I'm holding her to her word!" Robert was serious, but his eyes were laughing. "Go on, Jack. Do your thing."

Françoise took a deep breath and continued, "Supposing the door was left unlocked. It's highly possible that a patient could have easily escaped from the Pavilion and committed the crime. Nadine and I reviewed three medical records and two of them stuck out conspicuously. The records of Jim McMurdie and Anthony Gavette are the most suggestive. Their medical histories both report psychoses and dangerous behavior. Anthony even has a rap sheet with a number of arrests for A & B. He's been arrested several times for malicious assaults on strangers. The shrinks think he was psychotic when he committed the acts."

"Yes," Monique agreed. "Anthony is schizophrenic. He has delusions and paranoia. He's even talked in group about having sexual fantasies involving several of the staff. I believe, I'm not absolutely sure, but I think he was arrested in Alabama for attempted rape. Was that in the chart, Jack?"

"Nope, but we will run a check with Alabama and Florida. Is Anthony prone to violence on the unit?"

Monique laughed. "Why don't you ask Alex? Anthony put on quite a show for her today! Tell them, Alex."

Alex didn't think Anthony's behavior was quite as humorous as Monique did, but she smiled to be agreeable and replied, "I'd say he got pretty violent this afternoon with another patient named Rose. She was just talking. Then she started crying, and he went after her in a rage."

"Why? What precipitated the attack?" Robert asked.

Alex looked to Monique for guidance, but she didn't offer any. "I don't know for sure. I had interrupted the community meeting. The group was trying to decide if I could stay and finally agreed that I could, except for Anthony. He wasn't too keen on it. Then, Monique was having them express their feelings about what happened to Angie. Rose was talking about her feelings when Anthony got mad, called her a slut, and went after her. Fortunately, the staff acted quickly, and no one was hurt," Alex finished breathlessly, her heart racing a little at the memory.

Françoise was intrigued and asked, "What else did Anthony say? Anything specific to Angie?"

Alex was trying to remember. "He did say that Angie came to work for a paycheck and that she was afraid of the patients. That's about it. Do you remember anything else pertinent, Monique?"

Monique shook her head while Robert remained silent.

Jack was rethinking the scenario. "Well," he finally said, "Anthony knew that she was afraid of him. It also sounds like he dislikes women in general from what he said to Rose, especially the bit about her being a slut. What do you all think?"

Monique responded quickly. "Short of giving you a long dissertation in psychobabble, it's possible that Anthony was transferring his feelings about Angie to Rose. It's hard to say, Jack. Anthony's paranoid. None of this is conclusive." Monique's voice was skeptical.

Jack looked irritated. "Of course, it's inconclusive. *It's a theory*. These are just possibilities, what ifs and wherefores, so to speak. What is conclusive is a DNA match on the hair follicles and other evidence pulled from the crime scene. I'll check on our boy with Alabama tomorrow. You never know." Jack was trying hard to be neutral.

Alex broached the next question. "What about Jim, Jack? Do you know he's former NOPD? I think he's on disability of some type now."

Jack heaved a heavy sigh. "I know Jim McMurdie well. Good cop, good guy. I rode with him when he was a rookie. He was a good man, an outstanding police officer. I'll never understand why he flipped. What about him, Monique? Do you think he could fit into this?"

Monique was clearly annoyed at Jack. She responded in an irritated voice, "Jim McMurdie is a good man. He's *still* a good guy. He's just sick. I haven't finished working him up yet. He's been on the unit for about three days, and I've made a tentative diagnosis."

"Why was he admitted?" Robert asked.

Monique continued, "Mrs. McMurdie, Lynette, called me several years ago and told me that she thought Jim was having some psychotic episodes. Since Lynette's a registered nurse who worked at CCMC before their first child was born, I gave her telephone call credibility."

"I remember Lynette McMurdie. Didn't she teach critical care nursing over at LSU?" Robert asked as he searched his memory. "From what I can remember, she was a real knockout! A beautiful girl."

Monique said, "I don't know. She may have taught over there. I only remember her from the E.D. She and Jim met in the CCMC emergency department. But, you're right, Robert. She's gorgeous. Tall, fair skinned, with long, curly dark hair that she usually wears down. Anyway..."

Robert nodded his head. "Yeah. That's her!"

Monique continued, "Lynette and I had lunch shortly after her phone call and she told me that Jim, out of the blue, started accusing her of having extramarital affairs. She said she was becoming a little frightened of him because he had become so irrational. She told me that the week before she called me, Jim had run outside their house and threatened a stranger who was out walking his dog. He apparently swore at the stranger, accused him of having an affair with his wife, and threatened to kill him if he ever saw him within eyesight of his house again!"

Alex was wide-eyed. "Humph. Wow, that's pretty intimidating. Bet that man never walked his dog that way again," she quipped, trying to lighten the mood. It didn't work. She paused for a moment, and then asked, "What did Lynette do?"

"Well, she tried to reason with him later. Her four-year-old had witnessed the scene and had been frightened by it. Lynette said that when she mentioned it to Jim later, he denied it ever happened. She believed he had no recollection of the event."

"Damn. How long ago was this?" Jack asked.

"It was several years ago. Anyway, I asked Lynette if Jim had been under any unusual stress or pressure and she—"

Jack jumped up from the table and exclaimed. "Damn, that's just about the time Jim was assaulted and beaten in the Quarter. From what I can remember, he was on foot patrol when he and his partner were jumped from behind by a gang of druggies, cop haters so they said. Anyway, Jim and his partner were badly beaten. They were hospitalized for quite a spell."

Monique looked at Jack and marveled at his ability to remember things, from the biggest things in his life to the tiniest details of a crime committed twenty years earlier. "You're exactly right, Jack. Jim was hospitalized for about two weeks with a head injury. He recovered nicely in the hospital. However, about three months after the beating, he experienced a sudden onset of dizziness,

headaches, vomiting, ataxia, and left-sided weakness. He came to the CCMC emergency department for a workup."

Robert was absorbed, his medical mind working. "It sounds like he was having a stroke secondary to the beating. Such a sad story," Robert said, lamenting over the fate of Jim McMurdie.

"Yes," Monique said. "It is a very sad case. On neurological exam, there was evidence of left dysmetria and decreased sensation to touch on the left side. Jim had no history of hypertension or any other risk factors for stroke. His head CT scan revealed a left cerebella hemorrhage with massive effect. He had edema present near the fourth ventricle. He also had some mild atrophy of—"

Jack interrupted in an irate voice. "Yo. Wait a damned minute! Don't forget I'm here. Talk my language!" Françoise was once again frustrated because he couldn't understand the medical jargon. "Talk to me, not above me!"

Alex intervened, "Basically, Jack, Jim had a stroke. It also sounds like parts of his brain weren't working based on the atrophy of—"

"What in the devil is atrophy?" the commander barked at them. "Dammit, talk to me, too. I'm sitting here. You medical people are a pain in the..." Jack stared darkly into his Irish coffee, irritated that his friends were talking above him. He hated that worse than anything.

Monique smiled and patted his hand. "Sorry, Jack. Atrophy just means parts of his brain hadn't been used lately. You know the old saying that if you don't use it, you lose it? Anyway, the jealous accusations of extramarital affairs started after his injury."

Robert was intrigued. "This is fascinating, Monique. Do you think that his head injury caused his psychosis?" Robert leaned forward eagerly in anticipation of Monique's answer.

"I think it's possible. There is research to support the premise and—"

Françoise interrupted rudely. "I don't think it's fascinating. I think it's generally piss-poor. A policeman gets injured in the line of duty, has a stroke, and goes wacko. What the hell is fascinating about that? I don't admire the science of it. I just see the loss of a good, honest cop. Sorry." Françoise's voice was bitter as he continued to stare darkly into his Irish coffee.

Robert looked apologetic. "Sorry, Jack, I just—"

Françoise interrupted, "Save it for the medical books, Bonnet, I'm not interested."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Alex surveyed her nails and made a mental note to call for a manicure tomorrow.

Robert took a long swig from his Irish coffee and wished he'd ordered another one.

Monique and Jack stared at each other.

Finally, Monique began again, "Jack, the entire Jim McMurdie story is pure speculation. May I finish?" Her voice was calm, cool.

"Yes, of course, Monique. I just feel differently. McMurdie's a good man, was a fine cop. Now it sounds as if he could be implicated in this crime. It's unfair, it sucks, to say the very least. Of course, finish." Jack's voice was diffident as he raised his shoulders.

"Okay. Anyway, after I talked to Lynette the first time, she called again and reported that Jim was becoming increasingly depressed and irritable. His mood swings were frequent, and he'd begun drinking more than usual. She said she was becoming more frightened of him. She told Jim he had to go for help, or she would leave."

"How did that go? Did he come to see you?" Alex asked.

"Yes. He came three times. He was quiet, withdrawn, and cooperative. He seemed to know he had irrational behavior but didn't know why. He did better for a while, and he and Lynette got some

marriage counseling. Things were better. I put him on a course of psychotropic drugs that seemed to help, when he took them..."

"Only a short period... what happened?" Robert remained absorbed in Monique's story.

"Typically, he stopped taking his medicine. I guess there was some sort of incident at work, and the internal affairs division of the New Orleans Police Department put him on involuntary leave. Then Jim experienced extreme melancholia. He was acutely depressed."

"Why was he admitted to the pavilion last week? What was the reason?" Jack asked.

Monique shook her head sadly and answered, "Lynette and Jim were shopping for baby furniture at the mall when Jim saw a man he believed Lynette was having another affair with. He went berserk and attacked the man. His attack was vicious. Jim was psychotic and delusional at the time. Finally, the security guards at the mall subdued him and he was placed on a temporary detaining order and sent, TDO to us. It's extremely sad."

The group digested this information slowly. Finally, Alex asked, "How badly was the man hurt?"

"Pretty bad. He'll recover, though." Monique threw her hands up in frustration. "The worst part is that Lynette, who is seven months pregnant, took their daughter to her parents' home in Baton Rouge. At this point, she's refused to be a part of Jim's therapy."

Alex thought about this for a moment and said, "Can't say I blame her. She's probably frightened to death of him. I would be. Has he ever attacked her?"

"No, he's verbally abused her, consistently verbally abused her, but he hasn't attacked physically — at least not yet, but it is within the realm of possibility." Monique's voice was low.

Jack was once again annoyed. "What kind of bullshit response is that? It's within the realm of possibility that I will attack each one of you at this table. Now tell us what you really think, Monique. I'm sick of this psychobabble."

Monique bristled and her face flushed as the blood poured to it. She managed to hold her temper. "Yes, I think it's highly probable. I think Jim has Othello Syndrome. If he'd attacked Lynette, my diagnosis would be final."

Robert was the first to respond. "Othello Syndrome... like Othello as in Shakespeare's Othello?"

Monique nodded her head. She turned to Jack and explained "Yes, Othello Syndrome is named for the tragic character in Shakespeare's play in which jealousy played a major role in the character's commission of spousal homicide. While the Othello story occurred in the context of a marital relationship in the play, Othello Syndrome can be applied to any generic situation involving sexual or other intimate partners. As you can imagine, there is no clear demarcation as to what comprises 'normal' jealousy versus 'morbid' jealousy."

Alex could tell Robert was clearly intrigued, although he was smart enough not to say so and incur Jack's wrath again. She could still read his face and anticipate what he would say. She wasn't disappointed.

"How does Othello Syndrome first appear? Is it rare? I've never heard of it. How do they diagnose it? How does the patient present?" Robert fired a barrage of questions at Monique.

"Othello appears much like Jim's psychiatric illness has evolved. The forensic literature suggests that Othello Syndrome has appeared as delusional jealousy, sexual jealousy, erotic jealousy, and delusions of infidelity."

"How is it diagnosed? Are there criteria?" Robert asked again, his medical mind working.

"Well, sort of. Othello is often subsumed in the diagnostic criteria described under delusional, paranoid disorder. There can be non-bizarre delusions of unfaithfulness, as well as auditory or visual hallucinations. Sometimes it's hard to pick up the hallucinations, if they're not clearly evident."

Monique stopped for a minute to think. She continued, "Also, if bipolar syndrome is present, the mood swings may be brief or inconsequential to the relative length of the delusional disturbance. I think that's what's going on with Jim. It's hard to group human behavior into tight little boxes. Frustrates me to death, especially when people try to do it." Monique was beginning to look tired, the wear and tear of the day etched on her face.

"I think you're right," Robert surmised. "The diagnostic criteria sounds very much like Jim to me. What do you think?" Robert asked Monique.

"Yeah. It's very possible. There are two things that prevent me from confirming a diagnosis of Othello. Only one has any scientific or medical merit."

The group looked at her expectantly.

Françoise was trying hard to be patient. "Well, Doc, spit it out," Jack said carefully.

"First of all, the spouse is usually the threat in Othello. Jim hasn't physically harmed Lynette yet — although there are many cases reported where Othello patients attacked neighbors, children, and other unknown persons. Certainly, Jim fits into this mold." Monique stopped, as if examining Jim mentally.

"What's the second reason you haven't made a final diagnosis?" Alex asked Monique, gently.

Monique gave Alex a forlorn look. "It's because I don't want to. The syndrome doesn't respond very well to traditional psychotherapy or medication. It has a very poor prognosis. It's a devastating illness."

There was a long silence at the table as the four friends contemplated Jim's dilemma.

"Yeah, this really sucks, big time," Jack concurred, obviously distraught.

"Is there scientific evidence connecting Jim's head injury with the Othello?" Robert asked.

Monique nodded affirmatively. "Yeah. The best evidence suggests that Othello symptoms follow an injury of some type. As a matter of fact, there's currently a National Institute of Health research team working on identifying typical Othello lesions in the brain."

Commander Françoise, who had been thinking, looked hard at Monique. His face appeared to be carved of stone. "Monique, how dangerous are these people?" His look was ominous.

Monique's eyes met Jack's head on. "Incredibly dangerous. Jack, these patients are very, very dangerous. Othello patients harbor hostility toward others secondary to their delusional jealousy. This hostility can result in serious physical violence, including homicide. Some Othello patients murder out of morbid jealousy. These patients can be extremely violent to themselves and others."

"Are these patients dangerous only to themselves and people they know or are they dangerous to anyone?" Jack was pressing Monique for information she didn't want to give.

After a short silence, Monique acquiesced with a faraway look in her eyes. She looked out the floor-to-ceiling restaurant window as she said, "Individuals suffering from Othello Syndrome pose a significant risk to society in terms of potential violence, both in domestic and generic circumstances. Jealousy in its most severe form, the Othello delusion, plays a major role in completed homicides and spousal murders. In this situation, we know he was delusional. He attacked several men prior to admission."

Robert looked carefully at Monique and asked her gently, "Do you think Jim could have attacked Angie?"

Monique replied slowly, "I don't know. I don't believe rape is part of the syndrome. At least, I've never seen it reported anywhere in the evidence. I think that's a significant factor when we look at Jim. Otherwise, he could easily fit the picture of the attacker. He's known to be delusional, morbidly jealous." Monique stopped for a moment to think and then continued, "And he presents as classically

evolving Othello Syndrome. Who knows?" She shrugged her shoulders, looking very tired. She added, "I'm wasted. Can we continue this tomorrow?"

Jack felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. As he struggled to get it out and read the text, he said, "You guys timed this just right. Gotta go folks, sorry to leave such great company, but I've got another murder in the Quarter. Third one today." He shook his head. "Damn, this is getting old."

Monique glanced up and said, "Does the police commander always have to show up at every crime scene?"

Jack glared at her. "We've had this conversation. We're all tired, and, yes, *this* police commander will always show up at crime scenes and that isn't changing."

Monique looked tired and rejected. It was a good thing she had her car. She'd be damned if she was getting in Jack's car. Of course, she was instantly ashamed for having these thoughts. It was because of Jack's sense of commitment that she loved him so.

"Let's continue this tomorrow. Of course," Alex said, "we're all beat. Monique, don't be too upset. It may not even be a Pavilion patient. It could be anyone, right, Jack?"

Jack grinned at Alex. "Yep. You bet, Al. Proof is in the pudding and the pudding in this case is hair follicles, semen samples, and bite marks. "Yo, gotta go. Later," he said as he kissed Monique goodnight.

As Alex, Robert, and Monique walked toward the door of the Palace, Monique said, "I just don't get it. Why in the hell do police rush to a murder scene? They certainly can't help the victim. It's ridiculous."

"Well," Robert opined, "I think it has to do with testosterone and conditioning. And, in this case, a certain police commander who, trust me, will never change."

Alex nodded in agreement.

Monique sighed in resignation. "Yeah, that's why I love him," Monique admitted.

After hugging each other good night, Alex and Robert congratulated Monique again, who waved them away, suggesting that the romance was "old hat" now.

Robert offered Alex a ride and she accepted gratefully. During the ride home, the couple enjoyed a companionable chat. They talked about their happiness for Jack and Monique, as well as how difficult it was going to be for Monique to adjust to being a police commander's wife, if the romance got that far.

After reaching her house, Alex invited Robert in for coffee, but he looked at his watch and told her he had to get back to CCMC. He wanted to check on Angie and several other patients whose surgery he had supervised in the O.R.

Robert walked Alex to the door of her beautifully restored home, remarked how well manicured the lawn was, kissed her briefly on the cheek, returned to his silver Mercedes, and drove off.

Alex felt very alone after Robert left and wished for a few minutes that he had joined her for some decaf. But when she realized how exhausted she was, she was glad that he hadn't. The day had been two days long. She was worn out from thinking about Angie, the crime, and the patients in the Pavilion. Besides, the celebration dinner had been wonderful, but a bit stressful at times. Too bad this had to happen to the couple now. Her thoughts kept returning to Jim McMurdie, but for some reason, her intuition told her he didn't do it. After assuring herself that there was no concrete evidence to implicate him, she went into her kitchen, poured herself a glass of milk, found some chocolate cookies, and took them into her bedroom.

Milk and cookies in the bed were Alex's treat after a long, hard day. She supposed it was the child in her, and tonight she needed to nurture that child because her day had been so terrible. She

changed into her nightgown and climbed into her antique Victorian walnut bed and flipped on the TV with the remote. She watched the late news, pleased there was no mention of Angie's rape and beating. The press had virtually persecuted CCMC earlier in the year when patients had been attacked inside the hospital. Alex clicked the TV off and began to rethink the day. She was too tired to be analytical, so she focused her thoughts on Monique and Jack. When her eyes began to feel heavy, she snapped off her light and went to sleep.

At 3:30 in the morning, she was awakened out of a dead sleep by the constant, shrill ringing of the phone on her bedside table. She picked up the handset drowsily.

"Hello," Alex said sleepily.

Someone was trying to talk to her. It was a woman, but she was hysterical. Alex couldn't understand her words or recognize her voice. The woman was babbling.

Alex sat up in her bed, interrupted the caller, and said clearly, "Please slow down. I can't understand what you're saying." By this time she was wide awake, adrenaline pulsing through her veins.

"Alex, Alex, it's me! Monique. Get here as soon as you can. The Pavilion. It's horrible, just horrible!" Monique started sobbing again and hung up the phone.





Depression weighed Jack down like a ton of bricks as he made his way back down Canal to the Quarter. He was upset over his potential disagreement with Monique about her patients, as well as a nagging feeling that their careers would always present a challenge to their relationship. He guessed he'd just have to figure out a way to maneuver around it. He certainly knew he would try. He still couldn't believe the beautiful Dr. Monique Desmonde wanted him. Damn, he was a lucky SOB. He jumped as his police scanner blared in his ear. He was surprised to hear the voice of his PR man, Jason Aldridge. *Oh shit*, he thought to himself. *This couldn't be good. What is Jason doing out this late at a crime scene? This must be bad.* He picked up his receiver, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Yo, Jason! What's up? Are you at the scene?"

"Commander, are you close?" Jason's voice sounded tense.

"Yeah, I am turning into the Quarter now. What's up?"

"We'll talk when you get here. Hurry up."

"Gotcha! I'm turning in now." Jack signed off, secure in the knowledge that whoever was dead was important. His sense of dread only increased as he searched for parking on the narrow streets of the Quarter. Bourbon Street was party central with all the sex shops, and no one seemed to have any idea that there was a corpse down the street. Jack doubted they would have cared even if they had known it. While the Quarter was the center of tourism in New Orleans, as well as a beacon of history and architecture, it was also home to some of the most heinous crime scenes in the world. And, it was Jack's beat. It had always been Jack's beat. He loved the French Quarter, but he feared its steamy streets and deviant personalities.

*What a bitch*, Jack thought to himself. *There is no parking to be found anywhere. Not even illegal parking.* Jack circled a few times and finally pulled his silver caddy into a private driveway. He put his light on the hood in case the owners should come out and complain.

As he started walking toward the scene, Jack tripped over a body on the ground. The body groaned and rolled over, so Jack kept on walking briskly through the oppressive August night. He saw the blue bubble lights of at least six NOPD police cars, dizzying as they competed with the red lights of the emergency vehicles. As he hurried down the rough, aged, and bumpy sidewalk, it struck him that the crime scene location was close to the scene from last night — or, rather, early this morning, to be more specific. As he got a little closer, he realized that the crime scene was in the *exact* location as the one less than twenty-four hours earlier. *Damn*, he thought to himself. *What The hell! Here we go again. What the hell is this all about? This is definitely gonna suck. Why the same place? I wonder if it's the same perp. It has to be.*

Jason spotted the commander and walked toward him, a frown on his face. Jason could see the finely etched lines of worry and stress in Jack's face, highlighted by the circling beams of the police cars.

Then, Jack noticed that there were two bodies, two victims, in the same exact spot where the two kids had been found earlier. The meat wagon was pulled to the side in another alley.

"What the hell, Jason, there are *two* bodies? *Again*? What do you know?" Jack demanded.

"Yeah, and they're not the typical guys we usually find down this far in the Quarter."

"Yeah, I see. They're wearing some pretty expensive threads," Jack observed, as he noted the custom-tailored suit on one of the victims. The other man was dressed casually in khakis and a polo

shirt. His face was literally blue. Really blue. Jack had never seen anyone so blue from death. He hoped it was the blue police lights making the guy look worse than he really was. But he wasn't sure. Jack shined his flashlight on the guy. Yep, the guy's nails were so blue that they could have passed for black. For a moment, Jack wondered if the vic had on black nail polish. The guy in the suit had on a wedding band and the other man had on a Rolex watch.

"Is the Rolex real or a knock off and do we have any ID?"

"Commander, yes and yes. The Rolex appears to be genuine and IDs have tentatively been established. Both men had their wallets in their pockets, so robbery doesn't seem to be a motive, unfortunately. Between the two of them, they were carrying several thousand dollars." Jack continued to stare at the bodies, saying nothing as Jason continued, "Bad news, Commander. Here comes the mayor. I can spot him and his entourage a block away."

Jack gave Jason a dark look. The Mayor of New Orleans was Jack's boss and his sworn enemy. He really didn't need this after the day he'd had. "What the hell, who invited them to this party and who the hell else is coming?"

"I hope no one, sir," Jason replied. "Trust me, the only person I invited was you."

"Then why the hell are the mayor and his buddies here?" Jack demanded, sensing the beginning of a huge cluster. "And why is the man in the suit blue? Did he choke or something?"

Jason shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Clueless. The M.E. should be here any minute. I hear there's another murder over in the third district."

Jason continued to check out the body. "Maybe he was strangled or puked," Jason offered, looking closer at the dead man.

"Damn, he's as blue as any dead person I've ever seen. Who the hell are they?"

"Not good, Commander. The blue guy is Senator Beau LaMont, our infamous Senator from Louisiana."

Jack's face was incredulous. "No way. No way that's Beau LaMont! Couldn't be! It looks nothing like him. This guy is skinny. LaMont is a pretty heavy dude from what I remember. Couldn't be."

Detective Vern Bridges hailed Jack, walked over, and joined in on the conversation. "Commander, you been home yet?" Bridges teased.

"What the hell, Bridges, I just saw you here a few hours ago. Are you bringing these bodies in from Kenner?" Jack grunted as he slapped his detective on the back.

"Heck no. We don't have anything like this out in the burbs. That's why I gotta come to town for some action. Kenner police just sit around and eat donuts. You know that, Commander."

Jack gave Vern a wide grin. "Yep, best donuts in the world are on Airline Highway. Who the hell are these stiffs, Bridges?"

"Jason's right, sir. Yeah, Commander, that's LaMont. He had one of those fat surgeries done a year or so ago and lost over a hundred pounds. He does look entirely different, but for sure, that's him. I mean he looks different because of his weight. Not because he's blue, although that's different as well," Vern stammered and couldn't help but laugh.

Jack clapped Vern on the back. "Geez, Bridges, you're a funny man. You get all the good ones. How'd you get so lucky to catch both double homicides? Nobody I know has ever been this lucky."

"Guess it's just because I'm your best detective, Jack," Vern quipped.

Jack nodded. "Who's the other dude? The one with the slit throat?"

Detective Bridges shook his head and gave Jack a solemn look. "Commander, this guy looks just like those kids from last night. Do you see any blood?"

"Shit, no I don't." Jack looked around. "Was he killed here or just moved here after the kill?"

"Don't know, too early. But guess who he is, Commander."

Jack gave Bridges an irritated look, "I don't know, Santa Claus? Just spit it out, Detective, it's too late for games. Who the hell is he?"

"It's, at least according to his wallet, Hayes Hunter."

"Hayes Hunter? Hayes Hunter? That name's familiar, but who is he?" Jack scratched his head trying to remember.

"He's the head of the Democratic National Party. *The Democratic National Party*, not just Louisiana. He and LaMont were in NOLA finalizing the plans for the Democratic National meeting this fall. They were last seen—"

"Oh my God. Oh shit," Jack said just as he heard the mayor holler his name. Jack cursed under his breath and stared at his team. "We just have all the luck don't we, guys. Two fricking politicians dead in my backyard."

Jack turned around slowly to face the angry, pig-eyed, newly elected mayor of New Orleans. "Mr. Mayor, you're out late tonight," Jack said in a condescending voice. He saw Jason Aldridge flinch at his sarcasm. Jack guessed he didn't make Jason's life any easier.

Mayor Anthony Devries ignored Jack's comment and said, "Commander Françoise, let's put our differences away for a few moments. What has happened here in our beloved French Quarter? Is it true that Senator LaMont and Mr. Hunter have been killed?" The mayor's little pig-like eyes were wide, and he looked frightened.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he gazed at his nemesis, Mayor Anthony Devries. "Yeah. That's right. Mr. Mayor, that's precisely correct, and a better question is — how in the hell did you know?"

Devries bristled at the deprecating tone of the commander. "Really, Françoise, tone it down a bit. I am your boss, and I am happy to answer your questions. I am invested in bringing this to closure immediately. We have a lot riding on this."

"Yeah, I bet you do... like questions about whether New Orleans is a safe enough place to host the Democratic Party right, Mr. Mayor? Jack's voice seethed with cynicism.

Devries ignored the commander's sarcasm. He personally hated the commander and had tried to block his promotion but was unsuccessful because Jack had too many friends. "And to answer your question, my office received an anonymous tip less than an hour ago that two VIPs were dead in the Quarter. We came right down here immediately. Now, what do you know?"

"We know we got two stiffs, one of them is blue, and the other looks like someone tried to cut his head off. The M.E. hasn't gotten here yet. You can take a look for yourself," Jack offered, gesturing expansively with his arm.

Jason Aldridge interrupted, "Mr. Mayor, did you trace the call and does anyone know where the two gentlemen were earlier this evening?"

The vice-mayor offered up some information. He caught Jack's attention, as Jack actually liked the vice-mayor. "We tried to get the state police to trace the call, but the conversation was too short, even though it was transferred through the city network. Our security people got nothing."

Jack introduced Detective Vern Bridges to the mayor's entourage and announced he was the lead detective on the case.

Bridges gave an update on the murders, as best he could, and informed the mayor that the M.E. should be along shortly.

The mayor looked around impatiently and said, "Detective Bridges, is that all you know? That's really nothing. All we really know is that they are dead."

Bridges was getting pissed, "Mr. Mayor, you are correct. We don't know much, but the bodies are hardly cold, and the M.E. hasn't arrived yet. We'll know a great deal more when he or she does arrive. One thing we do know is that both men were last seen together at one of the vampire bars downtown. And, that was about two hours ago."

For a moment, there was total silence in the air at the crime scene. Even the police sirens seemed to cease.

Jack shook his head and considered the scene. His thoughts were interrupted by his cell. He was needed over at the hospital. The psychiatric staff at the Pavilion needed him. *It just keeps getting better.*



Alex's heart was pounding as she leapt out of bed. She hastily combed her long auburn hair and pulled it up into a chignon. Monique had called her and told her "there'd been an incident" at the Pavilion. She hadn't been specific, but her voice was tense. Alex's anxiety skyrocketed. She considered wearing jeans and a cotton sweater to the hospital but decided against it. She had no idea what she was up against and didn't know if she'd be able to return home to change clothes later. Besides, her grandmother always told her to dress her best when things looked the worst or when she was facing the unknown, good advice Alex always heeded. *Sometimes, just knowing you look good makes things seem easier.* Alex could hear her grandmother's voice in her head.

She quickly selected and stepped into a pale blue linen dress with a matching jacket. She added a hand-painted blue floral scarf, a long string of pearls, and low-heeled shoes that completed the look. As she checked her appearance in her full-length mirror, her mind was racing with possibilities. The knot in her stomach and the pain in her chest were reminiscent of the terrible tragedies that occurred only a few months ago at Crescent City Medical Center — a myriad of tragedies resulting in utter chaos and damage from which the hospital was just now beginning to recover.

Alex was debating whether she should drive to the hospital or call for Martin, her faithful cabdriver, when the phone rang again. She answered it with apprehension. It was Jack.

"Yo, Alex, I'm sending a patrol car around to get you. Are you ready?" Françoise's voice was low and gruff.

"Yes, Jack. What's going on? What happened?" Alex asked, feeling frantic. "Monique was vague when she called."

"You'll see when you get here. Trust me, that's soon enough." Jack's voice was hushed but ominous.

Alex, fully dressed, paced in her elegant living room, waiting for the uniformed policeman to pick her up. She was so anxious she forced herself to take deep breaths to calm down and think more clearly. She snapped on several lights and seated herself in the blue silk Queen Anne chair flanking the marble fireplace so that she would be able to see the lights of the police car through the French doors.

Each minute seemed like an eternity. The ticking of the grandfather clock slowed time to a crawl and thundered in her ears. If she only knew what had happened, she could be spending this time deciding on the best way to handle the crisis. For a moment, Alex was irritated at Jack for not filling her in. Obviously, Monique couldn't have. Monique could hardly speak. Alex forced herself to calm down. She looked around the room, admiring the soft pastel colors. She had designed the room herself and had used many of the Virginia antiques she had found at Wyndley, her grandparents' Virginia estate. She'd found other antiques in New Orleans on Royal and Magazine streets, the city's antique haven.

Her thoughts turned to Mitch. He'd loved this room and had often said the room captured the "essence of Alex" and personified her spirit, personality, taste, and love of beauty. Alex felt her eyes well up with tears at the thought of Mitchell Landry, the man she had loved and had lost so violently. She could still conjure up Mitch's face. His dark wavy hair and startling dark eyes were crystal-clear in her mind's eye. Alex loved him and missed him greatly. She was just about to let herself slip into one of her "Grand Funks," as she referred to them, when there was a soft knock on her door.

Her heartbeat accelerated again. She hadn't seen any lights. Was she daydreaming? She peered out the window and looked for a police car. She didn't see one. She wondered if she could have been so obsessed with her thoughts that she had imagined the knock. No, there it was again. A very soft knock. Alex walked over to her door and peered through the peephole. She knew she couldn't be too careful these days. Just last week, the *Times Picayune* had published an article stating that Louisiana was the most dangerous state to live in with the murder rate ten times the national average. Anyway, it was pretty clear that violence against the elderly, preschoolers, and women was escalating and Alex was always careful when answering her door.

She looked through her peephole. She still couldn't see anything. It was dark. She stepped back, rubbed her eyes, and looked again. It was still black. She couldn't even see the light from the porch lanterns. Alex felt her heart racing. She knew she'd heard a knock on her door — hadn't she? She was feeling a little dizzy from her rapid heartbeat, fatigue most likely, and fear.

For a second, she was beginning to think she was crazy. Then she heard voices on her loggia. She looked through the peephole again. Looking back at her with an innocent, enigmatic smile on his face was Lester Whitset the administrator from the Pavilion. Behind him was a uniformed New Orleans policeman.

Alex opened the door and stared at the two men.

Lester Whitset's eyes roamed over her, from top to bottom. He spoke first. "Evening or, should I say, morning, Ms. Destephano. Sorry to awaken you so early, but—"

"What are you doing here, Mr. Whitset?" Her voice was harsh and uncertain. "Commander Françoise told me he was sending a police officer to pick me up and take me to the Pavilion." Alex knew her tone was aloof and rushed. She felt short of breath just looking at the man. He gave her the creeps. He was vile. Besides, she wasn't pleased that Lester Whitset knew where she lived. In fact, it frightened and made her uneasy.

Whitset gave Alex another long, appraising look and said in a soft, sensual voice, "I was at the Pavilion when the tragedy occurred. Dr. Desmonde was extremely upset, so I decided who to call in." He shrugged his shoulders and said innocently, "In the interest of expediency, I decided to personally pick you up, particularly since we most likely have a legal situation on our hands."

Alex decided she wouldn't be ruffled or perturbed by the administrator. She said clearly, with no room for argument, "Thank you, Mr. Whitset. I'll travel with Officer Bennett." She was straining to see the police officer's badge in the darkness. "The commander was kind enough to send me a ride, so I'll honor his kindness by accepting it. I'll see you later." Alex's voice was formal and remote. She locked the door and brushed by Whitset to walk with the uniformed policeman to his car. Usually, Alex was friendlier and not so curt, but Lester Whitset made her blood run cold.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" the policeman asked officiously. "That man didn't bother you, did he?"

"No, Officer Bennett. I just didn't expect him to come to my house at three o'clock in the morning. I didn't like seeing him here..." Her voice trailed off.

"It does seem a bit unusual that he took it upon himself to pick you up. I'm glad I pulled up behind him. The commander would skin me alive if I returned without you," the officer admitted.

*Me, too*, Alex thought. She smiled at the young policeman and inquired, "Do you know what's happened over at CCMC? The commander just called me and told me to come at once and that he was sending you to pick me up. My friend and colleague called just before that, asking me to come to the hospital, other than that, I'm clueless."

Officer Bennett stared at Alex's huge blue eyes, wide with anxiety. "I don't know, ma'am. I was the closest unit to your house, and I haven't been over to CCMC yet. I guess there's been some kind of

accident. They're sending for the crime team again. I heard it on the radio."

Alex's heart sank. Her intuition told her it was patient related violence. She hoped in her heart that none of the staff or patients were injured badly. She had to do something about the staffing and security in the Pavilion. Don Montgomery, idiot that he was, would just have to listen to her.

As the bright lights of CCMC became visible in the darkness of the night, Alex quickly noted that the area around the Pavilion was blazing with activity. The blue and red sirens made her dizzy. When Officer Bennett dropped Alex off at the door, there were at least six NOPD units and a dozen or so other cars parked in the circular drive in front of the main entrance. Alex saw Monique's Volvo in the group. She also noticed Don Montgomery's shiny, gold Porsche. Just seeing the CEO's car convinced Alex that it was going to be a night, or morning, from hell.

The heavy Pavilion doors were guarded by members of the NOPD. Alex had to show her hospital ID to enter the building. On the drab grey bench, where Monique and Alex had talked just a few hours earlier, sat a handsome, well-dressed middle-aged couple. The wife was trying to comfort her husband, a distinguished white-haired gentleman. The man was red-eyed, obviously upset. The couple looked at Alex curiously.

Alex wondered who they were and how they'd gotten past the police. She smiled at them as she waited for the elevator. They didn't give her a response. She guessed she'd know their identity soon enough. As she stood in the lobby, she was keenly aware that the couple was staring at her. She wanted to speak and offer some comfort but decided against it. Instead, she smiled at them and nodded.

A police officer was operating the elevator. He also asked for her ID and then pushed the button for the second floor. The unit was locked, but Alex was quickly admitted by a pale-faced psych tech.

Whitset came in within seconds of Alex. He touched her shoulder as he passed by her on the way to his office and said, "Have a pleasant ride, Alex? Sorry if I frightened you earlier." He gave her a smirking smile and disappeared.

Alex ignored him and looked around for Françoise and Monique.

The psych unit was electric with activity. There were three staff members talking with police in the nurses' station, and Alex noticed several patients sitting in the day room. Two were catatonic and sat rigidly staring, without blinking, at the television set mounted high on the wall. One patient's body posture was grotesque. He was wearing only a T-shirt and boxer shorts. His legs looked like spaghetti noodles, wrapped around each other in a grotesquely contorted fashion. His arms were bent at the elbows and perpendicular to each other. His hands were fixed in a position that suggested he had just finished strangling somebody. His fingers were spaced apart and curved, just as though they would fit around someone's neck. His nails were long and untrimmed. Alex cringed at the contorted patient. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth and his eyes were bulging. He looked as though he had just finished killing his victim. He was even drooling. Her whole body shuddered in disgust.

*This place is horrible*, she thought, as she continued to look around. Another patient was pacing frantically around the room, never slowing his pace. His face was so devoid of expression that it looked like a mask. His continual motion made Alex dizzy.

The third patient was restrained in a chair, clearly hallucinating. He was speaking directly to President Obama and God, asking them to have Michelle fix things. Alex watched him briefly as President Obama apparently answered him. She shook her head at the disorganized, incoherent thinking of the man. Suddenly, he burst into loud, silly laughter that had a surrealistic tone to it. *How could Monique do this every day?*



Alex again scanned the day room. Over in a corner, looking most uncomfortable, was a young New Orleans policeman named Josh Martin, whom she recognized as a protégé of Jack Françoise. Alex motioned and caught his eye. He finally saw her and waved.

Josh Martin was an attractive young man. He wore his uniform to perfection and approached Alex with crinkly eyes and a wide smile that stretched over a generous mouth.

"Ms. Destephano. I'm glad to see you. This place is incredible!" Josh scratched his head and looked around wildly. "Look at these people! I'm supposed to be guarding them!" He rolled his eyes and continued, "To tell the truth, I'd rather be in a shootout or chasing a burglar than sitting in here. In fact, I'd rather be losing the shootout!" Josh gave a short laugh, looking around nervously.

Alex smiled at the young man. "Yeah, they're pretty unique, aren't they?" Then Alex changed the subject and anxiously asked, "Josh, what's going on? Where's the commander and Dr. Desmonde?"

Josh gestured toward the North Hall and said, "They're down there. The bigwigs are meeting in the community room. Go on down. It's pretty safe. Most of the patients are either asleep, doped up, or in seclusion."

"Thanks, Josh. You okay here?"

Josh looked uncertain. "Yeah, I guess so... but what do I do if they go off? The commander told me I couldn't shoot them! Heck, he even threatened to take my gun away from me, just in case I was tempted."

Alex laughed. "They look pretty controlled at this point. Keep your eye on the pacer, though. He could be a problem."

Josh grimaced, wavered, and returned to his chair, continuing to watch the eerie threesome he was supposed to be guarding.

"Josh," Alex hissed at him, "Move your chair closer to the door. You never put yourself in a corner with a psychotic patient close by. You'll want to get out if the going gets rough. Don't let them block you in, ever."

"Yeah. Good idea. Thanks, Ms. Destephano." Josh couldn't move his chair quickly enough to get himself closer to the double doors of the day room.

Alex walked down the hall toward the community room, her heart again thudding in her chest. She knocked on the door and a grim-faced Don Montgomery admitted her.

Don's greeting was tinged with scorn. "It's about time. Where in the hell have you been? I can never find you when I need you. When I don't need or want to see you, you're hanging around my office!" Montgomery's normally grating voice had a caustic edge to it.

Alex ignored him. Sweeping feelings of déjà vu encompassed her. *This is just like before*, she thought. Just like February, right before Mardi Gras. *Even the players are the same*, she thought to herself as she looked at the group assembled around the table. Monique was sitting next to Jack, her face tear-streaked and pale.

Jack was fighting strong emotions not to overly comfort Monique, while working hard not to beat the hell out of the pompous CEO as he railed out at Alex.

Jack looked like hell. It was clear he hadn't been home at all. He must have come here straight from the murder in the Quarter. A nurse was also present. Alex assumed it was the night shift charge nurse. Missing were Dr. John Ashley, the chief of medicine who was out of town, and Bette Farve. The other person in the room was Whitset, who waved and smiled benignly at Alex, greeting her as if she was his best friend. Monique hardly seemed to notice Alex's entrance.

"What's happened?" Alex's voice was cool, but she was seething with anger at Don Montgomery's disrespect.

Montgomery's voice was loud and testy. "We have a dead patient — a dead, whacko patient — *that's what happened!*" He looked around impatiently and continued, "A dead crazy, right here at CCMC. I just love it." Montgomery's voice dripped sarcasm as he peevishly added, "Where's Elizabeth? We've got to cover our asses on this one with the media. Where is she, Alex?" Don demanded, his face red with anger.

Alex shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know where Elizabeth is. I would imagine home in bed unless someone has called her. Did anyone call?" Alex looked around the room.

Everyone gestured in the negative. No one spoke.

Don's harsh voice broke in again. "Desmonde, you're the medical person here. Call Tippett and get her in here. *Now!* I can't expect anything from you physicians." Don glared at the psychiatrist.

Alex could feel Monique's fury, and she saw the telltale blush of anger climbing her bruised and battered body.

After several moments, Monique stood, stared at Don, recovered herself, and said clearly, "Mr. Montgomery, I'll be happy to call Elizabeth Tippet. Generally, the unit administrator, who in this case would be Mr. Whitset, calls. But I gather that hasn't happened, so—"

Whitset jumped to his feet, his eyes flashing, and harshly interrupting Monique, said, "How dare you single me out in front of a group for a responsibility I never knew I had. I will get you for this—"

Monique didn't let him finish. "Don't threaten me, Mr. Whitset. We'll talk about this later." Then she turned to face Don, leaned over so she was inches from his face, and said, "As I was saying before Mr. Whitset interrupted me, I will call Elizabeth, but I won't respond to any more of your callous behavior or profanity. Is that clear to you?" Monique's voice was calm and cool, her intent was clear. She had regained her professional demeanor.

Alex telepathically cheered her on. *That's my girl*, she thought. *Go Monique.*

Alex noticed the ruthless look Whitset gave Monique and it sent shivers up her spine. The look was downright evil, and Whitset had even bared his teeth. He was furious at her and Alex was afraid he would physically hurt her or sabotage her. She had to remind Monique to be careful and watch out. She turned to Jack and immediately knew that Jack had seen the look as well. His face revealed his anger, and he looked like he wanted to strangle the administrator.

"Just get Tippet in here," Don roared. He glowered at Dr. Desmonde again and said, "I run this place, such as it is. I'll say whatever I want to, when I want to!" Montgomery pointed his finger in Monique's face and said, "Don't try to bully me, Desmonde, with your calculated, psychiatric bullshit. If you knew how to run a psychiatric service, we wouldn't have patients murdering each other."

Alex's heart was racing frantically, skipping beats. She felt hot all over. *Murder! So that's what happened. It wasn't just a dead patient, but one that had been murdered. On the psych unit at CCMC? Murder involving patients? Oh My God! Oh, no!* This was worse than she'd expected. Her legal mind was boggled with the thoughts of it, not to mention the repercussions. A million thoughts were racing through her head all at once.

Monique continued standing, undeterred by Don's anger, ranting, and rudeness. She stated again, her voice firm, "Mr. Montgomery, I'll call Elizabeth, but I want you to guarantee that you will conduct yourself in an acceptable manner and cut the vulgarity and innuendos."

Don nodded his head and threw up his hands. "Just do it, Dr. Desmonde!" His voice was scathing, and his emphasis on the word *doctor* was derogatory.

Monique left the room to call Elizabeth Tippet, the young woman in charge of media relations at CCMC.

Alex looked frantically at Jack Françoise. "What happened, Jack? Who was killed?"

Françoise was positively grey with fatigue. He looked at Alex and spoke softly. "An elderly patient, Mrs. Smithson, was found dead in her room about an hour and a half ago. She had been stabbed repeatedly. She'd only been dead for a short period of time. Her body was still warm."

Alex's stomach lurched, and she thought she would be sick on the large walnut conference table. She immediately remembered Mrs. Smithson from the day before. She was the little, white-haired lady who had been admitted with depression. Just yesterday, Alex had questioned Monique and Donna about the clinical judgment of placing an elderly, depressed woman on a unit with so many violent patients.

Her voice was hushed. She could hardly form her words. "Oh God, not Mrs. Smithson. That little, white-haired lady who was knitting yesterday in the community room? The one who looks like Mrs. Santa Claus? The little lady with the apple-red cheeks?"

Whitset was clearly loving Alex's reaction. His smile was inappropriate. He couldn't wait to respond. His voice was remarkably clear and sounded gleeful, "Yes, Alex dear, that's her. But she doesn't have apple cheeks anymore and the knitting needle is now stuck in her mouth."

Alex was stunned, her jaw dropped in shock.

Even Don looked surprised at the sound of Whitset's voice, but his surprise was short lived. To deflect attention from his administrator, Don moved closer to Alex, his face leering into hers. "Looked like Mrs. Santa Claus. You've got it, Alex," he said sarcastically. "Mrs. Santa Claus has been murdered at Crescent City Medical Center by her next-door neighbor, Mr. McMurdie, our inpatient member of the New Orleans Police Department on the wacko unit. Right, Commander Françoise?" Don Montgomery turned his sarcasm on Jack and glared at him.

Alex could see Jack struggle for control. Jack despised Montgomery, who he had disliked before the mayoral election. Now he had two sworn enemies.

The CEO continued, "One of your protégés wasn't he, Captain Françoise? NOPD's finest. Great work!" Montgomery spit his words at the police commander.

"It's Commander Françoise now," Monique said automatically. "He is the highest ranking officer in this police district."

"Well, whoop-de-do! Everyone knows the New Orleans police are all crooked, incompetent, or on the take," Don snarled, staring at Jack.

Alex placed her hand on Jack's arm as if to restrain him from knocking Montgomery senseless, a dream the commander had coveted for months. The blood was bad between the CEO and the police commander — very bad, in fact. Alex knew that the meeting could easily erupt into a free-for-all between the two men and that the commander would lose, not physically, but most assuredly politically. She also knew Don would be a bloody mess. There was nothing Don would like more than to get Françoise fired, or at least, reprimanded. Jack's judgment returned with a touch of Alex's hand. He sat down. Alex noted with some relief that Monique had returned to the room, her composure intact.

Françoise settled down and looked at Alex. His tone was grave. "It looks, at least from the preliminaries, that McMurdie is guilty. He was covered with Mrs. Smithson's blood."

Alex fought another visceral response and thought about how she could possibly keep herself from throwing up. It had been hours since she had eaten. "Who found Mrs. Smithson?" Alex questioned.

"I did," responded the nurse at the conference table.

Alex turned to look again at the nurse. She looked familiar, but Alex couldn't quite place her. She thought for several moments and then remembered her from the evening before. She was a nurse from

an agency, who had been working evenings... the nurse who had admitted to Alex that she had no psychiatric nursing experience. *This is just great*, Alex thought to herself. *A jury will love this. We're fish bait on this one. This really sucks.*

Alex spoke to the nurse. "Didn't we talk earlier? Weren't you on the evening shift? Sorry, I can't remember your name."

"I'm JoAnne Waters. Yes, we did talk, and I was on evenings. The agency couldn't find anyone else to send for nights, so I volunteered. I guess the word's out around town about the nurse that was attacked and raped. Anyway, I agreed to stay over, you know, do a double. I didn't know I'd signed up for murder."

Alex noticed that Joanne was super pale and had tears in her eyes. "You were the one who found Mrs. Smithson?" Alex asked.

"Yes, I found her when I was making rounds at two a.m. She was dead. I immediately called security and they called the other people who are here. Mr. Whitset was already here, in his office, and came out when I was making the phone calls."

*Whitset was here. What the hell was Whitset doing here on the night shift?* "Did something happen on your shift that could've caused something like this to happen?" Alex looked speculatively at the tearful, frightened registered nurse.

Joanne answered in a quavering voice, "No. Nothing. The evening was quiet. The patients were doing well. There was no trouble at all." At that point JoAnne turned to look at Lester and said, "Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Whitset? You were here until after midnight."

Whitset gave the nurse a sly smile. "Yes, it was quiet. I agree. I left shortly after midnight to grab a coffee and returned to my office to do some work." He looked around the group as if to be sure that everyone heard him.

"Anyway," Joanne continued. "On the night shift, shortly after Mr. Whitset left, there was a big ruckus on the prison unit next door. They called a stat page for help, and I sent my two psych techs over. Apparently, several inmates were trying to attack a third man, and my techs were tied up for some time. I was alone on this unit. There was a lot of noise and screaming that I could hear from the prison unit. The noise woke up several of our patients who became alarmed and frightened. One was a new admission. I medicated him, along with two others, and told them all to go back to sleep. I guess that was what I was doing when the murder occurred... I didn't hear anything. I promise you, if I had known this had happened or heard Mrs. Smithson's bell, I would have gone there immediately. She went to bed around nine and was sleeping soundly at midnight. I had no idea..." Joanne started crying softly into a tissue, deftly handed to her by Whitset.

Alex pondered Joanne's remarks for a few seconds. She looked at the commander who nodded his head. Jack also believed Joanne's story. Alex turned her gaze to Whitset and asked him coldly, "Why were you here so late, Mr. Whitset?"

Lester gave Alex a placating smile. "I frequently work late, Alex. I make it a point to be on the unit at different times during the day and night so I can evaluate the quality of care the patients are receiving. It's my own system of quality management, you see. I'm a clinical and administrative manager. Besides, I love being here at night. It's quiet and I can get so much more work done than during the daylight hours." His voice was soft and smooth, even sensuous.

Alex found herself once again mesmerized by the man's voice.

He continued to smile at Alex the entire time he was talking. Then Whitset added, "Besides, I don't like imposters working at my hospital. I oversee all operations, clinical and administrative."

Alex was confused. "Imposters? What do you mean, imposters?" Alex questioned.

Whitset hesitated for a second and said, "Imposters, people that pretend to care for patients, but who don't know how. People who aren't in tune with patient needs and don't understand them are imposters. Many psychiatric staff are actually imposters — they pretend to be someone they aren't."

Alex nodded her head slowly. "Did you happen to hear or see anything that made you suspicious before you left?" Alex guessed that Jack had asked the same questions earlier. She glanced at the commander out of the corner of her eye and saw he was listening intently, his notebook open in front of him.

Whitset glared at Alex steadily with a lewd look in his eyes. His eyes dropped to Alex's breasts and stayed there for several moments before looking back up into her face.

Alex could swear he was leering at her.

"No, not a thing, Ms. Destephano. I checked the situation on the prison unit, headed for my car, and went out for coffee." He continued to stare moodily at Alex, his eyes wandering over her body suggestively.

Alex stared back at Whitset. Her gaze wandered over his rumpled shirt and pants. It was clear to her that he hadn't been to bed. Perhaps he had napped in his office because he was a mess.

Lester continued to gawk at her, his eyes wandering over her body as if trying to catch her off guard, daring her to say something that questioned his story.

Alex said softly, "Sorry you were awakened from your slumber, Lester. You must have been napping on your sofa in your office. That must be why your clothes are so wrinkled." She gave the administrator a sweet smile. "I guess we were all awakened abruptly."

"No problem, Alex. I'm a light sleeper. I'm used to rising for any occasion. Any occasion. You remember that." Whitset gave Alex an indecent look. His eyes were half closed, and his mouth was open as he looked at her. A little bit of spittle had gathered at one corner of his mouth.

Alex flashed a look at Jack, who nodded his head, a nod that was imperceptible to anyone else in the room.

Montgomery was glowering at her. He said, "Alex, have you finished your inquisition? If you have, I'd like to hear more from Françoise about his buddy that murdered dear Mrs. Santa Claus." Montgomery's eyes glittered rudely at Alex and Jack.

Dr. Desmonde interrupted Don. "Mr. Montgomery, her name was Mrs. Smithson and her son and his wife are waiting for you downstairs. I suggest you learn her name before you meet with them." Monique's voice was sharp, and she was clearly annoyed and irritated with him.

"That's your job, Desmonde. You're the shrink and this travesty is your fault." Montgomery gave the psychiatrist an ugly look. "Are you out of your mind? I have no intention of ever seeing them or associating myself with anything that has happened or will happen over here in this insane asylum. You should have given them more pills to knock them out. Damn situations such as these. I just don't have time for this," Don added, as he slammed his fist on the conference table.

Monique was livid but held her tongue and remained aloof.

Alex, clearly incensed, resisted an impulse to rail out at Don Montgomery. She could feel Françoise's body tense up beside her. He was so angry his body was radiating heat. She touched Jack's leg and said in a steady voice, "Really, Don, as CEO you and I both need to see the Smithsons. This is a terrible crime and we need to—"

Don interrupted her, his voice piercing her brain. "You just don't get it, do you? You don't know just how gruesome this crime is, Alex. Tell her, Captain Mighty Mouse," Montgomery said as he glanced at the New Orleans Police Commander, refusing to acknowledge his new title.

Jack overlooked Montgomery's slur and looked contemplatively at Alex. "The scene's bad, Alex. Grizzly crime — one of the worst I've seen in my time and..."

Alex remembered the violent crimes earlier in the year. *Nothing, nothing could be worse than those crime scenes. Nor could anything be worse than what had happened to Angie the night before... could it?* Alex was uncertain and asked herself these questions as she turned to Jack.

"Jack," she interrupted. "Nothing could be worse than what happened in February. Those crimes were horrible." Alex still had nightmares about them, even six months later.

Jack sighed audibly. "This is a little different. It's different in another way." He paused for a moment as he saw Elizabeth Tippett enter the room.

The lovely, dark-haired Elizabeth looked strained. Dressed casually in jeans and a white shirt, Liz had opted to get to CCMC quickly. She looked stunning for 4:30 a.m., prepared to take command of the media fracas certain to erupt shortly. Apparently, she'd heard there had been a murder. She sat down opposite Don and Monique.

"Thanks for coming Elizabeth." Alex smiled hesitantly at her friend. Elizabeth's job as the director of media relations for the hospital was difficult, especially for a young woman who had only two years before received her Master's degree in Communications. Elizabeth had earned her stripes via a baptism by fire earlier in the year, when the press had swooped down on CCMC like vultures, making mincemeat of the place and broadcasting the medical center's dirty laundry to the entire world. Elizabeth had stood her ground and represented the hospital well during those difficult times. As a result, she'd forged an excellent media network, which now worked to the hospital's advantage. She'd earned respect and admiration among her colleagues. She was incredibly well respected.

Alex continued, "We've had some trouble here, Liz. Apparently, one of the patients attacked and murdered another patient, and Jack was—"

Liz gestured to Alex to stop. "I know, Alex. The policeman outside told me. Do you have any details?" Elizabeth looked around the group and immediately extended her hand and introduced herself to Whitset and Joanne Waters, the two people she didn't know at the table. Joanne murmured a greeting to the media director.

Whitset spoke, "Miss Tippett, I assume it's 'Miss'?"

Whitset drew out the 's' in 'Miss' until Alex wanted to throttle him.

Elizabeth nodded, but said nothing.

Whitset continued, "I am so delighted to meet you. I'm in charge of the Pavilion and very happy to be meeting all of you from the 'other side' of the medical center, particularly those of you who are beautiful." Once again, Alex felt mesmerized by the sound of his voice. It was melodious and comforting to her ears. His voice was directly opposed to his appearance, which Alex found repulsive.

If Elizabeth was surprised or appalled, she didn't show it. She gave a half smile and turned to Alex. She was all business and Alex loved it.

Whitset looked annoyed that she hadn't responded to his compliment. His eyebrows were arched in disapproval.

"Commander Françoise was just about to fill us in when you arrived. Would you continue, Commander?" Alex asked.

Commander Françoise gave Elizabeth a quick smile. He'd become friends with her earlier in the year. The commander was well acquainted with the administrative players at CCMC. He knew their strengths and weaknesses. Most of them he didn't respect at all. As a matter of fact, he detested them.

"Hi, Liz. It looks like one of the patients attacked and murdered an elderly woman, Mrs. Smithson, sometime after midnight. The crime scene's a bloody mess."

Elizabeth nodded. "I understand the patient was stabbed. Is that correct?" She looked around the table and was surprised to find Whitset smiling as Jack described the situation.

"Yeah, you're right. But this ain't no ordinary stabbing. Mrs. Smithson was stabbed repeatedly with a long, thin, instrument. Probably at least seventeen times, as best we can determine."

Don interrupted rudely. "It was her knitting needle, you idiot. Couldn't you tell?"

The commander gave the CEO a dark, murderous look, said nothing, and then continued, "The murder weapon has not been confirmed yet, at least not officially."

Jack glanced at Elizabeth and Alex staring at him. Both women were speechless. Joanne looked at her hands, and Monique was staring at an imaginary spot on the wall. All seemed to be trying to disassociate themselves from what the commander was about to say.

Alex looked out of the corner of her eye.

Whitset was gazing intently at Françoise. Whitset's countenance was reverent, almost holy. He looked excited, practically orgasmic, as Jack uttered the next few words.

"Mrs. Smithson was stabbed at least seventeen times with what appears to be her blue knitting needle. She was stabbed repeatedly in the eyes, ears, and the nose and mouth areas. I'm sure the medical examiner will tell us that she died as a result of the murder weapon piercing her brain. It's as if the murderer wanted to totally disfigure her — to wipe out her face." After a pause lasting a few seconds, Jack added, "He did."

Alex felt the bile rising into her mouth. She was hot, so hot... and flushed all over. She felt ill again. She was afraid this time she'd be sick on the conference table for sure.

Jack reached toward her, thinking she would faint.

Elizabeth left the room, apparently to compose herself.

They could hear retching in the restroom down the hall.

Monique looked unwell, her pale face covered with a sheen of perspiration.

The room was so silent you could hear a pin drop, each person caught up in their own thoughts about the brutal murder.

Alex prayed for composure and felt it gradually returning. *Thank God*, she thought.

Whitset looked pleased. Everyone else seemed in shock.

After several moments, Alex managed to ask, "Did Mrs. Smithson try to fight back? Did she cry for help?" She felt tears in her eyes rise as she imagined the horrible death the little, apple-cheeked lady had endured.

Jack looked steadily at Alex. "We don't know if she called for help. Most likely, she did at first. The M.E. will have to determine precisely what happened. Remember, only Joanne was on the unit. The psych techs were next door."

Alex thought Jack was being evasive. She asked again, "Did she fight back?" For some reason, this was important to Alex. She didn't know why, but she needed to know if Mrs. Smithson had an opportunity to fight for her life.

Françoise held Alex's eyes to his and said, "No, Alex. She didn't appear to fight back. She couldn't. Her hands were tied to the bed. She had on wrist restraints. As a matter of fact, she had on four-point restraints. Her hands and her feet were tied down." Jack's voice sounded dead and weary as he told her.

"But why? Why?" Alex demanded loudly. Her voice was shrill, almost a screech. "She didn't look like a patient who needed to be restrained. Side rails, a Posey vest, maybe... but four-point

restraints!" She looked wildly at Monique. "Why, Monique, would you order four-point restraints for a harmless, little, old lady."

Dr. Desmonde said softly, "We didn't tie her down, Alex. Her killer did."

Alex was so devastated by the insanity of the crime she could scarcely think. Her body felt weak, exhausted, and immovable. She felt faint. A look of dread crossed her face as her mind clicked through questions to ask. She was afraid to ask the question. She looked at the people around her. Monique and Jack were gazing steadily at her. Montgomery and Joanne were preoccupied with their own thoughts. Whitset was staring at her as well, his cold eyes unreadable as they bore into her face. His mouth was curled upward in an eager, expectant smile. Her stomach again turned as she looked at him.

Alex continued to gather the strength to ask the next question. Her hands were pressed on the top of the conference table, the tips of her fingers bloodless due to the pressure she exerted against the table. She looked directly at Dr. Desmonde and Commander Françoise.

Her voice was low, breathless. It came in small, short gasps. "Was she... Mrs. Smithson...?" Alex couldn't say the words.

Monique looked in Alex's startled blue eyes with her clear gaze. She knew what Alex was trying to ask and she replied, "Yes, Alex. We believe Mrs. Smithson was sexually assaulted, that she was raped and beaten. It's horrible, atrocious, and horrendous." Monique's voice broke, and her eyes filled with tears.

The room was still, very still. Everyone was gaping at Alex. She finally looked around and said to Commander Françoise, "Jack, could you leave the crime scene undisturbed? I'd like to take a look at it in a little while. First, I need to do a little thinking."

"Sure, Alex. Sure. The CSI team is in there now. We've got some time. Ain't nobody going to touch nothing in there. Biggest problem we got, as I see it, is dealing with Mr. and Mrs. Smithson and figuring out who did this. He insists on seeing his mother's body. Nothing good is gonna come out of that." Françoise shook his head in anticipation of the event.

"I certainly wouldn't recommend that, would you?" This statement came from Whitset. The group stared at him. His voice was high and he was laughing. "You can't even see her face — it's gone! He probably wouldn't even know that it is his mother. But, on second thought, perhaps it will help him deal with his loss." He looked around the group, gauging their response.

Monique and Alex glanced at each other, sharing a look that communicated their disgust with the man, as well as their questions about his inappropriate behavior.

Monique looked at him curiously. "No, Mr. Whitset. We'll discourage the Smithsons from seeing their mother. As a matter of fact, Ms. Destephano and I hope Mr. Montgomery will see them shortly."

Whitset interrupted Monique and said, "I'll be glad to see the family. After all, I am the administrator for psychiatric services here at Crescent City. Besides, Don, you don't need to be involved with this, particularly since you aren't comfortable. Right?" Whitset gave Don an old boy, placating look and patted him on the back.

Montgomery gave a broad smile. "Hell, no. You go, Lester. I hate this kind of stuff. Makes me look bad. This one's going to hurt, too. Where the hell is Elizabeth? Hasn't she had enough time to puke her guts out?" Don glared angrily toward the door.

Alex spoke. "I'll bring Elizabeth up to date. We'll figure out a media strategy and pass it by you." Her voice was cold, and she stared at Don, disgusted again at his inability to deal with unpleasant situations. Of course, he was always available to claim the praise for everyone else's achievements and awards. What a bastard. She was finding it harder and harder to tolerate him.



"Okay." Don looked relieved. He looked at his watch. "I'm going home. It's only 5:00 a.m. I still have time for some shuteye. Don't bother me until noon. I'll be in sometime around then."

Alex and Monique eyed each other with amazement as Don Montgomery left the room. Joanne asked to be excused as well.

Jack was incensed by the chickenshit administrator's lack of interest and leadership. He uttered a string of profanities under his breath at the CEO's behavior.

Monique stepped on his foot to shut him up.

Whitset had been watching them closely, enjoying their disillusionment with Don. He smiled at them and said in a cold, but smooth voice, "Mr. Montgomery doesn't need to be involved in this. I can handle it myself. No problem. When shall we meet with the family?" His eyes were clear, and he was completely composed. He seemed eager to see the Smithson family, and he was getting off on splitting staff between Don and his administration team. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Alex reached across the table and offered the administrator her hand. "Later. Let's see them after lunch. Thank you, Whitset. We'll keep you posted." Alex's voice was low and throaty.

Monique and Jack met each other's eyes, questioning Alex's strategy as they rose to leave.

Whitset held on to Alex's hand just a little too long and then returned it to her, his eyes again raking her body. "I'll be waiting to hear from you, Alex," he said softly. He nodded to the others and left the room.

Alex shivered at his arctic cold touch and watched him leave.

Françoise spoke first and roared, "Let's get outta here. What the hell was that, Alex? That little pervert incites my killer instinct."

Monique nodded in agreement.

Alex didn't respond.

On their way down the hall, they ran into a pale and wan Elizabeth, who immediately started to apologize even though the three tried to wave her apologies away.

Alex said roughly, "Save it, Liz. I want to get outta here. Let's go to my office."

On the way out of the Pavilion, Françoise caught up with Josh Martin and told him to keep an eye on Ms. Tippett.

The police officer agreed and gave Elizabeth a concerned smile. He asked her, "Are you all right, Ms. Tippett?"

"Yes, thank you, Josh. It's been a little rough this morning." Elizabeth smiled brightly at the police officer.

"It's going to be a long day, Ms. Tippett. It's just a little after 5:00 a.m.," Josh said, gesturing to his watch. "Let me know if there is anything you need."

"Yes, I know. I'll make it. I've done it before." Elizabeth waved bye to Josh Martin and caught up with the others at the elevator.

Alex wondered if there was a new romance in the making. She turned to comment on this to Jack and Monique, but they were obviously tied up with each other. Once again, Alex felt loneliness engulf her.

"A little romance in the making? He's good-looking!" Alex joked and poked Liz in the ribs.

"Sure, Al," Elizabeth quipped. "I'm sure Officer Bennett thinks I'm really attractive, especially after he heard me throwing my guts up in the ladies' room." Elizabeth laughed and shook her head and added, "The irony of it all. He is really cute. I could go for him!"

"Don't get too excited, Liz. It probably raised the protective instinct in him. I understand policeman have a bad case of it," Monique joked as she looked sideways at Françoise.

Françoise nodded his head. "Yep, we do. We like to protect all of the good-looking ladies. I am training Josh right," he reminded the three ladies, and then said, "I'll meet you all on the first floor. I still don't ride in elevators if there's another way down." He looked sheepishly at Alex and Monique, a little ashamed of his continual elevator phobia.

They laughed at him, and after a couple of seconds, he joined in. "Laugh all you like — but remember, if the power goes out, I won't be the one stuck in a tin can or, in this case, an iron albatross!" With that, he turned and headed toward the stairway. Fortunately, the Smithsons had left the foyer of the Pavilion, relieving the stress of the group on the ground floor.



Françoise drove the three women to the main hospital in his prized silver Cadillac. Jack loved the luxury of his wheels. Jack defended the expense by saying he spent days at a time in his car. Besides, when he needed to move, he needed to move, and the car was fast. Fortunately, since he was now the commander, he got less grief from the higher-ups.

Alex pressed against the cushions in the backseat and directed the air-conditioning vent toward her. She loved the tinted windows and the comfort of Jack's car. It was already hot and it wasn't even six o'clock in the morning. *Damn New Orleans in August*, she thought to herself. "Do you think the crime scene in the Pavilion will provoke any further violence?" she asked Monique, who was sitting in the front seat next to Jack.

Monique looked at Alex through the rearview mirror and replied, "I'm not sure. I hope not. But anything can set them off. After the last two days, we could have a riot!" Her tone was light, but her face was dead serious. "We've got to step up security on the unit, at least for the next few days. I guess I'll have to check with Whitset." Monique looked aggravated at the thought. "He is such a slime ball," she added.

Françoise minced no words when he spoke to the women. "I'm going to tell you gals straight up. He raised red flags for me. I think that bastard's as nuts as most of the patients. Strikes me as a real psycho." He looked at Monique sitting next to him in the car and tried to catch Alex and Elizabeth's eyes in the rearview mirror.

Alex was quick to respond. "I agree, Jack. The man gives me the creeps. I despise the way he looks at me. Besides, I think he knows something. He is so sneaky. He looked as though he couldn't wait to talk with the Smithsons. It was almost as if he was looking forward to it. I don't trust him at all."

Monique turned around and looked at Alex. "Is that the reason you are playing patsy with him, Al? It's pretty dangerous, even if he is sane. I think the guy's a leech at the very least." She studied Alex's face in the backseat. "What's up with that?"

"I don't know for sure. I agree with Jack and I think he knows something, too. I'd like to psych him out. There's no way he went to bed last night. His clothes were rumpled and..."

"He could've put the same clothes back on, Alex. Besides, he never said he went to bed. You just inferred that. There's no proof." Françoise looked again at her through the rearview mirror.

"It's proof to me that he's a liar! That's a good beginning. So far, he's a leech and a liar. Why is he always at the hospital at night? It just doesn't add up!" Alex stopped for a minute, thinking. She asked suddenly, "When did he see Mrs. Smithson's body?"

Françoise shrugged his shoulders and looked at her in the rearview mirror. "I don't know. He could have gone in there at some point. I'll check with my men. They were stationed in the room. Why?"

"Because he came to my house to pick me up this morning a little after four, he beat the police. He said he knew her face was gone," Alex said with a chill. "There is something about him that just wigs me out."

Monique cautioned her, "Alex, you seem to hang on to every word he says and you are playing mind games with him. It's very serious and you shouldn't do it. I frankly don't like the way you're interacting with him. It could be dangerous."

Alex was silent for several seconds trying to find a way to express her feelings. She was a little piqued with Monique's critique of her behavior. "You know, Monique, you are right. There is something about him that I find powerful, and I am at some level fascinated with him. I know it sounds crazy, but I find something about him mesmerizing."

Monique turned around and glared at her. "Alex, you need to get over that. The man is at least sociopathic based on his behavior today. He relished, actually loved, the crime scene and was excited by it. Please, please be careful around him. He may mistake your attention and assume you are coming on to him."

Alex felt defensive. "Really, Monique. I wasn't born yesterday. I can see through him and am sure I can handle myself around him. Don't worry."

Elizabeth took all of this in and added, "I agree with Alex, there is something about him that is charming even if it is in a sick sort of way. But, trust me." She patted Monique's shoulder. "Alex and I can handle ourselves. Not to worry."

Monique still looked uncertain and said, "Okay, just be careful and don't play any games with him."

Françoise was thoughtful and said, "You girls listen to Monique. He's a slimy little bastard, and I'd like to kill him. I'll check him out today. That being said, I imagine he saw Mrs. Smithson when the nurse, Joanne, found Mrs. Smithson's body."

Alex was thoughtful and pensive. "You know, you're probably right, but the timing is important, Jack. We know he didn't see her after I arrived. There wasn't time."

"I know. I realize that. I'll check into it, Alex. Don't worry. The man is messed up at best. He even gives me the creeps." Jack turned to Elizabeth. "What do you think, Liz?"

"Commander, I can't honestly say. I'd never seen the man before this morning and then only briefly, but he is weird. He does seem to like Alex, though." She looked at Alex and laughed. "You lucky girl," she teased.

"Wow, thanks, Liz," Alex responded ruefully.

Françoise pulled his big car up directly in front of the hospital. "Alex, you think I'll get a ticket if I park my wheels here?"

"If you do, Jack, I'll fix it for you. But you'll have to repay me when I get my next one in the French Quarter!" The group laughed at the idea of a lawyer fixing a ticket for a cop.

"Thanks. I'm gonna go by the cafeteria and pick up some donuts and cinnamon buns. You make the coffee, Alex. You gals want anything special?"

"I'll eat whatever you bring, Jack," Monique said, as she smiled at him brightly.

"Ditto for me," Alex said, deciding she deserved some junk food and carbs to get through her day.

"I'm in, Commander, I'll take whatever," Elizabeth added.

Thirty minutes later, seated at the conference table in Alex's office, they all felt better. After several cups of coffee and a little sugar buzz, Alex and Elizabeth were talking nonstop and Monique was less wan. Eventually, the conversation returned to the crime.

"Where's Jim McMurdie in this, Jack? Do you think he's responsible for the murder?" Alex glanced at the commander, who was slowly munching his third jelly donut.

Jack was noncommittal, savoring his treat. "I wish they'd learn to make low-fat, low-calorie donuts. Sure would help my weight and cholesterol. To answer your question, Alex, McMurdie's in chains in his room at the Pavilion. I don't know if he's guilty or not, but it looks bad for him. What do you think Monique?"

"I don't know. He was covered with blood when we found him sleeping in his room. That was after we discovered Mrs. Smithson's body. At least, there was blood on his hands. We searched his room, but we didn't find anything. He became upset when he saw the blood, and he started crying. He'd been heavily medicated both around dinnertime and at bedtime. He had enough Thorazine to quiet an elephant. It's the heaviest dose he's had since admission. I don't know... he could have, but I'm not convinced. Most people would have slept for forty-eight hours after receiving that much Thorazine. Jim's not that big of a guy."

"Does he have a history of violent outbursts?" Elizabeth asked Dr. Desmonde.

"Yep," said Monique. "He has delusional jealousy concerning his wife. I think he has Othello Syndrome — a syndrome named after Shakespeare's character who killed his wife in a jealous rage. I haven't made a final diagnosis yet. Jim's had some violent outbreaks during his admission and assaulted several men prior to coming in. He thought they were having affairs with his wife. He's very sick, psychotic, and delusional."

"Why haven't you confirmed your diagnosis, Dr. Desmonde? What's holding you back," Elizabeth asked with growing curiosity. It wasn't like Monique to procrastinate about anything.

Monique was quiet for a moment reflecting on how she had been asked the question the night before. "It's probably because I don't want to, and I need more time to study his case. The syndrome has a poor prognosis. Another reason is that the violence is usually directed toward the spouse in Othello's — not other people. Of course, Jim is delusional. Other than that, Liz, Jim McMurdie is a classic example of Othello." Monique's voice was sad and pensive.

"So, Monique, do you think McMurdie could have been delusional and thought Mrs. Smithson was his wife? Would that be a possible motive for the crime?"

Alex marveled at what a good thinker Liz was. It was a good question.

Monique shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "Of course, that's possible, Elizabeth. I've thought about it myself."

Françoise leaned forward expectantly. "Dr. Desmonde, do you think Jim McMurdie could be responsible for the rape and beating of Angie, as well as the attack and murder of Mrs. Smithson?"

"Commander." Monique's tone was cool, aloof. "I told you yesterday and I'm telling you again today, I don't know! I just don't know! Do you understand that? If I knew, I'd tell you!" Her face was flushed with resentment.

Alex gave Elizabeth a quick look and intervened to diffuse the situation. "Jack, there are twenty-five patients in the Pavilion who could be responsible for the rapes and deaths. Plenty of them are overtly psychotic. Besides, you said the forensic evidence would tell. And, it's possible it isn't a patient." Alex's voice was calm, but her teeth were gritted, and Jack understood the "back off" look she gave him.

In a way, Jack Françoise was a little ashamed. "I accept your reprimand, Alex. You're right. Sorry, Monique. I'm having the department run a check on our local felons in the area. If the door of the unit was open Monday night, it could have been opened last night, too." He saw that Monique's face was livid with anger now. "Let me out of here before you're all mad at me. I can tell this isn't going well for me," Jack said plaintively as he rose to leave.

Jack's departure was interrupted by the surprising appearance of Lester Whitset in Alex's office, unannounced and unwelcome. His shadow in the doorframe seemed to dim the beauty of Alex's well-appointed inner sanctum.

Alex loathed the sight of him but remained fascinated with him — a fact that totally disgusted her.

"Oh, sorry if I interrupted anything. I didn't think of calling first." Whitset had the same angelic smile on his face as he looked around at the group, knowing they were shocked to see him. "I'm especially glad to see you, Commander. I found something you might be interested in. I was going to give it to Alex, but since you're here..." Whitset turned his head, gave Alex a sweet smile, and withdrew a shirt from a plastic bag — it was covered with brown stains.

The room was deathly silent. All eyes were focused on Whitset. He looked directly at Monique, his eyes cold and glaring. "I just found this shirt in the bottom of Jim McMurdie's locker on the unit. It looks like dried blood — certainly older than today's massacre." Whitset turned toward Monique and said in a sneering voice, "Really, Dr. Desmonde, I expected more professional behavior from you."

Monique felt a flush come over her. Whitset's words stung her like the bite of a thousand fire ants. She didn't know if she was embarrassed or just enraged. She tried to will away the crimson in her cheeks. She muttered in a small voice, "I beg your pardon?"

Whitset continued, sneering at Monique, who looked like a deer cornered in the headlights. "I thought you had the unit searched by the staff yesterday. And, Commander Françoise, I thought your men searched as well?"

Jack stared at Whitset, his face impassive.

Alex could see and feel the invisible steam of anger that poured from his ears.

Jack's eyes cut into Whitset's face and he looked like he could kill him at any moment.

Whitset stared back at him with his cold fish look, nonplussed, carefully surveying the reactions of the commander and the CCMC group. "I'll leave this 'evidence' with you, Commander. I trust you'll handle *it* appropriately. By the way, you may want to test it for the nurse's blood." Whitset's voice and manner were condescending as he handed the bloodied shirt to Commander Françoise. He turned to leave, but on his way out, said to Alex in his soft, sensual voice. "See you later, Alex, my pretty lass." He smiled his pure, beautiful smile at her and abruptly left the office.

Alex shuddered in disgust. Françoise erupted. "That bastard boils my blood and gives me the creeps at the same time. There is something wrong with him. He's not human. He slithers around everywhere, just like a little worm. I think I'll rush that background check on him!"

Monique was quiet. Finally, she said, "Dammit! We did search the unit. Twice! We gave everything over to you all, Jack. Where on earth did he get that shirt?"

"I don't know, Monique, but my men searched as well." Jack's voice was irate. "I'm not sure the evidence wasn't planted."

Alex intuitively knew there was more to Whitset than met the eye. She asked Monique if she knew anything about his background.

Monique thought for a moment, and then shook her head negatively. "Nope, I know nothing. Montgomery made the connection and hired him early in March. I wasn't even allowed to interview him." Monique tossed her head in anger. "If I'd interviewed him, we'd never have hired him!"

Elizabeth changed the subject and asked, "Dr. Desmonde, since I'm not a clinical person, can you tell me what motivates a person to work in psychiatry?" Elizabeth's question was straightforward, and Alex thought it was a darned good one. Jack looked at Elizabeth with renewed respect. Obviously, after her experience on the unit today, Elizabeth was skeptical about why anyone would want to work with such patients.

"That's a hard one, Liz," Monique said in a bemused voice. "I have my own theory. It's not scientific, but I think it's pretty accurate."

"Shoot," Françoise ordered, as he sat back down and sipped his cold coffee.

"I think most people go into psychiatry because they want to know more about themselves. I certainly did. I grew up in a house full of hidden agendas that needed tending one way or another. My childhood was full of secrets. My mother was a socialite and a closet alcoholic. My father was a control freak. He thought he could control my mother by controlling her booze. He was wrong. Alcohol merely cloaked my mother's real illness. She was chronically depressed and suffered from major depressive disorder. When my father realized he couldn't control her, he concentrated on controlling his business. He spent seventy hours a week away from home. The three of us — my sister, my brother, and me — grew up with no parents to speak of, no emotional support, no strong relationships with anyone, and no one to listen to us. We took care of each other. There was no one to help us grow up strong and sound." Monique's voice faltered, she was becoming upset.

Jack put both hands on his coffee mug. He was dying to hug Monique, but he didn't dare.

"You certainly did well, Dr. Desmonde," Elizabeth said, trying hard to preserve the physician's waning self-esteem.

"Yeah, at the time I thought I did okay. I was the oldest, and I remember some of the good times when my family wasn't so dysfunctional. My brother and sister weren't so lucky." Monique stopped for a few moments, thinking about her past. Then she continued, "You see, I had my grandmother. She was strong, wise, and loving. She was a positive influence in my life when I was very young. She helped me a lot in my early years. Unfortunately, she died when I was eleven. My brother and sister didn't have her as a role model. They never knew families were supposed to love you, care for you, and nurture you. It was hard for them."

"What about your brother and sister? How are they now?" Alex was associating Monique's past with her own. Her own mother was mentally unstable and reclusive. Alex had never known her father, Louis, very well. He had deserted them when Alex was three years old, apparently unable to put up with her mother's behavior. Alex had felt deserted with no father. It was painful to think her father had left her and hadn't loved her enough to keep in touch. This was the same pain she'd felt after Robert's rejection of her. Two men had deserted her.

Monique looked sad. She said with tears welling in her eyes, "My brother died fifteen years ago in a drunk driving accident. He inherited my mother's booze genes, I guess. My sister lives somewhere in California. She's pretty whacked out. She still acts like it's the 1960s. I rarely hear from her."

Françoise put his hand over Monique's. He'd known about her brother and sister but didn't know how sad and lonely her childhood had been. It made his heart heavy and made him want to protect her even more.

Monique dabbed her eyes with her sleeve and continued, "Anyway, when I took psychology in college, a light started going off for me. It was like, 'yeah, I recognize this... yeah, that sounds familiar.' That's when I knew I'd try to spend my life helping other people build confidence, self-esteem, and positive coping skills. I guess I just want to help people find their way in life. So, getting back to your question, Liz, I think people choose psychiatry because they are also looking for help. In fact, some of them may be a little bit sick." All three of her friends were listening intently, nodding their heads in understanding.

Monique continued, "I'm not just talking about physicians and nurses. I also mean social workers, music therapists, and other caregivers. I think in some ways we're looking for validation that we're not alone, that some of the things we do are okay and are done by other people, too." Monique gave a bright, false smile. "Anyway, that's my theory, such as it is."

Alex asked cryptically, "Is this in any way akin to Whitset's imposter theory?"



"Hell, no! It's not even close! That got my attention though," Monique said, shaking her head in reference to the imposter theory. "He is very strange and possibly pathological."

Alex's thoughts returned to Lester Whitset. She thought about him for a few seconds. "I'm not sure Whitset's all he's cracked up to be. I think he's one of those 'little bit sick' people you mentioned who choose psych as a great place to hang out, possibly to hide."

Françoise roared, "A little bit? Hell! That SOB is totally crazy!"

Monique contemplated Alex's statement and arched her finely etched eyebrows. "Could be, Alex, could be. You never know. But, I hardly think he's responsible for these crimes and murders. Granted, he is a weird one. Probably has a personality disorder of some type. Forget him." She waved her arm in dismissal of Whitset. "Anyway, lots of bright and creative people suffer from various forms of mental illness."

"Oh yeah, like who?" Jack demanded in a deprecating voice. Jack's world was clearly defined in black and white. He couldn't imagine any nut bunnies being bright or creative.

Monique glanced at him in disbelief. "Jack, really. Open your eyes. There are millions. Look at Winston Churchill and Edgar Allen Poe for starters. Also, Abraham Lincoln who, as history reports, was prone to melancholia. Lincoln was most likely bipolar, as was Churchill."

"Weren't there lots of artists who had diagnosed mental illnesses?" Elizabeth asked, fascinated.

"Yes, many of them were also bipolar. Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, to name a couple. Certainly they were creative."

Jack was not buying a word of it. "Is that why that dumb SOB cut off his ears?" Jack inquired as he shook his head.

Monique gave Jack a dirty look and continued, "I believe it was only a piece of one ear that he cut off. There are many famous writers who also had a diagnosed mental illness — Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Cole Porter, Ernest Hemingway, and our own Tennessee Williams suffered from major depressive syndrome, as did Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Who knows? If we'd had Lithium, Lamictal, and Prozac years ago, no telling what these artists' contributions to music, art, and literature would have been! Lots of severely ill patients are extremely talented," Monique added, finishing her diatribe on a high note.

"This is very enlightening, but somehow, I don't think it's going to make Bridgett or the Smithsons feel better about their dead and/or maimed family members." Françoise's voice was sarcastic, as he looked at his watch. "But, thanks for the review, Monique. I didn't know so many famous people were bipolar." Jack felt a bit guilty for demeaning Monique's profession. He would have to work through his opinions of and bias against psychiatric patients. After all, it was Monique's life work. He glanced over at Elizabeth and Alex. "Sorry to break up the party, but I need to get downtown and get some work done," Jack said.

Monique stood and said, "I've got to go as well. I'll see you all later. I've got patients starting in a few minutes. Anyone free for lunch?"

"Sure. Hospital cafeteria at 12:30 okay?" Alex asked, as she glanced at Jack and Monique. They both nodded and walked out of the hospital. Elizabeth declined, but walked outside with them. Alex, Monique, and Jack continued to the car and Alex watched as Jack gave Monique a quick peck on the cheek as he opened the door for her. He looked around quickly to see if anyone could have seen. No one was anywhere close to the silver Caddy.

"Give it up, Commander. The windows are tinted. You're safe," Alex teased him. Monique smiled up at him from the seat. Jack looked smug, embarrassed, and a little like the tomcat who stole the cream.

Elizabeth smiled, looked at Alex, and said, "Well, this is news. It looks like the two of them are an item. That's pretty cool."

Alex returned the smile. "Yes, it's very cool, but let's keep it quiet until these crimes are solved."

"Gotcha, mum's the word," Elizabeth promised on her way out.



• • • •

ALEX FELT HER ARMPITS begin to sweat as she and Commander Françoise walked down the hallway to Pavilion II. She didn't want to do this, but she knew she had to. She knew there'd be a huge lawsuit against CCMC, and she needed all the information she could get. This was absolutely a case of wrongful death. CCMC would pay; the question was how much would it cost them? She would certainly sue if Mrs. Smithson was her relative and, as hospital attorney, she felt compelled to review the crime scene. They were about to enter the room when they ran smack into Nadine Wells in the hall. She looked disturbed, but crisply professional.

"Have you been in, Nadine?" Jack asked.

She shook her head.

"Are you ready to go?" Jack looked carefully at the police expert.

Nadine nodded her head, still not speaking.

Jack was getting irritated and you could hear the impatience in his voice. "What the hell — cat got your tongue, Nadine? This ain't going to be pretty, Alex, Nadine. It's pretty awful. One of the worst crime scenes I've ever seen. Just expect to see the worst."

Neither woman replied, so Jack continued, "You can't even imagine it, so don't try." Françoise looked hard at the young, beautiful attorney and the grim-faced forensic expert. Alex seemed to be wavering.

Françoise scrutinized her and said, "You sure you want to go, Alex? You don't have to. We've got plenty of pictures."

"Nope, I'm going," Alex said in a firm voice. "Got to. Remember, Jack, I've seen some pretty horrible things already this year."

"Yeah, but this is worse, and no puking — either one of you. I can't take any more of that today," Jack said, as he thought back to February. "You ready?"

Alex nodded.

Nadine opened the door and stepped into the alcove of the room. Both of them gasped at the smell that greeted them.

Alex was assaulted by the stench of death. It enveloped her and caught her unaware. The metallic smell of old blood and decay entered her nostrils. She was overcome with wooziness. She felt cold and clammy. Even with the air-conditioning set at fifty degrees to delay decomposition, the smell was overwhelming. She looked at Nadine, who seemed to be struggling as well. After several moments, Alex plunged forward and peered around the curtain of the room.

Alex could barely stifle the scream that came from her mouth as she viewed the remains of Mrs. Smithson. Her knees were weak. She felt dizzy and lightheaded. The room was covered in blood. It was all over the bed and the pale yellow walls. And the smell, it was even worse than the smell in the alcove. The smell, salty and fetid, turned Alex's stomach. It was like a scene from a horror movie. The room was a red print of destruction, the aftermath of a massacre. Alex couldn't look closely at Mrs. Smithson. She took some deep breaths and regrouped slowly. Finally, she turned to look down at the body. It was a hideous sight.

Alex, incapacitated and paralyzed at the sight of the elderly lady, clutched futilely at the air for support. Emotions were clouding her objectivity. These emotions turned into distress and shock as she continued to look around the room.

Mrs. Smithson no longer had a face. Her eyes had been completely gouged out by the knitting needle. Alex couldn't even tell if they were open or closed. Her nose was a torn piece of flesh that was barely connected to her face. There were numerous stab and puncture wounds all over her head. Her ears had been desecrated in the attack. Most of her beautiful silver hair was matted with blood. The knitting needle protruded ominously from her mouth. Alex felt her knees buckle and Jack caught her. With effortless ease, he held her up until she felt strong enough to support herself. Alex barely noticed when Nadine left the room.

Alex gasped. "I can't believe this. This is terrible — horrible. What kind of a despicable, loathsome animal could mutilate a little old lady like this? My Lord, Jack! This is... there are no words to describe this."

Jack stood silently next to Alex and nodded in agreement, his arm around her shoulders for support, and led her to a chair. He nodded his head silently, tears in his eyes.

Nadine returned to the room and continued to view the body objectively. She had said nothing since reentering the room.

Alex was impressed by her dispassionate inspection of the body or, at least, she thought she was.

Jack said quietly, "I don't know, Alex. It's bad. The perp is... an animal. No human could create such brutal devastation."

Alex rose from the chair and walked back to the bed. She studied the body of Mrs. Smithson and noticed that the elderly lady's hospital gown was pulled up to her chest. Her small, frail hips were completely exposed. With tears in her eyes, she asked the Commander, "Can we cover her up, Jack?"

Jack hesitated for a moment, unwilling to disturb the crime scene, and then wavered. "Yes, I'll cover her up. She deserves that much dignity. Okay with you, Nadine?"

"Yeah, Jack. Trust me, I've seen enough. We've got pictures, right?" Nadine's voice was terse and despondent.

"Yeah, got plenty of them."

As Alex and Jack moved toward the bed, Alex saw that the patient's call bell on Mrs. Smithson's right side was covered in blood. It was clear to Alex that Mrs. Smithson had rung the call bell repeatedly for help. Her trained eyes immediately traveled the length of the electric cord to the wall outlet, where the bell was connected to electrical power. The bell cord had been pulled out of the wall. The alarm had long ceased ringing — perhaps even hours before the patient had died. Whoever did this was smart enough to disconnect the bell from the wall. But who? A patient? A staff member? Someone with knowledge of hospital equipment had killed Mrs. Santa Claus. Alex just knew it.

"Jack," Alex said breathlessly at the upsetting discovery. "Did you notice that the call bell had been disconnected from the wall? This call system is antique and it won't ring if it has been disconnected from the wall. So, even if someone had been close to the nursing station, the bell would not have rung in there. It has been disconnected from the operating call system in the patient's room!"

Jack shook his head. "No, I hadn't noticed. There were so many folks in here earlier I didn't notice. I am sure the CSI team picked it up. Shit! Unbelievable. This murdering SOB knew what he was doing!" Jack's face had taken on a fierce look. His normally cautious eyes were dark, brooding, and as hard as black coal. He trembled with anger and outrage at the pain and fear Mrs. Smithson must have endured.

Alex and Nadine watched quietly as Jack put the scene together.

"This bastard knows hospitals. This maniac restrained the poor lady in four-point leather restraints and disconnected her call bell. He knew his way around this unit!" Jack's face was flushed

with anger. His eyes had turned into burning sockets in his head. He thought his head was about to explode.

Nadine continued quietly examining the body. "Look here, Commander. Check this out." Nadine was pointing to an area on Mrs. Smithson's fragile right shoulder.

Jack crossed over to Nadine's side of the bed. He looked at the mark. Their eyes met with recognition. "Nadine, these look like puncture wounds on her neck. What do you think?"

"What is it? What is it?" Alex implored as she tried to see around the two police officers.

Nadine looked at Alex coldly. "It's a bite mark, Alex. Our killer here is the same man who attacked, raped, and beat Angie. He's probably already selected his next victim."

This was more than Alex could handle. Her face immediately crumpled. She left the room and the locked unit and walked briskly back to her office on the main hospital campus not even noticing the heat of the day. She was still cold with fright. Sticky from the New Orleans heat, but cold on the inside. Alex shuddered as she passed the yellow-tagged crime scene where Angie was assaulted.

She nodded briefly to Mona on the way in and then closed and locked her door. Then Alex cried and cried. She cried for the violent acts committed against two completely vulnerable and undeserving women. She sobbed until no more tears would flow. She vowed to herself that she would make every effort and use every opportunity within her power to make Crescent City Medical Center a safer place for patients and staff. She also decided that she would no longer compromise her own personal value system for the good of the hospital, no matter what or who got in her way. She would work based on her own values and ethical beliefs. The hell with Don! For a short while, Alex sat at her desk, oblivious to the world around her. She began to wonder if she was losing her own mind.



Shortly before noon, Mona knocked softly on Alex's office door. Mona knew that Alex was upset and hated to disturb her, but she felt she needed to check on her. So far, she had been successful in holding off the hordes of people searching for the hospital attorney this morning, and she had managed to successfully stall and reschedule most of her meetings. Still — Mona hated to bother her. Alex had been so distressed when she returned from the Pavilion a little while ago. Mona had heard her crying in her office.

There was no answer to her knock. Mona hesitated, thinking before she knocked again. If she hadn't received the phone call from Don Montgomery, she wouldn't bother Alex. But, as usual, Montgomery had acted like such an ass on the phone she knew she had to notify Alex. Hesitantly, she knocked again on Alex's door.

"Come in." Alex said, her voice faint and hard to hear.

Mona opened the door slowly and stood in the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt you, Alex, but Montgomery has called an emergency meeting of the hospital executive committee about the attacks. Latetia called about an hour ago." Mona sounded apologetic for interrupting.

Alex picked up on Mona's hesitation. "Thanks, Mona. It's okay. Thanks for letting me know. I'm okay now, but I did lose it this morning. When's the meeting?"

Alex spoke in a flat voice and she looked whipped. She didn't sound or look better to Mona. Mona examined her critically. "It's at two o'clock this afternoon in the executive conference room. Latetia said something about a press release and some other matters that will be discussed. You sure you're okay, Alex? You're looking mighty beat up!"

Alex smiled at Mona's typically Mississippi description of her. "I'll be okay. I just look terrible because most of my makeup has worn off. I cried it off. I'll put it back on before the meeting. Thanks, Mona." Alex hesitated for a moment and added, "I appreciate your concern. Thanks for letting me cry and giving me the time to do it. I know you rescheduled all of my meetings."

Mona nodded and left the office. As Mona returned to her desk, she thought about Alex. Alex had been up practically all night, had been through hell, and was going back for more this afternoon. Mona silently agreed with Bridgett, who adored Alex. They had discussed how amazing Alex was and how great a role model she was for women. Bridgett had confided to Mona that she thought Alex was insecure with men and had also whispered that she didn't think Alex had ever gotten over her marriage to Dr. Bonnet. Besides, it had only been six months since her relationship with Mitch Landry had ended so tragically. *Poor Alex*, thought Mona. *She has so much, but she also has so little.* As she returned to her computer, Mona was infinitely grateful for her husband, her two small children, and her little house in Kenner. She was thankful for being able to work part-time and was totally glad she wasn't the high-powered Alexandra Destephano. Regardless of how beautiful she was, how much money she made, or how much respect she garnered, Alex's life was hell.







ALEX CHECKED HER WATCH. It was half past noon and time to meet Monique and Jack for lunch in the cafeteria. She sighed. She was exhausted and felt as if she was a hundred years old. Every iota of energy had been drained from her. She walked into her private bathroom to redo her makeup and was shocked at her appearance in the mirror. Mona had been right — she looked bad, really awful. She looked like hell. No question. For the first time, she noticed small dry lines and wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. Her flawless fair skin was pasty white and her normally lustrous auburn hair looked dull and lifeless.

*I'm really a mess! I look terrible and feel like hell!* As she repaired the damage to the best of her ability, she made a pact with herself to take some extra vitamins and get more exercise. She needed to get more rest as well. That would help. Finally, reasonably pleased with her appearance, she headed toward the cafeteria when her thoughts were interrupted with what she was sure was a telepathic message from her grandmother, Grand. Kathryn Lee had always told her to look her best when she was on her way to slay her dragons, and Montgomery and Whitset were certainly the dragons du jour. Bastard dragons, actually.

Alex smiled when she thought about Grand. She made a mental note to call her tonight. She missed her grandparents and she missed Virginia. She was beginning to hate New Orleans. Her mind flickered to the job offer on her desk. Maybe, just maybe, she ought to consider it. It would take her home to Virginia. Besides, her grandparents were getting older and, even though the congressman hadn't slowed down a bit, Alex had noticed some fatigue and weariness in her grandmother that she had never seen before and it bothered her. Just thinking about her home in Virginia and her family lifted her spirits and gave her the energy she needed to move forward. *God bless them*, she thought.

Alex steeled herself for the rest of her day and admitted that it totally sucked, as she walked toward the hospital cafeteria. As she contemplated her afternoon, she frowned. She wasn't looking forward to meeting with the Smithsons, especially with Whitset present, and she knew the executive meeting she was headed to was going to be a battle or, more likely, a sham.

She waved at Monique waiting for her outside the hospital cafeteria.

Monique grabbed Alex by her arm. "Let's get out of here, Alex," Monique hissed. "Whitset is waiting for you in there. I told him you'd left the hospital for lunch and that you would meet him at about 1:30 on the unit to talk with the Smithsons. I figured you didn't want to eat with him."

Alex's blue eyes were sharp and her voice was brittle. "You figured right. Only, I want to meet him somewhere else. I'll call Mona and tell her to have Whitset and the Smithsons meet me in my office conference room at 1:30. I don't want them witnessing anything unpleasant in the Pavilion and thinking again that their mother should not have been admitted there."

"Good idea, Alex. The fire is going to be hot enough anyway. No sense adding more fuel."

Alex nodded in agreement. "Let's run over to the Cajun Café. I'll call Mona from there. Is Jack coming?"

"Nope. He's downtown running checks on Anthony and our boy Whitset." Monique smiled grimly at Alex. "Jack also says he has to meet with the medical examiner this afternoon."

"Why? Anything special happen?" Alex looked speculatively at the psychiatrist.

"No, not that I know of. I think he just wants to drop off some pictures of Angie so the medical examiner can compare them with Mrs. Smithson. You know Jack. He's pretty involved in this.

Actually, he's so emotionally involved it bothers me."

Alex looked critically at Monique. She took a risk and said plainly, "Yeah, I know. Let it go, Monique. We're all involved, and Jack's M.O. for years has been to become personally involved in his cases. That's the type of cop he is and that's why he's where he is. Police officers like Jack François are few and far between."

A faint blush was perceptible on Monique's pale cheeks. Alex knew she was trying to control her anger. She spoke again, her voice matter of fact. "Monique, I'm not trying to offer advice or cause trouble, but Jack is Jack, and that's how he operates. It's just part of him that you'll have to get used to or not—"

Monique interrupted her, her voice cool. "All right, Alex. I've got it. Let's table this for now. I'm too tired for another emotional shakedown and so are you. I know you're right, and I know I can't change him. It would've been easier if his first case with us as a couple hadn't occurred on my medical unit."

Alex laughed at her friend. "Yep, for sure, it certainly would've been — but sometimes life's a shit sandwich and we all have to take a few bites!"

Monique laughed at Alex's description, which she knew came straight from the mouth of Congressman Adam Patrick Lee. Alex seldom used profanity and, when she did, it was for emphasis. By this time, they were in front of the restaurant. "My, my, my, where are your genteel Virginia manners and where did you learn to speak like that?"

"You know exactly where that came from because you've been there!" Alex eyed the door thankfully. "Good, no wait. We can go straight in. And, the manners, I left them at home — better watch me at the table. Order me the special and I'll call Mona."

The Cajun Café was a small coffee shop inside the CCMC complex. It was usually filled with patients, staff, and family members for lunch, but for some reason the lunch traffic was light today. The food was authentic Cajun cuisine, and the chef took great pride in his menu. The café was gaily decorated with a Cajun bayou motif and watercolors of New Orleans street scenes painted by a local artist. Monique slid into the last booth at the rear of the restaurant, while Alex fished in her purse for her phone. By the time Alex finished her call, Monique had ordered iced tea and crawfish étouffée for both of them. Pierre, the owner and chef of the Cajun Café, was arguing good-naturedly with Dr. Desmonde over the proper Cajun spices for étouffée.

When Chef Pierre saw Alex, he bowed gallantly from the waist and said with a big smile on his face, "Miss Alex. I'm honored. Please enjoy your meal. I'll send a special chocolate dessert your way. You know, I know your favorite."

Alex smiled her thanks and she, Monique, and Pierre chatted for a few minutes before the chef left the women alone to enjoy their lunch.

The service was quick and within several minutes, they were eating the rich, delicious étouffée. Alex asked how things were going at the Pavilion.

Monique looked at her sideways. "Well, pretty well, I guess. That should be obvious since I was able to get over here for lunch. Most of the patients are still heavily medicated. Several others are depressed... that is, more depressed than usual. Overall, there's still a feeling of shock up there. Things could break bad tonight or tomorrow when the patients rally and start to talk about things — you know, when the meds wear off. The community meeting should be interesting today and tomorrow, especially since we canceled all privileges." Monique rolled her eyes as she imagined the backlash she would get from Anthony.

Alex sighed. "Yes, I suspect you're right. We've got to get Don and Whitset to agree to hire more security at the Pavilion for the next few weeks."

"Good luck with that, Alex," Monique said in a sarcastic voice as she arched her eyebrows. "Whitset told me this morning he wasn't authorizing any increased help — either professional or security. He maintains the unit is safe—"

Alex interrupted her, her face flushed with anger and her voice defensive. "That's insane! That man's crazy! If it was safe and we had enough staff, Mrs. Smithson would more than likely still be alive today."

Monique held up her hand. "Save it for the executive meeting, Alex. We will need all the support we can muster to fight the boys. From what I can tell, Whitset has Montgomery in his pocket. It's pretty disgusting." Monique pulled vigorously at her chignon and several large masses of her dark hair came loose.

Alex was astounded at how "human" Monique had become in the past few days. Before, the distinguished psychiatrist, while always supportive of Alex and friendly, had been aloof, cool, and unapproachable — or, at least, unapproachable in a proverbial human sort of way. Now, she seemed to be real — a real person like Alex, who struggled endlessly with the trials and tribulations of working in a male-dominated organization. It wasn't that Alex had a problem working with men in general; it was just that she had a problem working with incompetent people... and most of the incompetent leadership at CCMC was male.

Thank goodness she was finally meeting this side of Monique Desmonde. It was going to be great to have a colleague to hang out with who was part of the same dysfunctional organization. Of course, she had Elizabeth, but Elizabeth was much younger, and Alex was both her boss and her mentor. It wasn't quite the same. Dr. Desmonde was a power broker in the organization.

Alex touched her shoulder and said, "Monique, in some respects these events, terrible though they are, have created a bond between us. We'll work through this together."

Monique squeezed her hand in return and said, "I agree. Two heads are better than one, and I need all the help I can get."

Alex nodded and continued, "Let's figure out a strategy for this afternoon's meeting with Don Montgomery." She thought for a moment and said, "How about you approach the need for more security from a patient and staff safety point of view and I'll approach it from a legal and image position. We ought to be able to get what we want. Don's hot button is the CCMC image and he wants no airing of our dirty laundry."

Monique looked uncertain. "I'm not so sure, but I hope you're right. We have to go," she said as she ate quickly. She checked her watch. "We're meeting with Whitset. I invited myself, hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all. It's going to be hard. I'm glad you're coming. The poor Smithsons. I'm dreading it. It's still so horrible." Alex had a tragic faraway look in her eyes as she remembered the scene.

"Yes, it's horrible and Whitset's horrible, but we've got to meet with them. I'm still angry that chickenshit Montgomery isn't coming. It makes me furious when he dodges these nasty issues!" Monique was mad.

She only cursed when she was really mad, kind of like Alex. They saved the profanity for when it really mattered. Another lesson from Alex's grandmother.

Alex shook her head and said sarcastically, "Now, Monique, where are *your* genteel manners? Surely, you know by now that our esteemed CEO only pays attention to the positive things that happen here. Don thinks he's a deity and the only person who does any work!"

Monique smiled ruefully at Alex. "Hell yes, I know. To quote an observant police commander, 'Donald Montgomery is an incompetent SOB.'" Monique and Alex both laughed as Alex's phone sounded, signaling a text. It was Mona texting her, "Get in your office quick!" Monique excused herself and quickly headed to the ladies' room. As Alex was gathering her things, an enraged Donald Montgomery grabbed her shoulder roughly.

"Where the hell is Desmonde? I want to talk with both of you. Where the hell is she?" Don's voice was loud and people at nearby tables looked at him sharply.

Alex was shocked by Don's behavior. "Monique's gone to the ladies' room. Please lower your voice."

Don continued to hurl angry and profane epithets at her, while a number of patrons eating lunch in the café turned to stare at the well-dressed man whose speech would make a sailor blush. One gentleman stood up as if to intervene on Alex's behalf. Even Chef Pierre had emerged from the kitchen, wielding a large chopping knife. He was looking questioningly at Alex. She smiled, but with a small movement of her finger, she motioned for him to go back into the kitchen.

Alex's voice was soft. "Don, what's the matter? Come on over and sit down." She gently grasped the CEO's arm and led him to the table where she and Monique had just finished their lunch. Alex saw that people were still watching them, and she smiled courteously at the people around them. Alex hated scenes. She also hated to see people make fools of themselves because it embarrassed her. Don did it frequently and she still hated it. By this time, Monique had returned and took a seat.

Don sat down. Alex and Monique looked at him expectantly, waiting to hear the cause of his most recent outburst.

The CEO looked around the restaurant and saw for the first time that people were staring at him curiously. He lowered his voice and quietly blasted his words at the two women, his voice hissing a torrent of swearwords like the air escaping from a dying sailor.

"Why in the hell didn't the two of you take care of the Smithsons? The man literally stormed into my office a few minutes ago demanding to see his mother. Damn you all! Both of you are useless, incompetents. Why didn't you talk with him?" Don's face was so red that Alex thought he might have a stroke. Monique hoped he would.

Monique glared at him and answered his questions. She was as angry as Montgomery, but much more in control. "Mr. Montgomery, did you really want Mr. Smithson to see his mother with a knitting needle hanging out of her mouth? Did you want him to see her blood and brains on the walls? Did you want him to see that his mother no longer had a face? Do you think that would've settled him down?" Monique's voice was strong and quiet. Her intent was clear, and her argument was strong. Monique glanced over at Alex, who seemed to be silently cheering her on.

Don Montgomery turned his eyes away from the straightforward glance of his chief of psychiatry. He was quiet for several moments and then said heatedly, "Hell no! That would not have been good... but... it's still your fault. If... if..." Don was groping for words. "I don't see why you all didn't see them hours ago and calm them down. He's in my office threatening to call the press. Says he's going to sue Crescent City for all it's worth. Said his mother was brutally murdered in my hospital by one of my patients. The man's insane!" Don's red face had turned grey and he was shaking, obviously anticipating an onslaught of press reporters and TV cameras. "Where do people get these lies?"

Alex and Monique stared at each other in disbelief. What was going on with Montgomery? Didn't he remember the murder?

Alex spoke to him. "Don, his mother was murdered in the Pavilion. She was murdered in our hospital, and Dr. Desmonde talked with the family this morning. We asked you to see them as well."

You refused. You told Lester Whitset and me to see them. We're seeing them in a few minutes. Do you remember any of this?" Alex watched Don closely as his anger and rage returned.

Montgomery glared at Alex as if she were a moron. He raised his voice and said impatiently, "Of course I remember the murder in the Pavilion. As far as I'm concerned, the Pavilion isn't CCMC. We're a world-class hospital. Those wackos don't count when we look at the good things that are done here. Psychiatry isn't an important part of the hospital! It never has been. The Pavilion is a dump. It's a loser. As a matter of fact, I don't even consider psychiatry a part of this hospital at all." Don was thinking.

Alex could see the wheels turning in his mind. He was completely oblivious to the look of contempt Dr. Desmonde was giving him.

He continued, "Hell, I'm not even sure that psychiatry is part of the practice of medicine! Those sons of bitches never get well. They never even get better. They are just leeches on society. It's a losing battle all the way around. Even the psychiatrists are half crazy!" Don looked smugly at Alex and Monique and folded his hands on the table, as if patiently waiting for their anger.

Alex thought she could see smoke pouring from Monique's ears. She was speechless at Don's diatribe and accusations. She could feel energy, negative energy, radiating from Dr. Desmonde. Monique could hardly contain herself. Alex tried to settle the physician down by placing her hand on her arm, but it was useless.

Desmonde was not to be quieted. She rose and stood over the CEO, her face faintly flushed and her dark hair and eyes glistening in the artificial light of the restaurant. "Montgomery! You know something. Your behavior is infantile, it's inexcusable. You are an idiot. You treat this hospital like a toyshop, lining up your favorite toys and beating up and discarding the ones you don't like. That's what you did to the psychiatric service. You sold us out to contract management. Psychiatric services have been going downhill ever since." Monique paused for a moment and began again, her voice seething with anger, "Frankly, Montgomery, I think you need a bed in the Pavilion. Not only are you an idiot, you have a behavioral disorder!" Monique stared down at the CEO, clearly repulsed by what she saw. With a quick glance at Alex, she stalked out of the café.

Donald Montgomery was silent for a moment and then he turned to Alex and laughed. "Our famous shrink looks pretty good when she's mad. She is much easier on the eyes when she's irate. Maybe I should make her angry more often. Then I can almost stand to look at her!"

Alex was enraged at Don but refused to play into his sexist remarks. She said quietly, "Don, psychiatry is a part of CCMC, and the situation over there will affect the hospital and our image. You may as well prepare for a lengthy wrongful death action and a lot of negative publicity." Alex watched Don as reality set in. She chastised herself for feeling a bit victorious. She had humbled the CEO. "How did you leave Mr. Smithson?"

"Not well. I sent him to your office. He's probably there now. Take care of him, Alex. Handle it and do it right. I don't need this stuff so soon after February!" Don was actually pleading with her. His voice was quiet.

Alex used the situation to her advantage and said, "I'll do my best, Don. At the executive meeting this afternoon, I expect you to approve additional permanent staff positions for the Pavilion, as well as a temporary increase in security — at least until this stuff clears up. Deal? We need strong young bodies up there for security, as well as professional caregivers permanently." She looked carefully at Don, contemplating her next move.

Don shrugged his shoulders. "You give me a good argument, you'll get the money. Farve maintains that psychiatry is well staffed. So does Whitset. Just keep these people out of my office — the crazies

and their crazy relatives. I'm busy, and I don't have time for this kind of stuff. Understood?" Don was recovering from his momentary lapse into fear and uncertainty.

Alex shook her head negatively, signed her lunch check, and headed for her office.

Don, since he was already there, decided to have lunch. What was left on Alex and Monique's plates looked pretty good. He waved for the waiter. Things were quiet for him. He had over an hour until the executive committee meeting, so he settled in for a tasty lunch. Besides, he deserved it. It'd been an awful day, and he did run the place. He was entitled to a reward.

Don was a lucky man. He had no idea how close Chef Pierre had come to putting crushed glass into his lunch.





As Alex made her way back to her office, she became more and more infuriated at Don Montgomery. The man was an absolute egomaniacal idiot. Monique was right. The CEO probably did have some sort of a personality disorder. She wondered if asshole was a legitimate diagnosis in psychiatry and asked herself how much longer she could stand working for him. Again, the letter from her colleague in San Francisco surfaced in her mind. Maybe she would consider it. It was only a year and she could return to New Orleans if she chose. Dealing with Montgomery was getting pretty old and very tiring.

Alex paused outside her office door for a few moments, contemplating the best way to handle the Smithsons and the sad tale of their mother's death. When Jack had spoken with them earlier, it had been difficult enough, but he had kept with the police procedure and said nothing about how the crime had occurred. She shook her head, as if to clear it, hoping for some clarity on the best way to manage the conversation. When she entered her outer office, Lester Whitset was sitting on her sofa reading a magazine. Mona was not at her desk. Alex's heart began to beat frantically — just seeing him made her uncomfortable. He was repulsive. She felt her stomach flip-flop.

Whitset rose when he saw Alex, his eyes raking her face and body. "Alex, you're looking amazingly well for such a long day. Marvelous in fact!" His voice was soft and seductive.

Alex pulled back reflexively as his hand touched her wrist. The coldness of his fingers sent a shiver through her. "Are Mr. and Mrs. Smithson here? Where's Mona?"

"Your secretary just took them into the conference room. She's getting them coffee. She seems to be obedient enough — she a good worker?" Whitset smiled balefully at Alex.

"Obedient? What do you mean by obedient?" Alex looked suspiciously at the administrator. Obedience was becoming a theme in Lester's conversations.

"You know what obedient means, Alex dear." Whitset's voice was soft, almost hedonistic. "It means that she did what I asked her to do as soon as I asked her to do it. She scurried right out of here. I like that." Lester had a half smile on his face, and his dark glittering eyes were locked with Alex's blue ones. He moved closer to her. She could feel his breath on her cheek, and for some reason, she was powerless to move back. It was if he had a strange hold over her. Whitset continued to talk with her in the same soft voice. "Another pretty girl. Mona is her name, isn't it? She looks like a darker version of your regular secretary, Bridgett. They're the same size... just the hair is different. Isn't that correct?" He continued to stare at Alex, his dark eyes raking her face as his look commanded her attention.

Alex could barely suppress the shudder she felt crawling up her spine. And yet, there was something about him that fascinated her and made her feel powerless. It was almost as if there was an electric energy between them. She was startled. A dozen thoughts were dancing through her head. How did Lester Whitset know Bridgett? Did he know she was Angie's twin sister? Did all of these things mean something? She was frantically trying to sort the information through her tired brain as Whitset continued to leer at her.

Just at that moment, the door opened, and Bridgett walked in. She looked terrible. Her face was streaked with tears. She had a gold cross in her hand.

"Oh, Alex. It's so horrible. This is all been so dreadful." Bridgett was crying pitifully. Her voice coming out in gasps. "The nurse in the ICU just gave me Angie's cross. She's not doing well at all. She

still won't talk to me — they say she can't! I don't think she is conscious, but her eyes are open, and she stares at the wall. Alex, will she get well?" Bridgett burst into fresh tears.

Alex walked over to hug Bridgett. "Sure she will, Bridge. She'll be okay in a few days. It'll take some time." Alex continued to hug Bridgett, conscious of the gaping, sly smile Whitset was giving them. It was almost pornographic, she thought. Whitset was relishing Bridgett's pain. Bridgett seemed unaware of him. Alex doubted that Bridgett had noticed him in her grief.

She held Bridgett close for a few more moments, becoming more and more uncomfortable with the effect Whitset was having on her. He was openly smiling at both of them. He looked pleased with himself and Alex didn't understand why. He seemed to enjoy the secretary's grief. He was enjoying it — feeding on it! It was as if he were a voyeur, basking in Bridgett's abject misery. His smile turned benignly gleeful, and once again, spittle formed in the side of his mouth. He continued to leer at them, as the two women comforted each other.

Finally, Alex broke the embrace. "Bridgett, this is Lester Whitset. He's the contract administrator for psychiatry."

Whitset stepped forward and took Bridgett's hand.

Bridgett visibly flinched when he touched her.

An involuntary reaction, Alex guessed.

She said, "Oh yes, Mr. Whitset. My sister mentioned you to me. I'm pleased to meet you." Instantly, Bridgett dropped Whitset's hand, as if touching him was unpleasant to her.

Whitset seemed to pick up on Bridgett's feelings toward him. "Sorry if my hands are cold, my dear Bridgett. Poor circulation, I suppose. But you know what they say about that..." His eyes gleamed at her as he continued, "Cold hands, very warm, warm heart."

Bridgett just stared at him, speechless.

Whitset was nonplussed and continued, "I liked your sister. She seemed to be a competent nurse, although she was not as obedient as I would've liked. I do hope she improves soon."

*Obedient, obedient. There was that word again,* Alex thought. The word continued to frighten and grab at her, but Alex remained silent. Alex was also troubled by Whitset's use of the past tense, "liked your sister" and "seemed to be competent" — it gave her a sick feeling in her stomach.

Bridgett said nothing but nodded her head. She turned to Alex, "Do you know where I could get another chain for this necklace? I have a feeling that if I could fix it and get it back on Angie, she will get better. She got this cross and a St. Christopher's medal when we were confirmed at St. Anthony's as children. She always felt it protected her. See, I have one just like it." Bridgett opened the neck of her blouse to show Alex.

Alex heard an unusual noise. She turned sharply toward Whitset. She thought she heard a giggle come from his mouth. He was leering at both of them, his mouth open and his eyes bright with a strange light in the fervor of his enjoyment of the scene. He looked insane, crazed.

Alex turned to Bridgett. "Yes, I'll get it fixed this afternoon and bring it back this evening. Trust me, I promise," she reassured Bridgett. "I'm going to get Mona so she can be with you for a while. Mr. Whitset and I have a meeting to go to. Wait for me here."

Bridgett looked around frantically. She saw Whitset staring at her. His cold black eyes were raking her body with a sense of familiarity.

Alex saw his eyes rest on Bridgett's right shoulder. *Oh My God,* Alex thought. *What is wrong with this man?* Whitset was licking his lips. Then, Alex chided herself. She had to be imagining these things, but she was alarmed at the attention and reaction Bridgett was getting from Lester Whitset.

Bridgett noticed his gawking as well. She clung to Alex and said quickly, "No. No, Alex. I'll come with you. I want to catch Mona up on a few things in your office."

Alex picked up on Bridgett's discomfort. She took her arm and ushered her into the private office. She examined Bridgett carefully. Bridgett's eyes were wide with fright. *She feels it, too*, Alex thought.

Mona entered Alex's office from the conference room on the right. She stared at both of them with surprise. "What's with you two? You look like you've seen a ghost." Mona eyed them cautiously.

Neither woman was able to speak. Both were tied up in their own thoughts.

Bridgett, her fear subsiding, began to cry again, her shoulders shaking as her blue eyes welled over with tears.

Alex took charge, sending Mona numerous messages with her eyes. "Mona, show Mr. Whitset into the conference room. I presume the Smithsons are already in there?"

Mona nodded affirmatively.

"Then, take Bridgett out through the back door for coffee. Put the phones on forward. Still better, Bridgett, go on over to the coffee shop. Mona will meet you in five minutes — okay? Can you do that?"

Bridgett seemed to be in a trance, but she nodded her head. She said quietly to Alex, "Angie didn't like him. She said he was trouble in the Pavilion and that he stirred up the patients. He gives me the creeps. I think he's bad."

Alex held up her hand to stop her. "I know, Bridgett. We'll talk later. Now go! Mona will be there soon."

Bridgett left the office as Mona went to get Whitset.

Alex attempted to compose herself and went into the conference room.

Mr. and Mrs. Smithson were seated at the far end of the table. They were dressed in the same clothes they'd been in at five a.m. and both looked worn and sad. Mrs. Smithson was drinking black coffee and Mr. Smithson had a can of diet Sprite. He stood deferentially as Alex entered the room.

Alex smiled once again, thinking how handsome Mr. Smithson was. She walked toward the distinguished gentleman. "Mr. Smithson, I am Alexandra Destephano. I am the legal counsel for the hospital, and I want you to know that—"

"Legal counsel? So you're the hospital lawyer? I thought we were meeting with administration. Does anyone know anything that is happening around here?" Mr. Smithson's voice was deep, and his face was flushed. He was impatient and angry.

Alex tried to ease his concerns. She said softly, "I'm representing administration. Mr. Whitset will be joining us, and I believe Dr. Desmonde will be coming, as well."

Alex turned as Whitset entered the room. She watched him stand to the side of the table, glaring at the weary, older couple. There was no concern or compassion in his face for the Smithson family. His face was set in an ominous scowl and he looked prepared for battle.

Alex introduced Whitset to the Smithsons and was appalled when Whitset ignored Mr. Smithson's outstretched hand. He waved it aside and sat down. He turned his glittering cold eyes toward Mrs. Smithson and stared at her. The gentle-faced woman seemed nervous at his look and her hands fell to her lap, where she began to play with the catch on her pocketbook.

Alex began, "Mr. and Mrs. Smithson, on behalf of the hospital, I'd like to tell you how very, very distressed and sad we are over your mother's death. We're very sorry about the circumstances and hope that—"

Mr. Smithson, still smarting from the rebuke by Lester Whitset, interrupted her. "Thank you, Ms. Destephano. I understand that. My wife and I want some answers."

Alex nodded, urging him to continue.

"We want to know precisely how my mother died, and we want to know exactly why my mother died. We've had no information at all. When Dr. Desmonde talked with us this morning, she only told us that my mother had died — that she had been murdered!"

Alex felt her heart sink. She hadn't wanted to do this. She began, "I understand that Dr. Desmonde told you this morning that your mother had been attacked and murdered by someone, possibly another patient and—"

"Yes, yes, we know that." Mr. Smithson was clearly impatient. "How did she die? By what manner did she die? Did someone shoot her? I don't mean to sound short, but you've jerked us around since four o'clock this morning. I tried to see your CEO, Mr. Montgomery, and he literally threw me out of his office. I don't mind telling you, Ms. Destephano, that didn't sit well with me." Mr. Smithson sat back in his chair tiredly. He looked exhausted.

Alex took a deep breath and said clearly, "Mr. Smithson, your mother was stabbed — with a knitting needle."

There was a silence that seemed to last for hours.

After an audible gasp, Mrs. Smithson ventured a few words. "A knitting needle? *Her* knitting needle?" Her voice sounded incredulous. "Could being stabbed with a knitting needle kill you? It seems impossible. Are you sure?"

"She was stabbed more than once," Alex said, wishing she had someone there she could count on for support. She looked over at Whitset who was staring at the wall, smiling to himself. The wheels seemed to be turning in his brain. Alex prayed he kept quiet and behaved.

"How many times?" Mr. Smithson looked directly at Alex.

Alex didn't respond. She was thinking.

"Ms. Destephano, I asked you, how many times?" Smithson's voice was loud and demanding.

Alex's composure was dwindling. She fought for control and said, "She was stabbed many times. I don't know for sure. We'll know more when the police and coroner's reports come in. I can assure you that—"

Alex was interrupted when Dr. Desmonde entered the conference room and sat down quietly next to Mr. Smithson. Alex had to admire the man, his control, his fortitude, and his determination. Of course, he was pissed — she would be, too!

Mr. Smithson turned to Monique. "Dr. Desmonde, you told me in the wee hours of dawn this morning that my mother had died in a hospital accident. You didn't tell me she had been stabbed with a knitting needle! Now, everyone claims they don't know how many times she was stabbed!" Mr. Smithson put his elbow on the conference table and placed his chin on his hand so that he was looking directly into the pale, wan face of the lovely, but very stressed, psychiatrist. "You need not repeat what Commander Françoise told me. I want to know about the hospital's role in the death of my mother."

Monique gave Mr. Smithson her full attention. Their eyes were locked together.

"Now," he continued, "I want to know everything you know about my mother's death. Do you understand?" His voice was quiet but demanding.

Monique nodded at Mr. Smithson. "Yes, I understand. I know you must be very upset over your mother's death and I understand that. We all are. But we are not sure what exactly happened. Conjecture about her death will only be more upsetting. As soon as we know everything, the police

will update you again. As soon as the investigation is complete, I'll speak with you again if you would like. Please let me know if I am repeating what the commander told you."

Mrs. Smithson interjected, "Dr. Desmonde, we only want to know if our mother suffered. Did she?"

It was so quiet in the room you could hear the clicking of Mona's computer two rooms away. You could also hear the distant linen carts and x-ray machines rolling down the halls. Far off, someone was laughing. Alex wished she were with them and not here in this room with these poor, sad, grief-stricken people discussing the elderly Mrs. Smithson's horrific death.

Monique remained silent and looked at her hands for several moments, then looked back at the Smithsons. Finally, slowly, she said, "Yes, it is possible your mother may have suffered. We'll know for sure when we get the autopsy report." Secretly, Monique hoped that the gentle, elderly lady had suffered a stroke or a heart attack and had died instantly. This thought was helping her manage her own fragile emotional survival. Although it was unlikely, she was taking some comfort in the possibility.

Mrs. Smithson was crying softly into a tissue.

Mr. Smithson's eyes were red-rimmed as he looked at Alex and Monique and said quietly, "I admitted my mother because she was depressed over my father's death and my sister's illness. She was not chronically mentally ill, do you understand, she was *not mentally ill*. She'd never been depressed. You, Dr. Desmonde, assured me that this was the best hospital for her—"

A sob escaped Mrs. Smithson's mouth and she said to her husband, "Please, honey, let's not talk about this now. There is nothing Dr. Desmonde can do. Let's just go home, I am so tired."

Mr. Smithson turned to comfort his wife and said tearfully, "Two weeks later, she's stabbed to death in what is supposed to be the best hospital in New Orleans. I repeat, *how did this happen?* I expected this hospital to take care of her — to help her. Why didn't you? I trusted you to make her better!"

There was silence. No one spoke. What was there to say? Everyone just continued to sit uncomfortably in the conference room.

Mr. Smithson tried to speak again, but his voice broke. He stopped for several seconds to catch his breath, composed himself, and then said, "My mother was a gentle soul. She never hurt anyone. She didn't deserve to die like this."

Alex looked over at Whitset. He was watching Mrs. Smithson cry softly. He had a pleased look on his face. His mouth was turned up in a sly, half smile and he looked as if he was worshipping her grief. He was enjoying himself and was enjoying being a part of this heartbreaking meeting! *What the hell was going on?* Alex just couldn't understand Whitset. It was like he got off on grief, enjoyed it, and even relished it. A glance over at Monique confirmed to Alex that she wasn't noticing Whitset's behavior. Her attention was focused on Mr. Smithson who continued to vent his feelings.

"You know," he said, "it seems to me that something's wrong here. If my mother suffered, that must be your fault. If she was so brutally killed..." He looked toward his wife as she was seized with a fresh torrent of tears. He took her hand, pressed it for comfort, and continued, "If she was stabbed over and over, then why didn't somebody come to help her? I'm sure she cried for help." Mr. Smithson looked back and forth between Monique and Alex. "*Why didn't somebody come help her? Answer me! I demand an answer!*" His voice was loud and harsh.

Suddenly, without warning, Lester Whitset jumped from his seat. His tone was harsh, cruel even, his face only inches from Mr. Smithson's, "Listen, Smithson, we told you we were sorry. Isn't that

enough? We don't make promises when we admit people to the hospital. Particularly old people—" He stopped as Alex kicked him hard in the leg.

Smithson stood, faced the younger man, and raised his voice, "What did you say? *What in the hell did you say about old people?*" Mr. Smithson's voice was getting louder. "Say it again, dammit! What's this about promises and old people?" Mr. Smithson was taller and heavier than Lester Whitset and Alex watched as a brief flicker of uncertainty crossed Whitset's face.

Whitset momentarily gained control of himself. Then he lost it completely. His appearance changed and he looked like a pouty little boy. His slicked-back, G.Q. hair fell forward, and he looked at his hands and smiled. Then he began to speak, his lips pouting as he began a singsong litany. His head moved back and forth, keeping time with his voice, "*We're so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Smithson. We're so very sorry your mother was murdered in — our hospital. Please, please forgive us.*" Whitset's voice ended on a high note.

Alex was dumbfounded, paralyzed with shock at his behavior. Monique was speechless. What the hell was happening? It seemed like Whitset was making fun of the incident. His words were rhymed and spoken in iambic pentameter. His voice was the voice of a child in kindergarten. Alex couldn't figure out whether he was being rude and condescending or was just crazy.

The Smithsons were flabbergasted by Whitset's behavior.

Dr. Desmonde stared at him strangely. She slipped Alex a note telling her to call the hospital chaplain. Alex rose to leave the room as Monique again turned to the Smithsons, who were still shell-shocked by Whitset's words. She sighed with fatigue. She and Alex would now have to deal with Whitset.

Monique took Mrs. Smithson's hand and said to the older couple in a reassuring voice, "We will tell you everything as soon as we get the information. Is there anything else you need? Can I arrange for a cab to take you home?"

"Is there anything else we need to know now?" Mr. Smithson's voice was morose. He was grey with fatigue and grief. Mrs. Smithson looked like a shocked, broken puppet.

"Yeah," said Whitset, his voice loud and commanding. "Yeah, you may want to know that your mother was also raped."

Mrs. Smithson responded with a bloodcurdling sound. Mr. Smithson made the low guttural sounds of a wild animal in intense pain.

Whitset smiled his gleeful, enigmatic smile at the grieving couple, turned to Dr. Desmonde, and simply said, "Well, they needed to know, didn't they? They did ask if there was anything else."

Monique didn't reply. She continued to stare at Whitset. A realization about the man was sending tingles up her spine. He belonged on the Pavilion but not as the administrator.

Whitset flinched under her intense stare and looked at his watch. When he looked back at her, it began to happen. Dr. Desmonde's face was turning to plastic. *My God, the bitch is one of them*, he thought! Whitset could tell from the way the fluorescent light highlighted the sheen of her pale face. He felt a terrible noise in his head and struggled for control. He wanted to reach out and rip her head off. *The bitch*, he thought to himself. *How had she kept her secret so long? Was he losing his ability to identify them?* He stood abruptly and said, "See you shortly in Montgomery's office."

Alex was hanging up the phone when Whitset came into her office.

He grabbed her shoulder and said gleefully, "I told them everything, it's all done. See you in a few minutes."

Alex stared at him as he raced from her office. She couldn't decide whether he was happy, sad, or just crazy. She just couldn't figure him out.

Alex returned to the conference room and found both of the Smithsons in tears, devastated over their mother's death. Monique was doing her best, but she too was having difficulty keeping her composure. Her eyes were full of tears. Alex supposed they were tears of frustration, as well as grief. Alex and Monique stayed with the Smithsons, offering as much comfort as they could until a priest took the heartbroken couple away.





The room was deathly quiet. Monique and Alex sat quietly for a few minutes, each trying to figure out what had happened. Finally, Alex couldn't stand the silence any longer and spoke.

"Monique, talk to me! There's got to be something wrong with Whitset. Did you see him in here? It was as if some type of transformation occurred and a kid broke out! It's like he went to another planet or something! What's wrong with him? I think he's psycho!"

The psychiatrist didn't respond, caught up in her own thoughts. A dozen possibilities were racing through her mind. It was clear in her professional judgment that Whitset had some sort of psychiatric disorder — only she didn't know what. She'd never seen evidence of any overtly psychotic behavior. He'd always seem grounded in reality, although he was very strange. Of course, her interactions with him were limited and minimal because, truthfully, she didn't like or trust him. Monique knew that psychotic patients were often highly manipulative and could cloak their behavior well. The only clinical behavior she'd witnessed had only just happened a few minutes before and she couldn't make a judgment based on just that one incident. She needed verification and validation of what she was thinking. Somehow, she had to figure out a way to corroborate her suspicions. Of course, there was the sexual thing he seemed to have with Alex, but that wasn't conclusive either. Monique didn't know and needed more time.

"Monique. For heaven's sake, what do you think?" Alex persisted and grabbed her arm, pressing for an answer.

Dr. Desmonde shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "I don't know, Alex. It could be any number of things. There's definitely something wrong, but I just don't have enough information. Anyway, I need to call Jack and find out if he's checked Whitset out."

Alex was not to be mollified. "Do you think he has multiple personalities? That sure seemed like a child that came out in here!" Alex's voice was shrill, as she looked speculatively at her friend.

"I don't know, Alex. It's possible, but multiple personality disorder is pretty rare. If he has it, I guess we've seen at least two of them — the child and the sensual adult. Anyway, it's pure speculation on our part. Multiple personality disorder is extremely difficult to diagnose and treat. I think Whitset's more of a sociopath — he has a sociopathic personality or an antisocial personality disorder, as we call them now. Anyway, I've got to get out of here. I want to check in with Jack and go over to the Pavilion to check on things. Then I'll meet you over in Don's office."

"Okay, Monique. We've got about twenty minutes. Don't be late."

Monique nodded her head and waved at Alex as she left. Her mind was troubled as she walked back to the Pavilion. She was definitely suspicious of Lester Whitset. She couldn't casually blow him off anymore. She didn't think he was involved in the violence at the hospital, but she was troubled by the fact that he spent so much time with the patients, not to mention that he was her administrator. Her intuition told her something was very wrong with the man. He gave her an intense feeling of fear and free-floating anxiety, the origins of which she could not explain or articulate.

As she walked back to the Pavilion, Monique worked up an intense sweat. The August heat was stifling — it was hotter than hell. Even though she was a native of New Orleans, Monique could barely stand the heat. It weakened her. Sometimes she was convinced that it actually crippled her physically and emotionally. It almost assuredly brought out the worst in everybody — colleagues, patients, and families. As she entered the Pavilion lobby, she made a conscious decision. She was

going to search Lester Whitset's office. Who would know? She'd never get caught if she planned it right! Right?

Monique used her unit keys to let herself into Pavilion I. Things seemed almost normal. She checked with the charge nurse, who reported that Jim McMurdie had remained in seclusion since he threatened suicide earlier in the day — directly after Whitset had confronted him with the bloody shirt. Monique knew Jim thought he'd killed the elder Mrs. Smithson. The police questioning had been hard for him, even though the officers had been gentle with their questions. After all, he had been one of them.

On the spur of the moment, Monique decided to check on him. She walked down the hall toward his seclusion room, where she ran smack into Anthony Gavette who blocked her path in the hallway. He looked belligerent.

"Hey, Doc. What gives? They say you ain't coming to community today. Why not? Aren't we important to you anymore or are you more concerned with the dead people?"

Dr. Desmonde looked at Anthony. His face was tight and threatening. She said quietly, "Of course you are important. More important than ever. It's just that I have a meeting to go to, to see about getting more staff here so that we can all feel safer."

"Don't give me that crap, Doc. I feel safe. Plenty safe. Besides, I ain't afraid of nobody. Ain't nobody messin' with me. I may mess with other people, but ain't nobody messin' with me!" Anthony's body language was tense and angry.

Monique looked up at Anthony, her heart pounding a little. She decided to push the envelope, asking him quietly, "What exactly are you saying? Have you been hurting someone?"

"Hell no, Doc. I just want you at that meetin' today so I can get my privileges raised another level. I'm ready to be promoted to step three so I can get the hell out of here. The nurses say you got to sign off on it. Right?" He looked at her expectantly.

"Yes, that's right, but we're not raising anybody's privileges around here now. We've got to wait for things to settle down a little bit and—" Monique stopped for a second and looked straight at her often violent, schizophrenic patient.

He was getting mad, really mad. His face was red, and his eyes were glazed over. He started moving toward her in a menacing manner. "Listen to me, bitch, you useless, cold-blooded pig. I'm going to kill you. You hear, you Dr. Pig?" Anthony's voice was low, but threatening. His eyes were gleaming with an evil intent.

Monique knew she was in trouble. She felt her normal calm demeanor slip away. She knew she couldn't let him know she was scared. She never took her eyes off Anthony's face as she felt around her for something to throw for help. She wasn't close to an ASA red button. The nearest one was at least three feet away. She let her eyes wander for one brief second before she was convinced that no one was nearby. She only hoped someone was in the nursing station watching the security monitors.

It only took Anthony that one brief second to realize that Monique was frightened. Her fear gave him the edge he needed. The moment her eyes left his face, Anthony knew he was in charge. Quick as a flash, he reached out for the psychiatrist's slender white throat and wrapped his huge hands around it. At first, he exerted only a little pressure on Monique's neck, enjoying the fear and terror he saw in her eyes. Anthony had a fleeting remembrance of how much fun killing was. He should do it more often. He liked the sense of power it gave him. He applied a little more pressure, watching her eyes dilate with fear at the certainty of her fate.

He began to talk to her in a soft, sensual voice, "You're a pretty lady, Doc. Wish I had time to get a little piece, but I guess there's not much time left in this life for us — at least for you. Maybe in

another life. That's okay, though. Squeezing your neck is almost as good as." Anthony was surprised that he was so sexually stimulated. This killing thing felt good. He would do it more often, he thought, once he got out of this hellhole. He'd steal the shrink's keys and escape. The thought gave him another pleasure thrill.

Anthony applied a little more pressure.

Monique began to feel dizzy and felt her body grow weak. Anthony moved his face in position to kiss her and Monique became furious. In a last ditch effort to free herself, she brought her knee up sharply between his legs. He gave a yelp like a wounded dog when she kicked him. He grabbed his crotch, hurling profanities and vulgar epitaphs at her as he lay writhing in pain on the floor. Monique ran for the red button, pushed it, and then threw a stainless steel bedpan down the hall to attract attention as Anthony struggled to his feet.

Within several seconds, a powerful, young psych tech grabbed Anthony from behind and wrestled him back down to the floor. Anthony fell down on his stomach, moaning and holding his testicles.

In a matter of seconds, Donna Meade appeared with a syringe full of Haldol. As she squatted on her knees beside Anthony to inject his arm, the patient gave a huge yell, let go of his testicles, and grabbed Donna's crotch. In an instant, he had ripped through her uniform pants and pantyhose, while Donna lay writhing in pain on the cold linoleum floor.

Monique immediately retrieved the syringe and jammed it into Anthony's outstretched arm, sighing with relief when several additional psychiatric aides showed up and carted the angry patient off to the seclusion room on the far hall.

Dr. Desmonde immediately ducked into the utility room and returned with a blanket, which she placed over the moaning Donna Meade. Monique tried to talk with her, but the nurse manager was in too much pain. She also appeared to be shocky. Monique checked her pulse, finding it weak and thready and her blood pressure low. She ordered a stretcher and waited until two attendants had taken Donna over to the main CCMC emergency room. *My God, what a day!* she thought. *And it's only 2:15 in the afternoon.*

Sensing that the staff was now in control of the unit, Dr. Desmonde escaped to her office and locked the door. After forcing herself to calm down, she called Don Montgomery's office to tell them she was running late and would be over shortly. She breathed a sigh of relief when Latetia told her they were starting at three o'clock. The meeting was delayed for an hour because Bette Farve had a prior commitment — *probably at the hairdresser*, Monique thought ruefully. *What a bitch!* Thinking about Farve raised Monique's blood pressure and she actually felt better. She could handle Farve, no problem. It was some of the others that were scary. Farve was passive aggressive and a pain in the ass, but nothing like some of the other major players of the day.

After a few minutes, Monique's thoughts returned to Lester Whitset. She was still tempted to search his office, but her eagerness had been waylaid by Anthony's attempt on her life. Besides, as Monique reviewed the scenario with Anthony, she considered the possibility that Anthony was a more likely suspect in Angie's rape and Mrs. Smithson's murder than either Whitset or Jim. Anthony was totally psychotic now. God knows what he could do.

Monique continued to think about Anthony. Anthony Gavette did have a history of malicious assault. But, was it sexual assault? Monique couldn't remember. Her heart fluttered once again when she allowed herself to realize how close she'd come to death. Another minute, and well...

Monique shook off those thoughts and returned to Anthony. He was a diagnosed schizophrenic and did have delusional behavior. Besides, this was the second time in two days he had gone after a

woman. Yesterday he'd tried to attack Rose in the community meeting. Monique had considered the behavior a manifestation of Anthony's jealous rage, but then, an attack was an attack.

*Gosh*, Monique continued to think to herself, *was it only yesterday? It seemed like ages ago. Then, today, he had attacked her.* That was certainly a notable escalation of psychotic behavior. Both assaults had been accompanied by profane sexual language. She dared herself to look at her hands — they were still trembling. She put her face into her hands to make them stop. She was still frightened, and frustrated, for tons of reasons, and she was scared. She'd never been scared on her own psychiatric unit before. These feelings were new and she didn't like them. She needed to talk to Jack, but she couldn't reach him. She felt defenseless and very vulnerable. Monique didn't like vulnerability, not at all.



Alex was uneasy. She'd been put off when the meeting had been delayed. She, too, had decided that was another manifestation of Farve's uncooperative, passive aggressive behavior. Farve remained useless. Unfortunately, she knew that Farve's management style was similar to that of many nursing leaders. Farve neither supported nor appreciated the efforts of the great nursing staff at CCMC and rarely advocated for them in tough situations. Her style was more one of nepotism and fear. Hence, her nickname was Bigfoot in polite company, but she had more ribald nicknames that were used in the back of the cafeteria. With the initials B.F., it didn't take much imagination.

It was well known that Bette had pet nurses. One of the male nurses in critical care served as her on-call gardener, weeding her garden and mowing her lawn. Another nurse baked cookies for her every week and catered her dinner parties at no charge. Of course, they were rewarded — with favors, promotions, and extra time off. It was so unfair and so unethical. Alex just shook her head. This favoritism had to end.

Alex's thoughts turned from Farve to Whitset. She was convinced he was playing a large part in the current events at Crescent City Medical Center. She wondered if Jack had been able to find out anything on either Whitset or Anthony Gavette. She'd ask Monique after the executive meeting. Alex was so deep in thought that she jumped when her private phone rang.

"Alex here." She spoke into the phone.

"Alex, it's Sandy Pilschner. We've got Donna Meade over here in emergency..." Sandy paused, waiting for a response from Alex. When none came, she continued, "Did you know there was another incident over the Pavilion?"

Finally, Alex squeaked out a "no."

Sandy continued, "Apparently one of the patients whacked out and tried to strangle Dr. Desmonde... Alex, are you there?"

"Oh, no, no. What happened?" Alex's voice was a whisper.

"I don't know much, Alex. The techs had to hurry back. They said the place was wild and they couldn't stay."

"Is Monique all right? Is she all right?" Alex repeated to herself in her anxiety.

"What?" Sandy seemed confused for a moment. "Oh, Alex, I'm sorry. I wasn't clear. Yeah, I guess she's okay. Dr. Desmonde isn't here. Donna Meade is. She's the one who's hurt. The tech said Dr. Desmonde seemed okay."

"How's Donna doing?" asked Alex.

"Well, I guess she's doing as well as any woman can — who's just had most of her lady parts ripped at. She's in a lot of pain... and in shock, too."

"My God! I can't imagine." Alex cringed at the thought. "That's horrible, just hideous. Who did it?"

"Yeah, it is. Awful. No question. I don't know who did it. You know, Alex," Sandy paused briefly, "I would never work in the Pavilion. It's dangerous, and it's a hellhole. I think Angie hated it."

"I expect she did, I sure do. It is *a hell pit*. I understand perfectly, Sandy. Perfectly." Alex silently agreed with her. She would never work there, either.

"Gotta go, Alex." Sandy's voice was brisk. "We've got red blankets on the way in. Just thought I'd keep you up-to-date."

"Thanks, Sandy. I appreciate it," Alex said as she hung up the phone. She was in a state of bewilderment. She rubbed the chill bumps that had formed on her arms as she thought about what happened to Donna and Monique. Something had to give up there or the whole place would spontaneously combust. *I've got to call Monique*, she thought to herself, *and make sure she's okay*.

Monique answered Alex's call on the first ring. She hoped her disappointment wasn't reflected in her voice. She had hoped it was Jack returning her call. Monique assured Alex she was not injured and promised she could see for herself shortly. Then, Monique decided to take the plunge. "Alex, do me a favor? Go over to Don's office and make sure Whitset's there. If he is, call me right back. I want to take a quick look in his office, and I sure as hell don't want him to catch me."

Alex felt a quickening in her gut. "Monique, are you sure? Suppose someone sees you?"

"I'll be very careful, don't worry. Just call me back as soon as you get over there." Monique's voice sounded strong and steady.

"Okay, I'm with you. Give me about five minutes. Just be careful — promise me." Alex's voice was pleading and Monique detected a tinge of fear.

"Promise. You got it. Just call," Monique said as she hung up the phone.

Alex called Monique back a few minutes later and reported that the coast was clear. Latetia had confirmed that Whitset was in Don's private office, and Alex had even interrupted them to be absolutely sure. She tolerated the ridicule in Don's voice with a small degree of triumph. At least Monique wouldn't be apprehended by Whitset as she searched his office.

Dr. Desmonde walked quickly down the hall toward Lester Whitset's office, nodding briefly to staff, patients, and family members. She waved aside the questions of several staff, assuring them that she was okay and would return to the unit later.

She failed to notice the curious glances that several patients in the day room gave her. It was completely out of character for Dr. Desmonde to rush. She was the coolest, calmest, most collected cucumber that most of the patients had ever seen.

Rose was relatively indifferent to the physician's movements but was concerned. She'd been worried about Dr. Desmonde for the past few days and had heard through the patient grapevine that Anthony had just attacked her. Rose, in her confused and flustered state, really liked Dr. Monique. She decided the physician might need some help, so she decided to follow her.

As Monique entered the hall between Pavilion I and Pavilion II, she looked around furtively. The last thing she needed was someone reporting to Whitset that she'd been hovering and snooping around his office. Her heart froze when she thought of the possible repercussions, but she shook off the fear. Monique looked around again, just to be safe. The coast was clear.

She didn't see the waiflike profile of Rose peering at her from around the corner.

Dr. Desmonde tentatively turned the knob on Whitset's door. It was locked. *Just my luck*, she thought to herself. She thought for a second and then pulled the master key to the psychiatric unit from her pocket. She inserted the key into the lock, her heart pounding in her chest. She'd never broken into anything before. *Please Lord, please Lord, let it open*, she prayed to herself. She was in luck. The lock clicked with a slight turn of her wrist, and she pushed the door open. She entered Whitset's office, closing the door softly behind her.

The first thing that struck the psychiatrist when she opened the door was the darkness of the office. The heavy curtains had been drawn over the double windows opposite the door. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she noted that the office was immaculate. Nothing was out of place. Whitset's highly polished walnut desk was completely clear of any notes, files, or correspondence. The leather desk set and inkstand were easily visible. The round leather container held four different colored ballpoint

pens. Several pencils with sharp points were also in the container. A bookcase held several psychiatric reference books and several recent journals were on an end table, next to a pair of leather side chairs. All in all, the office looked like a magazine advertisement for office furniture. It was as if no one really worked in the place. It didn't even have a scent. It smelled like nothing. Monique sniffed again. Well, maybe it did smell like something. She could smell something metallic. It had a salty, metallic scent, kind of like old blood.

After looking around a second time, Monique decided the most impressive thing about the office was that it was unimpressive — except for its neatness, which was pretty typical of an obsessive personality. She continued to look around carefully, convinced that if she searched closely enough, she'd find something. She walked around to the side of Whitset's desk and switched on his brass desk lamp. A warm glow from the light bathed the office in a comfortably colored hue. The polished wood of the desk gleamed brightly in the lamplight. Monique's eyes searched the desk and nearby bookcases for any possible clues.

Once again, her senses were heightened to the metallic smell. What was that smell? As she tried to open the desk drawers, her eyes noted something glistening in the lamplight. It was hanging out of the bottom left desk drawer. Monique reached to pick it up and found it was a slender gold chain that was caught in the drawer. She tried to pull it out but couldn't because it was stuck between the drawer and the desk frame. Monique reached down to examine the chain more closely. She saw that the chain was broken and missing several links. The clasp was in place. The chain looked like one a woman would wear. It was much too fragile to be male jewelry.

Monique tried for several moments to detangle the chain from the desk drawer. Convinced that she couldn't remove the chain, Monique looked around the office again. Her eyes fell on Whitset's diplomas, which were hanging neatly on the wall over his bookcase. He had an undergraduate degree from some university in Europe. His graduate degree was a Master's in business administration from the University of Pennsylvania. Monique looked closely at the date on the MBA. The degree was conferred in 1966. Immediately, her heart started beating hard. It seemed impossible. Whitset certainly didn't appear old enough to have received a master's degree in 1966! She didn't think he was over forty-five. If he had received a master's degree in 1966, he must be a lot older than she thought he was — how then could he look so youthful? Monique intuitively knew that it wasn't Whitset's degree. She quickly looked back at his undergraduate degree. It was awarded in 1963. Damn, that was impossible!

As she stood contemplating this information, there was a soft knock on the office door. Her heart sank. She immediately killed the light and ducked behind the desk, holding her breath for what seemed like an eternity. Her pulse beat rapidly. Wow, the smell was overwhelming. What was that smell? At that point, Monique noted a green bottle, the shape that red wine came in, on the bottom bookcase near the back. She picked it up and sniffed. *Oh My God*, the smell of old wine and metal about knocked her out. She had to take several deep breaths to recover. *Whew*, she thought to herself. *If I drank that stuff, I'd be loco.*

After several minutes of silence, Monique rose from her hiding place and slipped surreptitiously out of the office. When she reached her own office, she pulled out her personnel file on Whitset. Her eyes scanned his resume. His date of birth was recorded as January 27, 1951. Monique smiled a half smile. She knew Whitset was smart, but she doubted he was smart enough to have been awarded a master's degree when he was only fifteen years old! Her watch beeped. It was almost 3:15. She rushed over to the main campus to the executive meeting, her face highly colored because of her discovery.





Alex was getting antsy at the meeting. She found herself fidgeting in her chair. Where was Monique? Where was Commander Françoise? She'd expected that he would attend the meeting to report on the progress of the investigation. Don was obviously getting cross about being held up by his "employees." Farve was droning on and on about how safe the psych units were and how other hospitals didn't have the sophisticated monitoring systems that CCMC had installed several years ago. Farve maintained the staffing numbers in the Pavilion were better than the staffing numbers of several hospitals considered competitors to Crescent City Medical.

Alex wanted to hug Robert Bonnet, present at the meeting because he was acting chief of surgery, when he interrupted Bette Farve's drone.

Robert directly addressed the nurse executive in a reasonable tone. "Ms. Farve, how can you suggest that the Pavilion is safe? Only last night an elderly patient was murdered, and no one heard her screams because the only staff member was on the far hall, a long distance from where the incident occurred."

Bette raised her eyebrows and gave the handsome surgeon a dirty look. "Dr. Bonnet, last night was an extreme and unusual situation. There'd been an emergency over on the prison unit. All other staff had been sent over there to handle it. This is an isolated incident!" Farve gave Robert a tight little smile.

Elizabeth spoke up. "It may be an isolated incident, but it still has a heavy impact. There should be enough staff to cover the unit even when there's a problem. When the media gets a hold of this, as I believe they already have — based on the stack of messages on my desk — we're going to be in for some nasty, negative publicity." Elizabeth Tippett used her advantage well and looked straight at Don Montgomery.

Montgomery didn't respond, but Whitset did. "I believe we are blowing the repercussions of this incident out of proportion in relationship to the actual threat. Accidents happen in hospitals. They happen every single day—"

Elizabeth interrupted the psychiatric administrator, "Really, Mr. Whitset, accidents and incidents do occur in hospitals regularly, but it's a bit extreme to have a patient murdered by another patient on the psychiatric unit. I believe you're the one underestimating the potential disaster here."

Alex wanted to give Elizabeth a standing ovation. She was proud of Elizabeth for the way she was standing up to Whitset. She had emerged from a shrinking violet just a few months ago to a strong member of the executive team. She was a master at dealing with the press and sorting out difficult press related issues. Elizabeth had a well-connected press network, which complimented her ability to perform her job well.

Whitset stared at Liz and gave her a chilling look.

Even Alex could feel the coldness his manner exuded.

He said in an icy voice, his black glittering eyes raking the media director's face and upper torso, "My dear, I do believe you're wrong."

Elizabeth maintained her composure and said simply, "No, Mr. Whitset, I'm right." She turned to Bette Farve and said, "Besides, it's clear to me that our sophisticated equipment you mentioned, Ms. Farve, was useless last night — particularly since there were no staff members available to monitor it!" She glared at the nurse executive, her eyes displaying her displeasure.

Bette just stared at the table. There was nothing she could say.

Alex and Robert both eyed each other after they saw the look of intense hatred Lester Whitset gave Elizabeth Tippet. Elizabeth seemed not to notice. Alex was glad. It was bad enough that she and Robert were worried.

Montgomery checked his watch and eyed the group. "Where in the hell is Dr. Desmonde? And, where is that useless police commander? I was sure he would be here to entertain us with his consistent incompetence." Don looked around at the group to see which of the members appreciated his humor. Bette Farve and Lester Whitset both smiled broadly.

Alex, per usual, was disgusted with Don. She said, "Don, I believe Dr. Desmonde is on her way. There was another incident up on the unit and—"

Whitset about fell out of his chair. "What incident, what happened?"

Alex looked around the room and said, "I don't know the details. Monique will tell us when she arrives."

Don was livid, and his face flushed bright red. "Shut up, Alex. I know what happened, and I don't care about that." Don paused as the door to the conference room opened. "Well, well, well, look who finally made it," Don sneered as Monique entered the conference room.

Robert was angry as well, but his voice was calm. "Don, please watch what you say and keep this meeting professional. Dr. Desmonde and Ms. Destephano don't deserve your sarcasm and disrespect."

Alex flashed Robert a smile. She could hardly believe the CEO had told her to shut up.

Don ignored Robert and said, "Dr. Desmonde, I don't recall you telling me I was going to need double staff to take care of these wackos. Did you tell me that, Dr. Desmonde?" Don's voice was demanding and so sarcastic that Alex could feel Robert get ready to say something else to him. She placed her hand on Robert's arm and whispered to him to let Monique handle Montgomery.

"No, I didn't tell you that precisely, Don. What I did tell you was that there was a distinct possibility our workload would increase significantly and that we may need more staff later. That, I believe, is when you, as our esteemed leader, hired Mr. Whitset's company to manage the psychiatry service." Monique's voice was disdainful and patronizing.

Whitset had been watching the exchange with a great deal of interest. He interjected, "Yes, Mr. Montgomery did hire us around the time he signed the state contract. He was obviously worried about the costs of caring for such a diverse population of psychiatric patients. My company assured him that we had helped many other hospitals do the same type of thing we have done here at Crescent City — successfully managing a changing population of psychiatric patients without increasing costs. We're successful here. It's a good model." Whitset smiled broadly, his thin lips curling over his small rodent like teeth.

Monique could hardly abide Whitset's tiresome ponderosity. *What a pile of bullshit*, she thought to herself. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she addressed the pompous Whitset.

"Mr. Whitset, your model may be a good financial model for the hospital, but it is a poor clinical model. I'm sure the only reason it's saved the hospital money is because you cut staffing positions."

If looks could kill, Whitset would have eradicated Monique. But he remained silent.

Elizabeth Tippet pushed her long, dark hair back from her face and looked at Whitset as though he were a moron. "I'm a bit confused by your comments. I wouldn't call these recent events successful, Mr. Whitset. I'd call them tragic. I agree with Dr. Desmonde. I vote we increase the staff to the levels she's suggested. It's pretty clear to me that we're understaffed over there. I, for one, don't want any more of these patient or staff incidents to occur."

"I second Elizabeth's suggestion. I trust Dr. Desmonde's judgment implicitly in these matters." Dr. Bonnet smiled warmly at Monique and continued talking. "She is a nationally known expert in her

field, and she knows the internal needs of her department."

Don gave Robert a deprecating look.

He'd always hated and distrusted the surgeon. In some respects, Alex believed Don was jealous of Robert.

"Thanks, Bonnet. What a surprise! You physicians never disagree with each other." His voice was laced with sarcasm and disdain as he sneered at Robert.

Don turned to Whitset. "What do you want to do, Whitset? It's really your call, you know. You're in charge of the Pavilion. If you think we need the staff, we'll work it out."

Alex intervened, "Don, I object to giving him this authority. He's hired contract help. This system is an administrative disaster. I would certainly like him on our team, but I wouldn't give him the authority to make the decision. In fact, I don't think he has that authority based on hospital by-laws and policy."

Whitset's eyes shot daggers at Alex, his black eyes penetrated her face.

Alex could feel the coldness he exuded. She could feel the chill as it washed over her.

Don shrugged his shoulders and looked at Whitset. "Don't know, Whitset. What do you think?"

Whitset managed a complete turnabout. He looked at the group, nodding at Don Montgomery. His smile was pleasant and his voice congenial. "Thanks, Don. Thank you all for your input. I'm not in favor of hiring additional staff. We don't need them. According to my numbers, CCMC is well staffed. The staff we have are competent and are used to caring for the type of patients we admit. Secondly, our productivity would drop if we hired ten new positions. It would take us over six months to hire and train them. Hiring these people makes no business sense at all — particularly because we don't need them. I figure these positions would cost us better than \$1 million the first year. I'm against it."

Bette Farve nodded her head in agreement with Lester Whitset. "I quite agree with Mr. Whitset. If we have money for positions, Don, I'd much rather put the FTEs in critical care or on the medicine units. Psych is doing okay. Besides, it's hard to fill psych nursing positions. We have to pay them more because of the perceived notion that working with these patients can be more dangerous. I'm against increasing the staff over there." Bette rolled her eyes at the "perceived notion" that caring for psych patients could be dangerous.

Monique interrupted, "Perceived notions, really Bette, you are intolerable. Two nurses have been attacked in the Pavilion!"

Alex gave Bette Farve a disgusted look and shook her head. One thing about Bette was that she never disappointed. For some reason, she always expected that the nursing leader would emerge as supportive of nursing and their needs. Farve never did. *I ought to be used to her by now*, Alex thought. *At least I know what to expect*, she mused. *I guess it's better than people shooting from the hip. Expect nothing, get less. That's going to be the way I approach her.*

Alex spoke. "I recommend, from a legal standpoint, that we fill the slots. We have a file full of complaints from patients, staff, and visitors about how unsafe the Pavilion is. We're required by law to provide for the reasonable safety of those who visit our premises. If we don't, we could be liable for all types of actions."

"Now, now, now, Alex. Perhaps you're being a little overzealous. Aren't you flaunting your lawyer credentials?" Lester Whitset looked at her, a mollifying smile on his face. His voice was so low she could hardly hear him.

"Absolutely not, Mr. Whitset. I'm only being reasonable and prudent, doing my job as the hospital attorney. Dr. Desmond has offered a convincing argument, substantiated by statistics, that we are severely understaffed here in psychiatry. Her numbers aren't even adjusted for the severity of our

patient index or patient population. Our overall patient acuity is higher than that of any other hospital in New Orleans. Therefore—”

Alex was interrupted by Whitset as he jumped up from his seat and leaned across, practically lying on the conference table across from her, his face white again with fury. He looked like a little boy who was pouting. "We will not hire any additional staff! It's my decision, and it's final! It's no longer open for discussion." Whitset stared around the room.

Alex was incredulous. How dare that creepy SOB undermine her? She looked at Don and said, "Don, really, we must have some type of closure here.”

Montgomery looked at the hospital lawyer and shrugged his shoulders. "It's Whitset's decision, Alex. He has the last say. It's in his contract."

Alex was incredulous. "No, no, Don. You're wrong. *It's our contract.* Whitset is contracting with us. We are in charge here. We are driving the bus."

Robert looked scornfully at Whitset. "What's in this for you, Whitset? A bigger bonus based on dollars saved at the end of the year?"

Whitset said nothing and continued to look around the room.

Alex's sense of smell was assaulted by a strange odor. She couldn't quite place it, but it was very familiar. She looked around to see if anyone else noticed it. Whatever the smell was, it had a metallic taint.

Elizabeth said clearly, "I must go on record here as being positively opposed to this decision."

Robert and Alex nodded their heads in agreement with Liz.

Monique Desmonde, still standing at the wall-mounted board with her statistics clearly in sight, looked at the group and quietly, but assuredly, said, "I disagree completely with Mr. Whitset. The Pavilion is a powder keg. Anything could happen up there at any time. In fact, it already has."

The silence was deafening.

Don looked at Whitset for help and support, but Whitset didn't seem to be paying attention.

Monique continued as she locked eyes with Don Montgomery and said to him, "Don, don't take this as a threat. Take this as a fact. If those new positions are not approved by noon tomorrow, I will personally call a press conference. I'll tell them, as the former chief of psychiatry at Crescent City Medical Center, just how unsafe patient care is here. I'll tell the press in great detail about the attack and rape of Angie Richelieu, mentioning her commitment to her work, her unpaid overtime, and the unavailability of a security guard to walk her to her car. I'll also talk about the death of Mrs. Smithson in great, gory detail. I'll describe her injuries — the way in which the knitting needle protruded from her mouth and the fact that her face had virtually been eradicated by her murderer. I'll also mention her patient call light — about how it was covered with her blood and how it was disconnected from the wall. I'll tell the press how Mrs. Smithson, as an elderly, loving grandmother and great-grandmother, frantically called and called for help while she was being brutally raped and *murdered because there were no available staff to come help her.* I'll tell them where the staff was, both of them. I'll tell the *Times Picayune* and the *Associated Press* how *both* of our staff members were on the prison unit trying to prevent the inmates from raping the new admission."

Monique stopped for a few moments and looked at the group as if surveying the effects of her words. Then she continued, pulling down the neck of her blouse. "Finally, I'll show them my neck, my bruises. By tomorrow, this redness will clearly delineate the hands that tried to strangle me an hour or so ago on the nursing unit. Then, I'll describe the patient attack on the nurse manager. Good story, don't you think?" Monique's pale face was red with fury, anger, and wrath as she continued, "It should keep the tabloids busy for several weeks. Trust me, if you think our Mardi Gras press was bad this

year, wait until this hits TV, radio, Facebook, and burns up Twitter and the local news all over the country. It will go viral in a matter of several hours. I may even uplink a YouTube video of my injuries!"

Don looked as though he were going to cry. "Monique, no! You wouldn't do that! You couldn't!" He was pleading with her.

"Don, I can, and I will. Count on it. I want an answer by noon tomorrow. I want the positions at mid-to-upper salary scales, and I want to hire them myself." Monique gave Lester Whitset a sideways glance as she left the room. His look chilled her to the bone, but she didn't care. She was on a roll. "I don't need Mr. Whitset's assistance with any of the human resource issues. As a matter of fact, I would prefer Mr. Whitset not interact with the patients at all," Monique concluded, as she shut the door behind her.

Alex glared at Whitset. She was shocked, but pleased at Monique's ultimatum, although she was afraid for her. The look on Whitset's face was one of unmitigated hatred and rage. Alex was scared for her friend, and her heart raced at the potential danger Monique could be in.

As Whitset watched Dr. Desmonde leave the conference room, he saw her turn into one of them. When she had given him that glance, he had seen it. She was one of them. An imposter. Whitset felt his heart speed up. A hot flush came over him. He was sweating. Could he be wrong? There were so many lately. No. He'd seen right. Right in front of him, Monique Desmonde's face turned into plastic — just as he thought it had earlier in the day. Then he hadn't been sure, but, now, he was positive. Whitset found himself becoming nervous and agitated. He felt like he was being suffocated. He had to get out of the room. He looked around at the others. They looked okay. Their faces had real skin. Suddenly, he got up from his chair and left the room. The noise and screaming in his head was all he could stand. There was no way he could stay for idle conversation.

Don watched him leave and said sarcastically, "Great, he's a lot of help. What a piss poor manager." He turned to Alex.

"Do you think Monique will go to the press? Will you help me?" His voice was pleading, even begging.

Alex hated Don's whiny voice. She was silent for a few moments. "I don't know, Don. Dr. Desmonde is a woman of principle. She feels strongly about things in the Pavilion. She's felt strongly for a long time. In addition to the security issues, she's convinced that the treatment milieu is inappropriate for optimal clinical outcomes. She maintains that mixing ages and placing depressed patients on the same unit with acute psychotics is inappropriate and substandard." She paused for a few seconds. "Yes, Don. She may indeed go to the press. Robert, what do you think?"

Robert Bonnet looked at Alex and Don. He nodded affirmatively. "No question about it — I'm sure she'll go. I've known Monique most of my life. What Alex says is absolutely right. Besides, she has nothing to lose, and a great deal to gain—"

Don interrupted, reverting to his little boy destructive act. "Nothing to lose! Hell, I'll fire her ass! I'll jerk her privileges! I'll blacklist her from every hospital in town!" His eyes gleamed in anticipation of destroying Monique.

Robert laughed at him. "Montgomery, Monique Desmonde is one of the leading psychiatrists in the United States, with an impressive international reputation to boot! Besides, she said she would quit. She's known globally for her work with adolescents and more recently, she's built quite a reputation for herself as a forensic psychiatrist. For God's sake, Montgomery, she's a consultant to the CDC and NIH on mental health issues. She can get a job anywhere. She could write her ticket to Hopkins or Harvard tonight and be there next week."

"I'll be damned if she'll get one in New Orleans. I'll see to that," Don ranted and threatened.

Robert snorted at the CEO. "You are powerless on this one, Don. Monique's currently an attending professor in psychiatry at Tulane, has staff privileges there, and an open invitation to head the service at Oschner. The only reason she has stayed here is because you got the state contract, and she was interested in building her forensic practice. You'd better give her what she wants."

Don looked dismal. "I can't. I really can't. It's Whitset's decision — it's in the contract."

"That's BS, Don. You are in charge of CCMC. Where's the contract? I've never seen it!" Alex was furious. "You shouldn't be entering into agreements with other groups without my advice. That is what you pay me for!" Alex looked at him disdainfully. Don was such an idiot and an appalling leader.

"I'll have Latetia copy it. See if you can work around it." Don looked scared. "Alex, please talk to Dr. Desmonde. Make her change her mind. She'll destroy us!"

"I'll talk with her, Don. But you best talk with Whitset. He's the problem."

"I will. Let's get out of here. You all think about this and let me know what we should do." Don dismissed the rest of the executive team with a wave of his hand. He disappeared into his private office and shut the door tightly.

Alex and Robert walked slowly toward her office, talking quietly to each other.

Robert said to Alex, his voice serious, "You know, Al, Whitset really bothers me. He looks crazy himself. Did you see the way he looked at Monique? At Liz? I swear, I think he'd like to kill them both."

"Yeah, I know, and probably me as well. The man absolutely chills me to the bone. I think there's something wrong with him, too. Monique thinks he probably has some type of personality disorder. I know Jack was going to run a check on him today. By the way, Robert," Alex said, lowering her voice to a whisper, "Monique was going to search his office this afternoon. That's why she was late getting to the meeting. Intuitively, I think she believes he's involved in some of the stuff in the Pavilion."

"Do you mean Angie or Mrs. Smithson?" Robert looked shocked.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. She's just concerned that he spends so much time with the patients. She thinks he agitates them or something. Causes patient outbursts. Anyway, I'm going to go over there and try to see her."





Whitset felt confused on his way back to the Pavilion. He had taken several wrong turns in the main hospital. The voices were screaming in his head. He was so hot, so terribly hot. He stopped to sit on a bench in the shade to rest for a few minutes, but it was still stifling. It'd been a hard day for him. He'd been up a long time, almost twenty-four hours. He always felt bad when he didn't sleep well, and the voices seemed to wear him down more. He placed his face between his hands, pleading with the voices to leave him alone. He was too tired to listen to them. Besides, he was worried about all the imposters that were showing up. They were ganging up against him. There were so many, three in just the last few days. Before that, it'd been years since he had seen one of them.

Lester began to think back. He'd never forget the first one he'd met. It was at school, a teacher of his in Alabama. He had been twelve years old then. She'd been mean to him and ridiculed him in front of the class. He'd wet his pants, and everybody had laughed at him. He could still see their faces — all of his friends. Their mouths were huge, and their lips painted red like the red of a clown's mouth. They were leering at him. They were making fun of him and taunting him repeatedly. They'd even made up a rhyme. He could hear it now. They had sung it to him on the bus over and over again:

*“Whitset, Whitset, can stand no stress*

*Whitset, Whitset is a real big mess*

*Whitset, Whitset is such a mess*

*Whitset, Whitset just peed his pants!”*

Lester couldn't stand it. After that, the kids never left him alone. He'd become the class whipping boy. He began to hate school and retreated into himself. Then, one day, his teacher had kept him after school and made him write on the blackboard three hundred times, “I will pay attention in class.” He remembered being mad and feeling completely powerless. He had completed his punishment and turned around to face his teacher... and then it happened. He saw her turn to plastic! He watched her face become hard and immovable. He saw her eyes turn into two inflexible pieces of blue plastic. He watched in horror and fascination as her lips became fixed in a red, stiff, hard smile. Her hands, below the cuffs of her blouse, had also turned to plastic. Her nails turned a shiny pink plastic, like seashells. Then, they told him to do it... the voices... and he had. He felt triumphant! After all, she was an imposter. It was his responsibility to "do away" with imposters. His voices said so.

Then there was a huge blank in his life. Whitset didn't remember the next few years. He thought he'd been in school trying to learn to behave better. Anyway, he hadn't seen any imposters for a long time. He could only remember one other one and he pushed her out of his mind. He had loved her, and she had laughed at him. Finally, he saw her turn to plastic, too. And then, well, he'd had to do it. Even if it was his brother's wife. He felt tingly at the memory. He liked the feeling he got when hurting other people.

He got excited now just remembering the feeling of squeezing her neck. God, that was such a long time ago. It was too painful to remember, but the pain felt good and energized him — at least, for a while. Suddenly Whitset felt tired. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and awoke with a start! Had someone spoken to him? They must have because he had heard a voice. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. People were walking from the Pavilion toward their cars. He looked over at the yellow tape and wondered what it was doing there in the trees. Then he remembered. Oh yeah, the nurse. He remembered that night and pleasure riveted through him. He got chill bumps all over his arms. He could feel the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Lester shook his head furiously. He didn't want to

think about that now. He had to get control back. He was much too tired, and his head was beginning to ache.

Whitset rested a few minutes longer and then finished walking to the Pavilion. The air-conditioning in the lobby felt so cool. The blast seemed to revive him. So very cool. He sat on the grey vinyl bench for a few minutes. He began to feel better, much better. His strength came back, and his head cleared. He pushed the elevator button, unlocked the door to Pavilion II, and headed toward his office. It was pretty quiet. Everybody was in the day room eating dinner. Rose, the waif, waved at him from her room when he walked by. Whitset didn't respond. He continued the walk down the hall toward his office.

He opened his office door. Immediately, he knew. *Someone had been in here. Someone had been in his office.* He could smell it — no, not it, her. It was a female smell. Just a slight, slight odor. He felt himself getting angry. Who had been in his office? He began to hyperventilate as he looked around carefully. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. His desk drawers were still locked. He took out his keys and opened his bottom right drawer to check his stash. It was there. He breathed a sigh of relief and began to calm down.

His relief was momentary. He was furious about the invasion of his private space. He stalked out of his door and locked it securely. He walked into Rose's room. Why not? Her room was the closest to his office. Maybe Rose saw something. She was lying on her bed and gave Whitset a shy smile in greeting.

His voice was charming, honey coated. "Rose, it's your good friend, Lester. How are you doing?" Whitset gave Rose his best smile. He sat next to her on the bed, holding her hands. "I like your blouse. Is it new?" His voice was soft and sensual. His eyes rolled up and down her slight body.

Rose nodded her head. Her eyes transfixed on Whitset's face.

"Give Lester a big smile and then Lester will give Rose a big kiss," Whitset said in a childish voice as he moved closer to her.

Rose smiled at him. She didn't really like Lester, but she was so lonely. Besides, once he had made her feel really good. Just a couple of nights ago. They had done the dirty thing or, at least, they had almost done the dirty thing. Somehow, Anthony had found out and that was why he had been so mad at her yesterday. Somehow, Anthony knew she had been with Lester. Rose continued to smile and think. Men usually just ignored her, except for Anthony. He said he really loved her. She didn't really know. Men had said that to her before and, besides, Lester was being nice. She kissed him back.

"That's good, very good." Lester's voice was soft, almost a whisper, as he continued to kiss Rose over and over. His hands undid the buttons on her blouse. Rose gave a little sigh as Lester's soft hand reached for her tiny breasts. As he continued to kiss and fondle her, he asked her softly, talking baby talk to her, "Did little Rose see anybody go into Lessie's office today? You know, when I was at the meeting?"

Rose didn't say anything, but Whitset picked up on the almost imperceptible stiffening of her body. He continued to kiss her, kneading her breasts and fondling her body. He said sensually, "Lester knows that Rose knows who was in his office. Rose had better tell Lester if she wants him to stay and play with her."

Rose was silent. Whitset immediately withdrew his mouth and hands from her body.

Rose moaned in disappointment. It was cold where his lips had been and she shivered. She opened her eyes wide and looked at him. "Please, Lester, please. It feels so good. Please play with me," she begged.

"Only if you tell Lessie who was in his office this afternoon. That's only fair. Then, I'll play with you all night. That's only fair." Whitset's voice was indignant, self-righteous.

That was all Rose needed to hear. She asked in her little girl voice, "Promise, Lester? Do you really promise?"

"Scouts honor. I promise. Tell Lester and we will play with each other all night." Whitset gave Rose another long, lingering kiss.

Rose, her eyes closed, said softly. "It was Dr. Desmonde. She was only in there a couple of minutes."

Rose opened her eyes as she felt Whitset's hands turn cold. His face was white, and his eyes were dilated. She was frightened. She wished he would get up, but he just laid there, his body was so cold that she was freezing where she had been so warm a few minutes before.

Whitset was beside himself with anger. God, he hated that shrink bitch. She'd been a pain since his first day. Always wanting to do things right. Always wanting more staff and more supplies. Always wanting to disorder Lester's perfectly ordered life. Today she had gone too far. She would pay now.

He continued to think, becoming angrier by the minute. First, she'd threatened to close down the hospital and now she'd broken into his office. Then, she turned into an imposter. She was one of them. In his anger and fury, Lester ripped off Rose's polyester slacks and thrust himself into her. He needed a release. Please, somebody, anybody, give me a release, he cried to himself. Let me make it this time. Let me get off! It was such a big deal for him sometimes. Then, other times, it wasn't a big deal at all. The uncertainty made him mad and unsure of his sexuality. He lusted for power and obedience at all times. That also included the obedience of his body.

He continued to go at it. Please, he deserved it today. He needed the release. It had been a horrible day. He thrust and thrust and thrust.

Rose lay beneath him, whimpering silently. "Please stop, Lester. You're hurting me. I want you to play nicely with me." Rose smiled tearfully at him.

Whitset glared at her. "Shut up, you little bitch." He grabbed her face in his hands and hissed at her, "If you tell anybody we did this, I'll kill you!"

He jumped from the bed and disappeared silently from Rose's room, leaving her crying silently into her pillow.



It was late afternoon and Alex was frantic. She could not find Monique anywhere. She had called the Pavilion before she left the hospital, and the staff had assured her that Dr. Desmonde wasn't there. Alex, feeling increasingly apprehensive and useless at work, called Martin's cab, dropped Angie's cross at her jewelry store over on Magazine Street, and went home. Even Martin's humor and jokes had not been able to cheer her up on her way home. She was worried and had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She glanced at her kitchen clock for the tenth time since getting home. It was almost seven o'clock in the evening. She phoned Monique again and left a voicemail. The charge nurse at the Pavilion told her that Dr. Desmonde had turned over her calls to the senior psychiatric resident at six o'clock that evening. Alex, her frustration mounting, tried to reach Jack. When he didn't answer his cell or text, she called police headquarters and was told that Commander Françoise was unavailable. Alex pressed the watch officer for more information and declared an emergency. The officer finally admitted that the commander was out of New Orleans for the evening, working on a case somewhere either in Mississippi or Alabama. He wasn't sure. The man offered to put Alex in contact with someone else, but she refused.

After the phone call, she chided herself, thinking that Monique and Jack were spending a quiet evening alone — out of New Orleans, probably in an isolated hideaway on the Gulf Coast. That kept her satisfied for a few minutes. If they were together and she was this worried, she would probably murder them herself for not answering her frantic messages and texts.

Time wore on. Alex didn't like what she was feeling. She was so unsettled; she poured herself a second glass of wine and sat on the sofa in her living room. As her mind clicked through the events of the day, she kept refocusing on the look that Whitset had given Monique in the executive committee meeting. His behavior toward the psychiatrist had chilled her to the bone. It terrified her. It was evident that he was enraged with her. Essentially, Monique had the power to put Whitset out of work and, more than likely, Whitset knew that as well. This concerned Alex because she didn't think Whitset was normal or rational. His behavior with the Smithsons had been unnerving, particularly that singsong routine she had witnessed. Oh, if only she could reach either Jack or Monique, she would feel so much better. Besides, she knew Monique had found something in Whitset's office and her curiosity was killing her.

She jumped up when she heard a knock at her door. She ran from the living room to the foyer and felt a twinge of disappointment when she saw Robert on her porch. Well, not disappointment, but she had hoped it was Monique. She opened the door, smiling. Robert looked great. He was impeccably dressed, clean-shaven, and his eyes sparkled at the sight of her. *He truly was a hot guy*, she thought to herself.

"Hey, what a surprise! What's up? Have you heard from Monique or Jack?" Her voice sounded strained, and she looked stressed.

Robert looked surprised at her greeting. "No, Alex, why? What's happened? Has something else happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing really. At least, nothing I know of. I've been trying to reach Monique since right after the meeting this afternoon and I can't find her. The hospital said she turned over her calls. She doesn't answer her home phone or her cell and..." Alex paused for a moment and continued in a

concerned voice, "Oh, Robert, I guess I'm frightened for her. I'm afraid Whitset might go after her. He was so angry!"

Robert nodded in agreement, his face also showing concern. "Yeah, that he was. Have you been able to locate Jack?"

"No, I've tried. I pressed the watch officer at NOPD. He said Jack was out of the state, that he was investigating over in Alabama or Mississippi. I would think his cell phone would work over there, wouldn't you?" Alex paused for a moment, thinking. "I bet he found something out on Whitset. He said he was going to run a check on him in Alabama!" Alex was breathless for a moment then her face fell.

"What's the matter, Alex? If he found something out on Whitset, that's good, isn't it?" Robert looked at her intently.

"Yes, of course it is! I had convinced myself that he and Monique were off on some romantic interlude or something. I guess I'm a hopeless romantic. Heaven knows, they certainly deserve it after today."

Robert attempted to look cheerful. "Well, maybe they are investigating together. Anyway, I'm sure they're fine. Have you had any dinner?"

Alex shook her head. "No... would you like for me to make something for us? I could whip us up something simple. Salad or something."

"I'd be glad to take you out, if you'd like."

"No, Robert, thanks. I prefer to stay in. I feel better here, particularly if the phone rings and it's either Jack or Monique. How about a fresh chicken salad and a glass of pinot noir?"

"Well, you know they can reach you on your cell, Alex. But, that being said, chicken salad and wine sounds great. Are you sure I'm not imposing? We could order out," Robert ventured.

"No, no. It will get my mind off things to be busy in the kitchen. I appreciate the company. I hate to be anxious alone. Come on back to the kitchen."

Robert and Alex retreated to Alex's newly remodeled gourmet kitchen. Robert looked around, once again pleased at how beautifully Alex had renovated her New Orleans home. He reminded himself that he had never really appreciated her talent and abilities when they were married. He guessed he would be sorry for that for the rest of his natural life. He eyed the oak kitchen furniture appreciably and said, "I still love this furniture."

Alex smiled at him. "Yes, it's beautiful. One of our best purchases..." They both remembered the beautiful fall afternoon when they had purchased the lovely antique oak furniture during a sojourn to the Virginia countryside. They had absolutely no money at that point in time. Robert had been a resident at the University of Virginia, and she was a staff nurse in the ICU at the University hospital. They had fallen in love with the honey-colored oak furniture and had purchased it on impulse. Robert had worked three straight weekends in the emergency department at Martha Jefferson Hospital, and Alex had worked many overtime shifts to pay for that extravagance. It'd been worth it. They'd dined on it during their marriage and spent many evenings sitting around it, talking with good friends. Additionally, the couple used the table as a desk and spent many evenings studying together when they were students. The table, chairs, and sideboard were so large they had practically taken up the entire student housing apartment.

Alex was again remembering their first meal together at the table, how it was followed by a night of splendid and unparalleled passion in their marriage — the night she became pregnant with the child she later lost. That seemed to start the downward spiral of what she thought was a perfect

marriage. She guessed Robert was remembering the same evening. Suddenly, they were interrupted by the shrill ringing of her telephone.

Alex quickly picked up the receiver. It was Don Montgomery. She winced at the sound of his whiny voice.

"Destephano, have you gotten Monique Desmonde straightened out? This shit is bothering me. We can't have her blabbing to the press. Not good for us. Not good at all." Montgomery was whimpering into the phone.

Alex gritted her teeth. "No, Don, I haven't talked with Monique. I've been calling her since right after our meeting. I don't know where she is."

"Shit, she's probably at home writing her press release. Fix this, Alex. I mean it! Your butt's on the line!"

Alex could hear the irrational anger beginning to surface in the CEO's voice. "I'll do my best, Don. Did you look at Whitset's contract?" Alex skillfully returned the ball to Montgomery's court.

"No. I had a cocktail party to go to. I'll have it on your desk in the morning." Don was whining again.

"Good. Make sure you do. Whitset's the major player here. Make sure you can control him. I'm not your problem and neither is Monique." Alex knew her voice was condescending, but she didn't care.

"Dammit, Alex! Desmonde is the problem, not Whitset!"

"Don, you and I both know that there are a dozen Whitset's for every Monique Desmonde. You need to stand tall on this. If you lose Dr. Desmonde, you will lose psychiatry at CCMC."

"I don't give a damn about psychiatry! Let the wackos go! I just don't want any bad press!"

"You'll destroy our reputation as a world-class hospital. You must have a psychiatric service to keep the world-class designation. You're going to get bad press if you don't get Whitset in line. After all, you are the CEO." Alex knew she was venturing on the fringe, but she didn't care. Don had already tried to fire her once this year — back in February. Her appointment by the hospital board of trustees made it impossible for Don to fire her without their approval. And, so far, they really liked her.

"All right, all right. Just fix Monique." He was backing down and his voice was contrite.

Alex rode her advantage home. "Look, Don. Think about it. Your win-win position is to keep Dr. Desmonde and psychiatry — even if Whitset and his management company have to go. Think about that."

"Okay, okay. Just keep Desmonde away from the press, promise?" Don's voice was placating now, sugarcoated.

Alex was disgusted. "I won't have to keep Monique from the press if you give her what she needs to provide safe, reasonable, standard care. Get the picture, Don?" Alex's voice was defiant.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll do what I can. You do your part." He clicked off the phone without saying goodbye.

"Bye to you too, you idiot!" Alex slammed down the phone. "I hate that Motherfucker," she grumbled to Robert.

Robert laughed. "Whoa! That's rough talk for you, Alex. Can I assume your boss hung up on you?"

"You bet he did. Slimeball!" Alex was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Robert, I'm going to tell you the truth. I don't know how much longer I can stand working with him. He's an absolute idiot, a model of incompetence. He's the Peter Principle personified. I have a very interesting opportunity on my desk at the hospital. A large, managed care group is looking for a corporate attorney. Of

course, I would have to leave New Orleans..." Alex demurred a bit. "I'll never understand why the board keeps him here."

Robert gave her a matter-of-fact look and said, "Sure you do, Alex. For all his faults, we all know why they keep Don around. Montgomery is a financial wizard. Crescent City is one of the few hospitals in New Orleans that is financially solvent. No one cares that he's rude, inappropriate, and non-appreciative of nurses, physicians, and other providers. No one cares that he's insensitive to needs of patients, staff, and families. They only care about money. *We* are making money and that is ultimately what it's all about — the bottom line, like it or not. CCMC has held together when other hospitals have gone out of business or have been bought up by conglomerates. Don will skillfully maneuver CCMC through health care reform. He understands the health care portability act better than the politicians that wrote it. That, my dear, is very simply Mr. Montgomery's strength."

Alex sighed. "Yeah, I know, Robert. But Don truthfully doesn't give a rip about the care that patients receive. He doesn't even know about clinical care. It seems unlikely that his success will continue."

Robert shrugged his shoulders. "Rest assured, it will continue as long as he keeps giving the physicians the technology they crave and the raises they deserve. I hate to give the man any accolades, but he's doing a fairly good job, all things considered. Even the nursing salaries are competitive, I hear."

"Yeah, but the quality of care is dropping and the working conditions suck. The nurses have absolutely no support. Bette Farve treats them like street workers, not like professionals. Money is important to nurses, but so is professionalism, research, and continuing education — important aspects of a nurse's role that Farve refuses to recognize. Motivation and morale are almost zilch at CCMC among nursing staff." Alex shook her head. "It's actually very sad because CCMC has some of the best nurses I've ever seen."

"Yes, a fact which the physician group is profoundly concerned about. None of them like Farve." Robert paused for a moment and winked at her. "Don't say anything to anyone, but I think Farve may take a fall in a few months."

"Robert," Alex's voice was gleeful, "that's the best news I've heard." She ran over and hugged him.

"Shish. Don't say anything. It is definitely in the making. I've just come from a medical staff meeting and Ms. Farve's leadership, or lack of it, was the topic of discussion. I'm sure it will happen. Just be patient. Besides, I don't want you anywhere other than New Orleans!"

Alex smiled to herself. She was enjoying the feel of being in his arms again. When she broke off the embrace, Alex literally danced around the kitchen, making a gourmet salad of lettuce, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, and fresh chicken breast. She even pulled out her food processor and made Robert's favorite salad dressing, a creamy vinaigrette, for old time's sake.

Robert knew what she was doing and was secretly pleased. Once again, he could kick his own ass for divorcing her.

"Robert, let's set the table in the dining room! It's been a long, lousy day. It deserves a good ending. No shoptalk at all. The china is in the linen press. I have a bottle of barrel-fermented Virginia chardonnay that should go well with the salad. It's great! Estate bottled at Windy River Winery, a new winery close to my grandparents' home in Hanover County. Grand shipped me four bottles last week. She's impressed with the quality — what do you say?"

"Why in heaven's name would I argue with such a beautiful lady? I'm on my way to set the table." Robert was feeling happy and lighthearted as he moved into Alex's formal dining room. He switched



on the brilliant crystal chandelier. It glowed magnificently against the pale blue moiré of the wallpaper. He adjusted the dimmer switch to a low light level until Alex's antique silver service glistened in the light. The silver candlesticks and fresh flowers were beautifully set against the antique mahogany and cherry of the dining room furniture. Robert sighed in appreciation as he looked around the room. The Sheraton banquet table gleamed in the light of the chandelier. Again, he was awed by Alex's taste. He wondered briefly if Mitch Landry had been a part of the house's renovation. A flicker of jealousy flowed through him. Then he realized that Mitch couldn't have been. He remembered they had started seeing each other three months after Alex had moved into the renovated townhouse. The home was obviously Alex's creation alone. For some reason, that pleased him.

He continued to think about the relationship between Mitch and Alex, as he removed the heavy silver from the drawer of the sideboard. He'd known Mitch for years and had been a little perturbed when he had learned that Mitch and Alex were dating. Of course, Mitch had been charming. He was sincerely sorry at the way things had ended. But, to be honest, it did allow him an opportunity to win Alex back. Oh, and how Robert wanted her again. He had been such a fool — young and foolish, a real macho idiot. He could admit that to himself now. Monique had helped him see that.

He had wanted Alex to be a typical haus frau, a stay at home wife and mother. That was what his mother had been. Of course, his mother had always done civic and charity work. She was a proverbial do-gooder. Back then, that was what he thought all men wanted, a wife that stayed at home and cared for the home and children. He never thought a man wanted a professional wife, one who shared his world. Looking back, he guessed it was a culture thing. He'd just recently realized that marriage in the world he lived in was very different than the world his parents shared.

Thank goodness for Monique Desmonde! Now, due to her influence, he saw things differently. He wanted Alex just as she was. Since he had gotten older, Robert had learned that his mother had given up her professional career for his father. She had been a well-known classical violinist. Of course, it hadn't been all bad. She was the first lady of Louisiana when his dad was governor, and now she was a ranking senator's wife. Still, Robert realized, his mother had made considerable sacrifices throughout the years, missed opportunities she could never regain.

As Robert opened the antique linen press, he felt a little maudlin. The china was the same. Alex was still using their wedding china. It was English Aynsley, the pattern, Capistrano. He hadn't liked the china when they were married. He had considered it too busy, garish in fact. Now he thought the colors were beautiful and the birds magnificent. What a purist he had been in those days! He'd wanted china that was white, with a platinum ring around the edge. He had possessed no imagination at all back then, only a preconceived notion of what a wife, a woman, should be.

Alex had fought him on the china decision, telling him continually that if the Queen of England dined on Aynsley, so could they. He had acquiesced but had never liked the china with its colorful birds and flowers. He touched the plates fondly now, as if trying to atone for his former dislike. It was so very Alex, beautifully designed, etched, and colored. He had just finished setting the table when Alex appeared in the doorway with the salad in a large cut glass bowl and a silver basket full of French bread.

"Robert, you did great! When did you learn to set the table? Good job... I'm impressed." Alex really was pleased. Before and during their marriage, Robert would never have helped her in the kitchen, much less have set the table. She looked around. The silver, china, wine, and water goblets were perfectly placed on the table. She continued, "If you light the candles, I'll get the wine. It's chilling in the silver ice bucket in the kitchen."

Alex was thinking about how much Robert had changed, as she returned to the kitchen. He was a wonderful man. Kind, good, even tempered. A healer. Would she ever recover from the distrust and feelings of abandonment he had left her with? Maybe, just maybe, she could. She felt her heartbeat pick up. Maybe they could get back together. She knew Robert was interested. She believed Robert loved her and always had — but he did have a lot of baggage. He had been an excellent surgeon prior to his injury earlier in the year, and while he seemed to be coping well with his limitations, Alex knew he was prone to depression. Of course, what man wouldn't be? He had been at the precipice of national fame prior to his injury and had pioneered several surgical techniques that were now written in the medical books. After all, it was quite possible that a brilliant surgical career had ended in a gun battle at the Endymion extravaganza during Mardi Gras.

Alex also remembered that Robert was a wonderful lover. She briefly allowed herself to think back to their married years and, as her heart quickened, she felt her legs weaken. Even when they weren't getting along, they had always had a consuming passion for each other. They had been great lovers. She felt a little nervous about the dinner. What was going to happen? What would she do if one thing led to another? Well, she made up her mind. She would just savor the day. Wasn't that the avant-garde thing to do? Besides, it'd been so long. There had only been one other lover in her life since Robert, a physician in Texas. She and Mitch had never been intimate sexually. Why, it'd been over two years. No wonder! Alex's heart began to flutter.

Robert reappeared in the kitchen. She heard the sounds of Vladimir Horowitz, her favorite pianist and Robert's favorite as well. He had remembered and played the CD for her. She was beginning to feel wonderful. She felt the tension drop from her body like a discarded garment.

Robert smiled at her — a deep, caring, and sensual smile. She looked into his eyes. She knew the look, the sensitive eyes that smoldered and bespoke of countless pleasures to come. He said in his deep voice, "May I escort the lovely lady into dinner?" He was so gallant, so cultured, so... French. So sexy. She loved this.

Alex laughed a little nervously and accepted his arm. "Of course... I'd be honored," she said, remembering her Virginia upbringing.

He seated her to his right, and he sat at the head of the table. He deftly poured the wine and served her salad.

For a moment, Alex had a flashback. This evening was so typical of the evenings she and Mitch had spent at her house. Only Mitch had been seated at her table. No other man had ever graced her dining room. She pushed the thought from her mind, not wanting to think about Mitch tonight. He wasn't an option any longer.

She had a fleeting thought of what her grandmother, Kathryn Rosseau Lee, would do in a similar situation. It was easy. Grand would tell her to go for it. Grand was such a pragmatist, a wise lady, and so fair with people, their flaws, and relationships. Besides, hadn't Grand encouraged her to try and rekindle her love for Robert? Hadn't she urged her to consider reconciliation when they'd been in Virginia in the spring? Grand had suggested this, and Alex had brushed it off, way too raw from the death of Mitch.

Alex couldn't be hard on her grandmother, her mentor. Grand had suggested to her in her exacting, precise, and practical way, "Alex, my dear, real love comes only once. Robert was your first love, just as Adam was mine. People fall in and out of love with each other many times throughout a marriage. My generation, we put up with each other, but you younger folks run for divorce — an easy out, which prevents people from trying to work things out—"

Alex had interrupted her grandmother, angry and defensive at the conversation. She'd accused her grandmother of blaming her for ending her marriage. Boy, she had some raw nerves back then.

Kathryn had denied this, saying only that she was sure Robert still loved and wanted her. Because the conversation had been painful for Alex and the loss of Mitch so recent, Alex had abruptly ended the conversation. Her grandmother had assured her that she understood and asked only that Alex keep an open mind with regard to Robert's intentions. She asked that Alex be honest with herself. Grand also mentioned she knew Alex had secrets locked in her heart, as Grand did herself. Alex had found this remark particularly perplexing. One day when she wasn't so emotional, she would ask Grand about her secrets.

Robert interrupted her thoughts. "Alex, what are you thinking?" His dark eyes bored into hers.

"I was just thinking about Grand. Something she said to me when we were home. It's nothing really. How's your salad, Robert?"

"It's wonderful! Just as you are, Alex. I'm going to savor this evening — it's perfect!"

Robert reached for Alex's hand and rubbed it gently, tracing the veins in her hands softly. Alex again remembered the passion of their marriage. She decided to let herself be romanced and lured. It felt so good.

Robert continued, "You know, Alex. You're so fortunate to have had your grandparents. They are fine people. The very best actually. I admire them both."

She laughed. "Even Granddad? You always said you never had a handle on how Adam felt about you. Has that changed?"

Robert contemplated her remarks. "No, I guess not. But, I still admire Adam Patrick Lee. He's one of the most noble and ethical men I have ever met." He looked a little sheepish. "I don't think Adam Lee thinks any man is good enough for his Alex."

Alex smiled at him.

"And you know what," Robert continued. "He may be right."

Alex smiled at Robert. Their eyes locked. He continued to stroke her hand. She looked at him, conscious that she was going to have to make a decision very soon — a decision that could possibly affect their relationship for a long time, maybe even forever.

Alex said to Robert gently, "Robert, I don't have any dessert. Sorry." Alex pretended to ponder this impropriety.

He finally said, "Well, I guess I'll accept a dance instead. Isn't that Richard Clayderman?"

Alex nodded. Clayderman, a popular pianist, was playing a romantic medley of songs. They moved into the living room to dance. Alex was pleased that Robert had cut off the lamps and had lit the electric wall sconces. The room was romantic, the sconces casting a warm, mellow glow over the pastel furniture.

Robert and Alex began dancing, each caught up in their own thoughts about the rest of the evening. It was a wonderful feeling for Alex. She felt like a teenager. It seemed so right. After all, Robert had been her husband. That made it feel especially right. Besides, it felt perfect in his arms. It was so familiar.

Robert was thinking the same thing. He felt sure he was interpreting Alex correctly. He wanted her to want the same things as he did. He wasn't looking for a one-night stand. He was looking for the opportunity to reclaim his wife. He said to her softly, "Alex, I love you. I've always loved you. I want to be with you, but only if you really want me."

She moved her head from his shoulder and looked at him directly. His eyes were smoldering with passion and love. She knew the delights they held.

She said simply, "I want you, too, Robert. I can't promise anything forever, but I want you."

He pulled her closer and kissed her. A long, lingering, passionate kiss.

Alex felt her heart beat faster and her legs and arms become weak with anticipation. She was aware of the degree of Robert's passion, as he held her in his arms. She took his hand and led him into her bedroom. "Give me a moment, Robert, so I can brush my teeth."

He laughed at her, remembering that this was Alex's prelude to love. He said, "I'll do the same."

Alex went into her bathroom, stripped off her clothes, and changed into a satin gown. She reemerged and found Robert waiting for her in her bed. No, it was *their* antique walnut bed with the deeply carved rosewood ten-foot headboard.

For a moment, Alex was infinitely glad she had Helene, her cleaning lady, continue to put satin sheets on her bed. Over the past couple of years, she'd laughed at herself for using them, but now, it was worth it.

She smiled shyly at Robert, and he pulled her into bed. She fell into his arms. Robert was naked and she felt his muscled, lean body press against her as they embraced. She breathed a sigh of contentment as he kissed her. It was beautiful. It was poignantly familiar, it seemed so right. It was right, Alex convinced herself. She loved the way he smelled, so fresh and masculine. She was giving herself up to a night of ecstasy, when the phone rang. Robert gave a little, sad moan. Alex giggled and picked it up. It was Monique. Alex felt guilty. She had forgotten all about Monique and Jack.

"Alex, can you meet me? I have got to talk to you! I can't find Jack!" Monique's voice was strangely hollow and frightened.

Alex looked at her alarm clock. It was almost 11:00 p.m. She said, "Of course, Monique. Are you okay? You sound frightened. Where are you?"

"I am frightened, and I'm at home. Would you like to come here?" Monique picked up on Alex's hesitation. "I could come there, but I'm not sure that someone..."

"No, you stay there. I'll come over. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Thanks, Alex. I appreciate it." Monique sounded relieved.

Alex looked at Robert, who smiled at her sheepishly. "Could I have a rain check," she asked demurely.

He laughed. "You bet! You can have any kind of check you want. Monique okay?"

"I think so. She said she was frightened and wanted to talk." Alex became apologetic. "If it was anything or anyone else, I would've said no, but..."

"Alex. It's okay. Believe me, I understand. Want me to go?"

"No. But if I need you, I'll call. Deal?"

"You bet. I'll drop you off."

Robert and Alex looked at each other shyly. Robert finally said, "I won't look, if you won't look."

"Okay... another deal. Shut your eyes!"

"Okay." Robert pretended to shut his eyes as his beautiful former wife bounded naked from the bed, clutching only a sheet. She had the elegance of a gazelle. She turned around and smiled at him as she ran into the master bath.

*God, she's beautiful,* he thought to himself. *She looks like a goddess with her alabaster skin and perfect body. She hasn't changed at all. In fact, she looks better now than she did ten years ago.* He was right. Alex's long legs and buttocks were perfectly formed. Her tiny waist was the same. If anything, she had improved. He sighed as he retreated into the guest bath to dress. *Well,* he thought to himself, *it was almost a perfect night.* It was certainly more perfect than he had ever dreamed of on

his way over. Robert smiled to himself. *I love her*, he thought. *I really love her. Please God, please make her want me back*, he prayed to himself.



Lester Whitset was having a rough evening. He was furious about Dr. Desmonde breaking into his office. He also knew that Anthony Gavette had seen him come out of Rose's room. That had pissed him off, especially when Anthony started screaming rape while hurling obscenities and threats at him. Lester decided he really didn't give a damn about Anthony. Anthony was the least of his problems.

The voices had been screaming at him since he left the hospital and went home. He had tried to stop them but couldn't. His head was hurting so badly, Whitset decided on a chemical fix, something he rarely did. Sometimes it helped calm the voices down and send them away. The booze and pills made him feel mellow and he deserved it. It'd been a bad day. Then, when he was calm and could think better, he could decide what to do about that imposter shrink bitch.

Lester went to his bar and poured himself a tumbler full of scotch whiskey. After gulping the golden liquid, he went into his tiny bathroom to look for his Xanax. Damn, the bottle was empty. He'd have to steal some tomorrow off the medication cart. He refilled his tumbler again and drank it all.

Finally, the whiskey was helping. The voices were fading. He thought again about Rose. He knew she would be loyal to him. She had shared in his little game. He continued to think about her as he drank heavily. He suspected Rose had told Anthony about the little game they'd been playing. Whitset considered Anthony his closest equal on the unit. He also knew that Anthony coveted the little waiflike patient.

Anthony had told Lester one night, over a week ago, that he had wanted Rose for his own. Whitset had laughed at Anthony, reminding him that he was, after all, only a patient and not the administrator, like Les, who had the pick of the female patient litter. Anthony had gotten mad, but Lester calmed him down, assuring him that he liked his women tall and lush, like Angie Richelieu — not like the skinny little waif, Rose. Eventually, Anthony had cooled off, feeling confident that Lester was telling the truth.

Whitset had put on a real show for Anthony and had spent most of the evening watching the beautiful nurse as she worked on the unit. Anthony had watched his every move. Whitset had even followed Angie into the glassed medication room, making obscene gestures behind her back in an effort to prove his point to Anthony and the other patients watching from the day room. Anthony had seemed pretty convinced. Whitset had thought what a dumbass Gavette was. Just a stupid, ignoramus crazy.

Whitset smiled as he remembered how he foiled Anthony. He'd considered Anthony his intellectual equal, but now it was crystal clear that he was the superior being. The two men had a lot in common, but Whitset was the leader. After all, he was the administrator and Anthony was a lowly patient without any power. Lester had all the power, except some that the shrink bitch thought she had. He mustn't think about that, he told himself. Tut, tut, for Anthony Gavette. He smiled as he relived the evening. As soon as Anthony had been medicated and hauled off to bed by the psych tech, Whitset had reentered Rose's room.

As the evening wore on and Whitset continued to drink, he daydreamed about the night with Rose. It had been good, so good. Rose was exactly what he had needed. The two had played like children, naughty children of course, for over two hours. Lester had been able to be himself with her. He was so happy when he had learned that Rose likes the simple little games of house that he had made up. He became more excited when he learned that Rose hadn't minded when the big burglar came in,

killed her husband, and then raped her in the special way that only Lester knew how to do. He had ignored Rose when she had cried for help. He knew she loved it.

Whitset shook himself when he realized he had drooled all down the front of his shirt. He got up to get a towel and shuddered when he thought of Angie Richelieu. She was a big, gross, woman pig. He had hated her. Still did. She was trouble. She wasn't obedient. She never had been — like Rose. He felt grossed out at the thought of Angie. He knew he'd have to take care of her if she woke up. *It kind of made him happy... it would be a pleasant "chore"*, he thought to himself.

Whitset began to feel agitated again and poured himself another glass of whiskey, drinking it quickly. It was good. Booze really did help him. He felt better. He was calm. Whitset looked down at his pants. He had a huge hard-on. He thought about Rose again and smiled to himself as he checked his watch. It was a little past nine. He knew that pretty soon it would be lights out at the Pavilion. He had just enough time to finish his drink and go to the Pavilion to sample a few more of Rose's favors. Maybe he'd get off this time! And, afterward, maybe he'd go into Anthony's room and lord it over him. Tell him about the little game he and Rose played, about how she preferred him to the big, powerful Anthony. Lester smiled and clapped his hands in anticipation of his plans for the evening. He felt like such a naughty boy.

His phone rang. It shrilled endlessly in the still apartment. At first, Whitset was disoriented. He had only gotten one or two phone calls in the six months he had lived in New Orleans. They had been from long distance telephone services trying to sell him cheaper long-distance rates. He picked it up. It was Don Montgomery.

"Whitset, is that you?" Montgomery, demanded. "Say something to me, dammit!"

Whitset recovered swiftly. "Don, what's up? Where are you?"

"I'm in my car on the way home. Have you decided to hire the staff we talked about?" Don's voice was laced with static. The cell reception was terrible.

Whitset was annoyed. He hated cell phones. He said clearly, "No, I'm not hiring anyone. I told you my decision today. We don't need all that staff. It costs too much and it's stupid."

"Whitset," Don's voice was placating, "we have got to do something, or else Desmonde will go to the press. You heard her today. Just hire them temporarily. We can get rid of them when all this quiets down. Nobody will listen to her story in two weeks or a month. I think we should give her what she wants — at least for now." Don's voice ended in a whine.

Whitset, hardly sober, reviewed his options. "Don't worry, Don. I'll take care of Desmonde. I'll talk to her again."

"She's not going to back down. I know the woman. You have got to give her what she wants now. Do it, Whitset, it's worth it. I promise it will be a temporary fix."

Lester felt himself losing control. The voices were back, telling him to get the shrink bitch. He could barely talk coherently. "I said I would take care of it, Don. Don't worry. See you tomorrow." Whitset hung up the phone.

"Whitset, you sound funny. You sure you're okay?" Don repeated his question again before he realized the administrator had hung up. The CEO said out loud in his car, "You had better take care of it, you damned asshole! If you don't, I'm canceling your contract, and I'll make sure you never get another job anywhere." Don floored his gold Porsche and drove recklessly down Canal Street toward his house.

Whitset sat on the sofa. The voices had completely taken over his head. In his mind, he again saw Dr. Desmonde turn to plastic in front of him. He was going to have to do what the voices told him to do. The imposter shrink had to be stopped. After all, wasn't that his mission? He was supposed to get



rid of all the imposters. They told him so. Whitset grabbed his tie and left his French Quarter apartment.

He wandered aimlessly for about an hour through the sultry New Orleans heat into the Vieux Carre, trying to decide what to do. He sat on a bench, holding his head, trying to argue with the voices. Nobody looked at him. After all, he was in the French Quarter of New Orleans with all kinds of people from all walks of life. He fit right into the crowd. He finally acquiesced to the voices and entered a phone booth to look for Monique's address. Phone booths were a bit of an anachronism in most cities, but New Orleans still had them. Phone booths were still around for the throngs of people who could not afford cell phones. He found no listing for Monique Desmonde.

He was furious. Why didn't the shrink bitch have an address? Maybe imposters didn't really live in houses. They seem to appear only now and then. Perhaps they were already dead. Whitset batted this idea around in his head for a few minutes. It certainly seemed plausible to him. Finally, an idea dawned in his drunken mind.

Whitset reached for his cell phone and called CCMC information. He identified himself, and the hospital operator bought his story and gave him Monique's phone number and address. He was in luck. She lived on Royal Street in the Quarter, only a few blocks away. He dialed the number and got a machine or voicemail. He was livid. He hated answering machines and voicemail. His calls were too important to be picked up by a piece of equipment. Machines represented more of the technology he hated. In frustration, he slammed his phone down.

The voices were loud again, screaming at him. Whitset entered a bar and ordered a double whiskey, which he downed in rapid time. He had a second drink. It was now almost 10:30 p.m. He walked over to the wall phone in the bar and dialed the psychiatrist's phone number. She answered on the first ring. He could see her cold, plastic face talking to him. Her lips were just as red as his teacher's had been, taut, thin, and inflexible. He would change that. Soon. She said hello three times before he hung up. He decided to have another drink or two for the road and the work ahead.



Monique was unnerved by the hang-up phone call. She pressed redial, but no one spoke or answered her repeated “hello”. There was just a dead, ominous silence. Whitset listened on the other end of the phone, relishing the increasing panic in the shrink bitch's voice.

Monique tried to convince herself that she was being paranoid. It could've been anybody — even a wrong number. In desperation, she dialed Jack's home phone and cell again. No answer. Then she paged his beeper, entering her number with the 911. She waited fifteen minutes for a return call, but her phone didn't ring.

*Jack, Jack, where are you,* she said to herself. *I'm frightened half to death. I have to find you. I have the answers you need.* Monique, her hands shaking, looked up the non-emergency phone number of the NOPD in the New Orleans phone directory. Finally, after an endless amount of time, she was connected with the watch officer. He chuckled when she asked for Commander François.

The watch officer said, "The commander sure is popular tonight, Dr. Desmonde, and you're the second person looking for him. He's out of New Orleans. He's investigating a crime over in Alabama. He's been gone and unreachable all afternoon."

Monique was panicked. "Has he called in?"

"Nope, not since six o'clock this evening. Said he would be unavailable until morning."

"Can you reach him? It's really urgent." Monique was working hard to keep the hysteria out of her voice.

"No, ma'am. If the commander could be reached, he would've left a number. If you need help, I'll send a blue and white over," the watch officer offered, trying hard to be helpful. He felt sorry for the poor lady. He knew something was very wrong.

"No, no. I'm all right. I'll call a friend," Monique managed to say, as she was fighting for control.

"Listen, Dr. Desmonde, if you're in any danger, just tell me. I'll send a car over. The commander said that if you called and needed anything, I was to give you everything you needed, plus more."

Monique smiled at the watch officer's remarks and said, "What I need is Jack François. I'll call a friend to come over. Thanks. If the commander does call, please tell him to call me stat."

"Yes, ma'am. I will. Take care now. Good night."

Monique laughed a little hysterically. "Yes, I will. Thank you."

After Monique hung up the phone, the watch officer radioed the mobile unit closest to Monique's house and asked them to drive by periodically. They assured him they would. It was a good move on the part of the watch officer, a very good move. Besides, he didn't want to piss off the commander. He'd done that once before and was, to this day, stinging from the rebuke. No one ever wanted to mess with Commander Jack François — not because he was a commander, but because he was Jack François.

Monique decided to call Alex and was relieved that she was coming over. Alex had a good analytical mind and would help her sort out what she needed to do. Finally, after an endless period of time, she heard a knock at her door. Alex was standing on her porch. Monique noticed the silver Mercedes with the lights on out front.

"Alex, thank goodness. I'm so glad to see you. Who's in the car?"

"It's Robert. He dropped me off. He was over for dinner and we—"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Monique interrupted her. She looked at her friend. Alex looked lovely. Her eyes were as blue as the denim work shirt and jeans she had hastily donned for her late-night visit.

Her beautiful face was flushed, and her eyes were shining. Monique didn't think she had ever seen Alex look so ravishing. She continued, "I interrupted something, didn't I?" Her voice was apologetic.

"Monique, it's okay. I'll tell you about it later. What's up? You look scared, frightened to death. I've been trying to find you all evening. Where were you?"

"I was so angry after the executive committee meeting, that I decided to go to City Park and walk off my frustrations. Then, I went over to the Art Museum to see the Monet exhibit." Monique paused for a moment, capturing in her mind again the beauty and elegance of the French artist's late works at Giverny. "It was magnificent... and sad. Alex, you really must go."

"I will, I will. Then what happened?" Alex asked impatiently.

"I went to the Pavilion. It's a good thing I did. One of my patients had been raped, Rose, remember her?"

Alex's heart sank. Another attack and rape. When would it end? "Of course I know Rose. Is she okay? Who raped her?"

"Physically she's okay. She won't tell who did it. One of the psych techs found her lying in her bed whimpering. She wasn't in the day room for supper. That's when they went to search for her and found her sobbing. I tried to get her to tell me who did it, but she just looked at me and cried."

"Was it Jim or Anthony?"

"No, impossible. Both of them were locked in seclusion. I don't know who it was. Anyway, we sent her to the emergency department. She hadn't returned to the unit when I left..." Monique's voice trailed off.

Alex pondered her comments. "I can't imagine who did it. With Jim and Anthony locked up, our saga has a new twist. I guess we'll know later." Alex looked at her friend. She had become very quiet. She was sitting on the sofa, twisting her hands.

"Monique, what else happened? What else do you know? Tell me, for goodness sake!"

"This sounds crazy, Alex. Bear with me, but it's true. Whitset is not Whitset."

"Huh, what! What the hell are you talking about? For heaven's sake, Monique, spit it out. Make sense." Alex's voice was snappish. After all, her friend had just interrupted the first potential sex she'd had in years.

"Stop interrupting me, Alex. I'm doing my best." Monique paused for a moment, as if getting her facts straight. "This afternoon, when I searched Whitset's office, I noticed the diplomas on the wall were dated 1963 and 1965. Whitset doesn't look old enough to have graduated that long ago. So, I went to my office and looked in the personnel file at his resume. He lists his date of birth as being 1951. It's inconceivable that he could have graduated with a master's degree in 1965. Whitset is an imposter. I don't know who in the hell he is, but I'm convinced that he's parading around as a psychiatric administrator without the education."

Alex was quiet, taking all of this in. Finally, she said, "Who do you think he is, Monique?"

Monique shook her head. "I don't have a clue. I think he's probably a former psych patient who somehow got hold of the real Whitset's degrees and has been pretending to be him for years! Unbelievable, isn't it?"

Alex sighed deeply. "Yes, it is, but it does explain his outbursts this morning. He's definitely a crazy."

Monique glared at her. "Come on, Alex, cut me some slack. You know I hate that term. It's unfair to label people like that."

Alex waved Monique's objections away. "Okay, sorry. Anyway, we have an unbalanced, possibly very mentally ill man running our psychiatric service. Now, that's a real legal problem! Monique, did

you find anything else in his office that could lead us to figure out who he really is?"

"Alex, I'm freezing to death. Do you mind if I open the French doors for a few minutes? Maybe we could go outside for a few minutes so I can warm up." Monique's teeth were chattering, more from fear than the air-conditioning.

"That'll warm you up. It's still in the high eighties out there. Hot and sultry. Nope, I don't mind. Let's do it."

Monique unlocked the deadbolt on her French door and walked out on the balcony.

Alex followed her. It did feel a little better. Alex was cold too.

"Do you mind if we sit out here for a few minutes? I promise I won't keep you out here long. As soon as we warm up, we'll go back in." Monique rubbed her arms, as if to rub away the uncertainty and chill bumps.

Alex smiled. "Of course not. These chairs look pretty comfortable." Alex seated herself. "Monique, this is really a lovely balcony." She admired the perfectly manicured flowering plants in hanging baskets. "You're quite a gardener."

"As are you. Yes, I love working out here. It's a great stress reliever. Where were we?"

Alex thought back for a second. "I had just asked if you had found anything else in Whitset's — or whoever he is — office?"

"No. Place was obsessively neat and clean. It was very dark in there. Drapes were completely drawn. There was nothing else significant."

Alex pressed for more. "Tell me everything you remember about the office, Monique. Was there any correspondence on his desk, books, anything like that?"

Monique thought hard. "He had some current psychiatric journals and textbooks lying around. The most significant things were his degrees. Of course, I could've missed something. Someone knocked on the door when I was in there. I thought I was going to have a heart attack! Scared me to death! My heart was racing!"

"What did you do?" Alex could imagine Monique's fright and it bothered her immensely that someone knew she was in there. "Who do you think it was?"

"It could've been the cleaning staff. Anyway, I crouched under his desk for a few minutes."

"Did you go through his desk drawers?"

Monique raised her eyebrows at Alex and laughed, "Of course, I did. I was playing super snoop. It was the usual stuff. Oh..." Monique's voice trailed off again.

Perceiving that Monique had remembered something, Alex urged her. "What, Monique, what else did you see?"

"It's probably nothing. His bottom right drawer was locked. There was a fine gold chain hanging out of it. It looked like a woman's gold chain. I saw it when I was searching through his office." Monique's voice was noncommittal as she told the story to Alex.

Alex's head had started thundering. She felt the hairs on her neck stand up. Her entire body went weak all over and she felt dizzy. She said to Monique in a strained voice, "Monique, are you warm enough to go in? I'm feeling really warm!"

The psychiatrist couldn't see Alex's face in the dark, but she distinguished the change in her voice. She knew something was wrong. She said, "Sure, I've warmed up. Let's go in and have some ice coffee."

Neither woman saw the crouched body of Lester Whitset hidden behind the latticework and a massive copper planter at the end of the balcony. He'd heard every word the women had said, and he

was enraged. The voices were screaming in his head. Kill... Kill... Kill. Whitset was drenched with sweat. *Would the voices ever stop?*



Alex could barely breathe as she entered Monique's living room. She was weak and trembling all over. Monique looked at her strangely. "What is it, Alex? What is it?"

For once, Alex was too frightened to speak. She was speechless.

Monique instructed her in an authoritarian tone of voice. "Alex, take some deep breaths and calm down. You've got time. What you've got to say will keep until you get control of yourself." Monique sounded stronger than she felt. She was terrified at the look in Alex's eyes. After a minute or so, Alex was able to speak.

"It's Whitset. It's Whitset," she gasped, stopping to take a breath. "Monique, Whitset's the one that raped and beat Angie!" Alex gasped out the words, her heart racing and pounding in her chest.

Monique stayed calm. She faced Alex, standing by the French doors. "Whitset? How do you know, Alex? What makes you so sure?" Monique noted the fast pounding and beating of her own heart.

"Because... because... the chain, the gold chain you saw, goes to her cross, her religious medal. Bridgett brought it to me today in the office. I took it to a jeweler this afternoon to have the chain replaced." Alex was so weak from her discovery; she wasn't sure she could stand.

Monique felt the force of the earth coming down on her shoulders. She could hardly speak. She was so frightened. She was about to ask Alex whether she thought Whitset was involved with Mrs. Smithson's murder, when, to her horror, her French door opened, and Lester Whitset entered her living room carrying a long metal pipe.

Alex turned and froze in place. Monique looked like a marble statue. She was transfixed. All color had drained from her face.

Whitset stared at Monique. It happened again. She was so white. Once again, right in front of his eyes, she had turned to plastic. So, he had been right. The voices were screaming at him to kill the shrink. Lester watched in horrified fascination as Monique's face assumed a hard, shiny appearance. Her eyes turned into emerald green plastic ovals. Lester could hardly stand what he was seeing.

He stared at the psychiatrist and said in a cold, measured voice, "I'm going to kill you, you shrink bitch imposter. They are telling me to!"

Monique spoke to him through her pale plastic lips. Lester was startled because she could speak. He had never heard an imposter talk and it confused him. Once they turned, they lost their voice, but, he recognized her voice. *Yes*, he said to himself, it's her, it's still the shrink bitch. Even though she's plastic, she is the same bad person.

Whitset made no response to Monique's question. He continued to stare at her, a slow smile spreading across his face. He looked very pleased with himself. Finally, he turned toward Alex and said to her in a slow and sexy voice, "Alex, I'm so glad you're here." He shook his head a little, as if to clear it. "As soon as I take care of her, we can leave. I wasn't sure you would meet me."

Whitset raped her body with his gaze and returned to her face, his eyes boring into hers. Alex ventured a look at him out of the side of her eyes. His intent was clear. Whitset meant to rape her. A large amount of spittle had again gathered at the side of his mouth and had begun to run down his chin.

Alex stood mutely trying to decide the best thing to do. Whitset moved closer to her, reached out and gingerly touched her. She flinched at his touch.

Whitset became angry. He gawked at her, then squinting as if to see her better. Was she one of them too? No, she didn't appear to be. Her face stayed the same. He reached out and touched her



cheek. It was warm and soft. She didn't move. Lester was satisfied. Alex was real. She wasn't an imposter like the bitch standing next to her.

Alex stood there, like a dead person, while Whitset began to run his hands over her body. He put his face next to hers and started to kiss her. She was overwhelmed by the smell of whiskey.

Suddenly, he pulled back in anger. He was furious. He screamed at her. "You whore! You slut! You've been with somebody else! Who is your lover? Who have you been with, whore?" Whitset was dancing around with rage, waving his lead pipe madly.

She tried to talk but couldn't. Only grunts came from her throat. She looked frantically at Monique.

Monique had been contemplating the best approach to use with Whitset. She decided to try a blunt one — one that would catch him off guard and give them an opportunity to defend themselves.

Monique addressed Whitset, her voice hard. "Whitset, what are you doing here? Don't you know the police are watching this place? They're probably looking for you by now."

Lester looked at Monique and laughed, the sound of a maniac — a loud, piercing, surreal laugh. "Shut up you bitch imposter! Just shut up!" He moved toward Monique and pushed her hard against the sofa. She fell backward on it. "I'll take care of you in a minute." He turned to Alex and said in a sad, soft voice, "How could you do this to me, Alex? How could you betray me? You know I want you. I love you. We've been special for a long time. How could you be with someone else?"

"Lester, I didn't." Alex finally found her voice and it was soft. "You look so tired. Why don't you just sit down for a few minutes, and I'll get you something cold to drink. Then, we'll talk."

Whitset smiled at Alex, the same slow, seductive smile that gave her chills. He said softly, "You're a bad girl, Alex. You're very naughty. Very, very, naughty. Lester's going to make you pay for being naughty."

Then Whitset began to sing to her, once again in that childlike voice that rhymed.

*"Alex is a bad, bad girl,  
Bad as all girls in the world,  
Lester's going to make her pay,  
Lester's going to have his way, way, way, way..."*

The sound of his voice and the emphasis on the word "way" froze Alex's blood. She stood paralyzed with fear as he approached her.

Whitset's stride was broken, disjointed, as he moved toward Alex with an evil and threatening look on his face. He hurled himself toward her, the lead pipe raised in fury. He swung the pipe at her head, but Alex ducked, barely missing contact with the lead. She felt the cool rush of wind whistle by her ear. The stark realization of what was happening propelled Alex into action. She moved behind the chair, ducking another swing of the pipe.

Monique came to life and attacked the administrator from behind. She jumped on his back, her arms around his throat as she shoved her knee up into his groin. With a loud yell, Whitset threw her off, and she fell to the floor, striking her head on the edge of a marble table.

Whitset laughed at her as he clutched his groin. "Look at you, you plastic bitch. I see your plastic head did not split. As soon as you wake up, I'll really fix you. I'll split that plastic head!" Then, he began to laugh again — the high pitched, rumbling laugh of a maniac. The sound was the most evil cacophony that Alex had ever heard. She bent to the floor to help her friend.

Just then, the phone rang. It rang three times as Alex, who was sitting on the floor by Monique, and Whitset each looked at it. Finally, Monique's voicemail clicked on and Alex heard Commander Françoise's voice.

He was desperate. "Monique, where are you? Answer the phone!" There was a pause, and then Jack's voice continued, "Stay inside and lock your door! I have information on Whitset. He is parading around as his brother. I think he's Weston Whitset, the brother of Lester Whitset. If it's him, and I'm sure it is, he was locked up in the hospital for the criminally insane in Alabama for years after killing two women and possibly more. I've been here in Alabama all night gathering information. I've called the precinct and they'll be checking on you." Jack's voice stopped again. Finally, in a desperate voice he said, "I love you, Monique. I'll be there soon. Please stay safe."

Whitset went into a rage after hearing the message. He took his lead pipe and beat the phone repeatedly with it. He ripped the phone plug out of the wall. A low sound caught his attention. He whirled around in his mania and saw that Alex and Monique were talking softly. Monique was attempting to sit up. He gave another furious howl and swung the lead pipe at Monique's head, striking her fiercely on the right side. Monique immediately slumped and lost consciousness.

Alex cringed at the sound of the pipe breaking Monique's skull. She knew Whitset's blow had been a deadly one. She watched helplessly as Whitset cut Monique's face with a knife he had in his belt.

Alex stood up slowly, seething with hate and rage at her attacker. Her voice was filled with fury and wrath. "You crazy bastard, you've killed her!" Alex grabbed a porcelain lamp and hurled it toward Whitset. It missed him, but landed on the wrought-iron balcony, breaking into a thousand pieces.

Whitset laughed again, the high pitch sound of a maniac, as he sprang toward Alex, knocking her to the floor. He began ripping off her clothes and hitting her in the face.

She fought against him furiously. It was a losing battle. Whitset had the superhuman power of the criminally insane.



Officer Josh Martin came on duty at eleven p.m. He'd learned and reported that Ms. Destephano and Dr. Desmonde had called the precinct looking for the commander. The watch officer had described Dr. Desmonde's voice as desperate. The commander wanted the doc's house watched and Josh agreed to cover it for the shift. Josh knew the commander had special feelings for the psychiatrist, but he didn't know what they were and, really, it wasn't his business.

He smiled to himself as he drove into the Quarter. He'd spent a pleasant evening with Elizabeth Tippett. They had talked about the events at CCMC, superficially of course, and he knew that Elizabeth thought something was wrong with Whitset. Josh had experienced similar feelings earlier in the day as he watched Whitset interact with patients. Anthony, the big guy, had told him on the sly that Whitset was one of them — “one of the gang” was specifically how the wacko had put it. Josh hadn't given it much thought since and wasn't quite sure he understood what Anthony meant.

Josh, like most policemen, hated wackos. He'd only had a little experience with them, but he knew some of them were really dangerous, especially if they did drugs and drank booze. *It just seemed to make them crazier*, he thought.

Josh drove down Royal Street. It was the second time he had cruised by Dr. Desmonde's house. The front light was still on, but the French doors leading to the balcony were open. He stopped the police car just as he heard something breaking on the balcony. He immediately radioed for help, took out his 9mm and raced toward the house, taking the steps two at a time. There was no answer at the door, so the young officer scaled the balcony and entered the living room.

He saw the prostrate, bleeding form of Monique Desmonde on the floor and saw Whitset on top of another woman. Josh aimed his gun at Whitset's head and said, "Freeze!"

Nothing happened. Apparently, Whitset didn't hear him. Josh went over and kicked the administrator in the back. It was then that he saw Alex Destephano, her clothes all in disarray. Josh was appalled at what Whitset had done to her — or may have done to her. The extent of the attack was unclear, so Josh could not be sure.

Whitset looked up in surprise at the policeman. His pupils dilated with hatred. Then, in a flash, he jumped the police officer, knocking his gun from his hand as he ran out the French doors. Josh went after Whitset, but before he could catch him, Whitset leapt from the balcony and disappeared into the Quarter.

Alex was lying on the floor. Whitset had beaten her severely in the face. Handprints were visible on her face. Her lip was bloodied and there was a considerable amount of blood pouring from one eye. Josh bent over her and said quietly, "Ms. Destephano, can you hear me?"

Alex was dazed, unable to talk, but nodded and pointed toward Monique.

Josh felt for Monique's neck pulse. It was beating faintly. He felt sick as he looked at the long slash mark circling the psychiatrist's white, perfectly oval face. He grabbed his radio and called for an ambulance.

Then he turned his attention back to Alex. She seemed more coherent and asked, "Is Monique alive?"

Josh nodded his head. "I called for help. Alex, did he hurt you?"

She gave Josh a tight smile and said, "Josh, he cut Monique's face after she was unconscious. He cracked her skull. I heard it break when he hit her with the pipe. Oh, no..." Alex's voice began to break.

Josh tried to hug her to offer some comfort, but she pushed him back frantically. Then, she started sobbing. Finally, she said, "Josh, call Dr. Bonnet. Call the hospital and get them to connect you. Please. He has to come take care of Monique."

Josh left her for an instant and radioed the information to dispatch. He returned to tell her that Dr. Bonnet was on his way. He also retrieved a quilt from Monique's bedroom and covered the psychiatrist with it.

Alex was attempting to rearrange her clothes when she heard the police car sirens outside the apartment. Within seconds, the house was crawling with NOPD and an ambulance was outside.

Robert appeared a few minutes later. Alex waved him toward Monique. After a cursory examination of Monique, Robert ordered an immobilizing board. He called the hospital and talked directly with neurosurgery. He returned to Alex, took her hand, and said simply, "Monique's unconscious. She's in a coma. Her pupils are barely reactive. She'll need surgery. They're waiting for her at CCMC. It doesn't look good, Alex."

Alex was so traumatized, the right questions wouldn't come — that is, not the questions that she, as a nurse, would have ordinarily asked. She let Robert hold her while she sobbed quietly. Alex was still unable to speak.

Robert sensed this and didn't ask any questions.

Josh told Alex and Robert that they had made contact with Commander Françoise and that he would be there within minutes. He also reported there was a citywide manhunt for Whitset. The police were combing the Quarter looking for him. Josh was confident he would be apprehended soon.

Robert thanked him but waved away the questions Josh was trying to ask Alex. She looked up at him gratefully.

Alex continued to let Robert rock her in his arms. She felt so guilty... and dirty. She hadn't been able to help her friend — she shuddered when she thought about it and broke out into fresh sobs as the ambulance took Monique away.

Robert eased Alex onto the sofa at the same moment Commander Françoise entered the house. His face was strained and as dark as a thundercloud.

"Where's Monique?" he bellowed. "What the hell happened here?"

Robert shook his head sadly. "She's on her way to CCMC. Whitset attacked both Monique and Alex. Monique has a head injury. They'll do surgery as soon as she arrives."

Jack sat down, a broken man. He stroked Alex's face. "Are you all right, honey?"

Alex nodded, her eyes filling again with tears. "I'm sorry, Jack. I just couldn't do anything. He came at us like a maniac. He was so strong. I tried so hard, but I just couldn't stop it."

"It's okay, Alex. You did what you could. We'll find the little bastard, whoever he is, and he'll pay for what he's done. I need to talk to Officer Martin for a few minutes. I'll be back."

Josh and Jack retreated into the kitchen. Josh reported to Jack what he had found, describing in detail the slash to Monique's face and how he had discovered Whitset and Alex. He saw Françoise's face darken again and noted the curious light that came into his eyes. It was the famous Jack Françoise killer light that he had heard older officers describe. He was sure that it was only a matter of hours that Whitset had left on this earth.

"Martin," Françoise asked in a quiet, but demanding voice. "Did Whitset rape Alex?"

Josh looked at the floor and back up into the commander's face. He replied, "I don't know, sir. Her clothes were torn. I just can't say for sure. It certainly looked like it could've happened."

"Did you ask her?"

"I asked her if Whitset had hurt her and she turned the conversation toward Dr. Desmonde. She wouldn't answer me, Commander. I tried to ask her — twice." Josh looked despondent.

Françoise nodded his head, as he felt the anger spread throughout his body. "Robert, come in here for a moment," he barked from the kitchen.

Robert appeared immediately. The men talked in low tones for a few moments.

Finally, Commander Françoise said to Robert, "You've got to find out if Whitset raped Alex. If he did, she needs to go to the emergency room."

"But, Jack," Robert began. "She's been beaten and terrorized. Can't we give her some time?"

"No. No. Hell no. We need the evidence against him. Do you want me to ask her to go with you?" Commander Françoise's voice was firm, and he gave Bonnet a hard look.

Robert wanted to accept Jack's assistance, but he knew he couldn't. He shook his head negatively and said, "I'll do it, Jack. You may want to go to CCMC and check on Monique. I'm worried about her."

"I will. I'm going now. Then I am going to find and kill Lester Whitset." Commander Françoise was reasonably calm.

Robert and Josh both knew that beneath the calm façade was a roaring lion, out for blood — blood to avenge Monique and Alex.

"Jack, Jack, come here. I've got to talk to you for a minute." Alex was calling for Jack from the living room.

Jack went to Alex and sat by her on the sofa. "What is it, Al?" he asked gently.

"You have got to search Whitset's office. Monique went in there today, and she found a gold chain hanging out of his bottom right desk drawer. I'm sure it's Angie's chain. Bridget brought me her cross today and I had it repaired." Alex's voice trailed off, remembering the teary scene in her office. Then she continued, "Monique also discovered that the college degrees in Whitset's office couldn't be his."

The commander nodded his head. "Yeah, I know they aren't. He's a fake, an imposter. I think he's Weston Whitset, Lester's crazy brother. I've got to go. Anything else, Alex?" Jack looked at her sharply.

Alex shook her head. "Not that I can think of. I know there's more, but I can't think of anything now. I'm just so tired..." Alex looked away, uncomfortable at the commander's direct gaze.

"Alex." Jack's voice was gentle. "Did Whitset rape you?"

Alex didn't answer. She looked at the commander and began to cry again.

"You must tell me, Alex. It's important. If he did, we'll need the evidence to convict him. You'll need to go to the hospital and be checked. "

Alex pulled her hand away from Jack's. She got up and left the room.

Robert and Josh looked at her disheveled, torn clothes. Then they looked at each other.

Jack's face was suffused with anger and he shrugged his shoulders as he said to Robert, "You've got to find out for sure, Robert. Need the evidence. Need it bad!" The commander's voice was rough and emotional.

"The hell with that evidence, Jack. I need to get her to CCMC to get her face treated. Besides, you're probably gonna kill him anyway." Robert was angry.

"No, take her over to Community Memorial in Gulfport. Alex doesn't need the ignominy and stress of being treated for rape in her own hospital. Check her in under an alias. I'll call and make the arrangements. Take her now, dammit, I mean it." Jack saw Robert hesitate and said roughly, "*NOW*, I mean it. And, check on Monique. Make sure she gets the best CCMC has. Do you understand?" Jack was glaring at his boyhood friend, his temper hanging by a thread.

Robert nodded. "Yeah. I'll do my best, Jack. Now, get out of here." His voice and his eyes were tired.

Jack whispered to Josh on the way out, "Get Nadine Wells over here to see Alex. Let her decide about the rape. And, get Alex's statement when Nadine is with her. Move dammit, move now!"

Josh disappeared from the room to call Nadine.

Robert intervened, "Please, Jack, you have got to calm down. I know you are stressed, we all are, but there's no place for temper in this—"

Commander Françoise pivoted around and stared at the physician. "Dammit, Bonnet. This lunatic practically killed Monique and probably raped Alex. He raped and beat Angie Richelieu. He probably killed Mrs. Smithson as well. Don't talk to me about my temper. My temper's the only thing giving me the energy to move right now. Understand? If my temper wasn't acting up, I'd be dysfunctional with grief." Françoise stared at Robert, his eyes full of tears.

Robert walked over to him and hugged the big, burly policeman. The two men stayed in an embrace for several moments, each crying silently for what they had lost.

Françoise broke the embrace. "The next time you see me, Robert, Whitset will be dead. To hell with court justice."

Robert nodded, powerless to stop him.

"Take care of my girls, Bonnet. I'm trusting both of them to you." Françoise slammed Monique's French door so hard that the glass shattered and fell out.

Alex reemerged from the bathroom.

"Al, you've got to tell me about Whitset and what he did. Jack said we've got to get the evidence soon — you know that." Robert's voice was gentle, and he moved over on the sofa so she could sit next to him.

"I'm not going to any emergency facility. Not CCMC, not in New Orleans, and not in Mississippi. I refuse to submit to any examination." Her voice was adamant, stubborn.

He asked gently, "Why, Alex? It was a situation you couldn't control. You're not guilty of anything."

Her voice was morose, her eyes filled with tears, "I'm just not going, Robert, I'm not. Now leave me alone about it, please." She laid her head down in his lap and pretended to fall asleep. She needed to be alone with her thoughts to try to put together exactly what had happened. She needed to think through what she should've done. She was feeling so guilty — about a lot of things. She should've saved Monique. Finally, she fell asleep on Monique's sofa.

A half an hour later, Josh opened the door for Nadine Wells. They talked quietly in the kitchen for a few minutes and Josh motioned for Robert to join them.

Robert seemed uncertain about Nadine. When he learned she was NOPD's expert on sexual crimes and a registered nurse, he retreated into himself.

Nadine perceived the change in Robert's behavior and assured him she wouldn't badger Alex. She mentioned they had met shortly after the rape of Angie Richelieu.

Robert seemed surer of the petite Nadine's concern for Alex and went to awaken her.

Nadine held up her hand, motioning for Robert to wait a moment. She asked him, "Dr. Bonnet, what is your relationship to Ms. Destephano?"

He flushed a little bit at the question. It would have been easy to answer before last night. He didn't know what to say and stammered his reply, "Well... well, to be honest, Ms. Wells, Alex and I were married when we were students and lived in Virginia. We divorced about four years ago. Alex

moved to Texas and I moved to New Orleans. I'm from here..." Robert's voice trailed off, unsure of exactly what it was the woman wanted to know.

She continued to look at him, their eyes locked. "And now, Dr. Bonnet, what is your current relationship with Alex?"

Robert was uncomfortable. Her directness was bothering him, and he didn't like it. He felt guilty and defensive for some reason. He remained silent.

Nadine turned to Josh. "Josh, could you leave Dr. Bonnet and me alone for a few minutes?" Josh nodded and hastily left the kitchen. Nadine continued to look at Robert, whose defensiveness was turning to anger. His lean, handsome face was red. She repeated her question, her voice adamant. "Dr. Bonnet, it's important that you answer my question for your sake and for ours."

"Why, why in the hell do I have to answer your question? I haven't done anything illegal or wrong." He was stubbornly defensive.

"I must know if you and Alex are sexually intimate. If you are, and have been recently, it could complicate any evidence we gather tonight. That's the reason for the question. Otherwise, I agree. It's none of my business."

Nadine saw Robert's shoulder sag. "Ms. Wells, I love Alex. I'd like to marry her again. We're presently good friends and have been since earlier this year. I assure you there's no evidence from a sexual encounter with me that would complicate a police rape investigation. I promise you."

"Then why are you so uncomfortable?" Nadine looked at him shrewdly, still persistent.

Robert was amazed at the woman's perceptiveness. "Tonight, at least earlier tonight, Alex and I had dinner at her house." He smiled at the memory. "I believe we could have complicated the evidence if Dr. Desmonde hadn't called Alex at eleven o'clock. Actually, Alex and I were... well, the phone rang, so nothing happened." He looked sheepish, even a little embarrassed.

Nadine smiled at him and touched his shoulder. "I'm sorry she called and spoiled it for you. Trust me, there will be other times. Thanks for being honest with me, Dr. Bonnet. Can I count on your support — emotional and physical — to get Alex through this?"

"Yes, absolutely. What do you want me to do?"

"Help me help her remember what happened. I believe, based on what Commander Françoise and Officer Martin said, it's possible Alex doesn't remember what happened. She may not know if she was raped or not."

Robert was flabbergasted. "You're kidding. I'd never have thought that."

"It's a protective reflex that many women have after a rape. It's a dissociation mechanism that's commonly associated with sexual crime and abuse. It sounds as though her clothes, while torn, were basically intact, so I'm hopeful that she wasn't raped. Let me rephrase that, I am hopeful she wasn't actually penetrated. She was most assuredly raped in the greater sense of the word, and Alex will view it that way. It's critical for her recovery and continued mental health that she knows for sure so she can learn to deal with it. Do you understand what I'm saying, Dr. Bonnet?"

Robert nodded mutely and followed her into the living room where Alex remained on the sofa. Damn! It was a lot easier being a surgeon than a shrink or mental health worker. Being a surgeon was quick and simple, and you got results right away — not so much with mental health stuff.

Nadine shook Alex gently.

She opened her eyes slowly. They were liquid blue in color, the color of bachelor's buttons in the summer. She struggled to sit up.

Robert noticed that her right shoulder was drooping. A fractured clavicle, he surmised — the same arm that had been injured in February.



Nadine spoke softly. "Alex, Jack asked me to come over and talk with you. Josh and I need a statement about what happened here tonight. Are you up to talking?"

Alex nodded, looking to Robert.

Clasping her hand tightly, Robert assured her he would stay with her.

Nadine was pleased that Bonnet was so cooperative. So many men were either useless or macho machines in times like this. He would be a good support for Alex, if she'd let him. For some reason, Nadine's intuition told her she wouldn't.

Josh began, "Ms. Destephano, do you mind if I tape your interview? The commander asked me to get your permission. If you would rather I didn't, I won't."

Alex smiled at Josh. "You can, Josh. It's okay. Call me Alex."

"Thanks, Alex." Josh cut the recorder on, giving the date, time, describing the crime scene, and naming the people present at the taped interview.

"Tell me what happened tonight, Alex. You can go as slowly as you like. I've got three tapes with me. We've got plenty of tape and plenty of time." He handed Alex the microphone.

In a clear voice, Alex talked into the machine. She began with the phone call from Monique and ended with the entrance of Josh Martin. She cried when she related how Whitset had beaten Monique with the lead pipe and how he had cut her face after she was unconscious. She made no mention of rape but recounted in great detail how Whitset had sung his sick little rhyme to her and how he had torn her clothes. Her hand was gripped tightly by Robert throughout the interview, which took about twenty minutes.

Nadine and Josh nodded their heads as she spoke, asking questions to clarify and expand her statement.

Josh seemed satisfied and looked at Nadine for direction.

Nadine picked up on his cue and said to Alex, "You described how Whitset pushed you to the floor and ripped your clothes. You didn't tell us what he did to you."

Alex looked confused. "What do you mean I didn't tell you? I told you everything that Whitset did!" Her voice was angry, defensive.

Nadine persisted, "You've got bruises on your face, a black eye, and an injured shoulder. Did Whitset hit you when he had you on the floor?"

Alex looked thoughtful. "Why yes, I suppose he did. Who else could have possibly hit me?" The tone of Alex's voice implied she thought Nadine's question was ridiculous and stupid. Her tone was condescending, very much unlike Alex's normal voice.

"Did Whitset do anything else to you that you haven't mentioned?" Nadine continued to look thoughtfully at Alex, who shook her head negatively.

There was a silence for a few minutes while Nadine and Josh reviewed their notes.

Robert continued to stroke Alex's hand. He smiled at her gently and said, "It's almost over, Al. Soon we'll go."

She smiled back. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was take a shower and sleep.

Nadine looked up from her notes and said, "I have another question for you, Alex. Listen carefully and answer me as best you can. It's important."

"Okay, Nadine. But, hurry up. I'm tired, and I want to get cleaned up so I can go to CCMC to check on Monique."

Nadine could tell that Alex was getting impatient. Nadine's dark eyes searched Alex's deep blue ones as she asked the question in a matter of fact manner, "Did Lester Whitset rape you?"

Alex was flustered, her voice angry. "Nadine, I told you everything that happened that I can think of. Don't you understand that I'm tired and I want to go home? I've been awake for over twenty-four hours."

Nadine continued to look steadily at her. She asked again, "Did Lester Whitset rape you, Alex? Did he penetrate you?"

Alex jumped angrily off the sofa, her injured shoulder drooping. She shrieked at them, her voice loud and quavering, "I told you everything I know. I want to get out of here, now." She looked around frantically for some means of escape. Her eyes rested on Robert, and she said to him, in a small and broken voice, "Robert, please make them leave me alone. I said everything I can remember. I want to go home. I want you to take me, please!"

He felt his heart constrict as he looked at her, her eyes liquid pools of grief. He felt his reserve melting. She looked so dejected, so sad. He glanced over at Nadine Wells, who gave him a dark look that clearly told him to keep his mouth shut.

He looked back at Alex and said gently, "You've gotta answer Nadine's question. It's important to know whether Whitset actually raped you. If he did, we need to get you to the emergency department for an examination."

Alex became hysterical. "No... no... no... I'm not going anywhere. Don't you hear me! I'm not going anywhere! I've told you what I know, and I am leaving! Don't any of you try to stop me!"

Nadine stood in her way. Her voice was crisp, chilly. "Calm down, Alex. Shut up and stop all the noise, now! None of us wants to hear it. Just answer the question."

Robert was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the line of questioning. He thought Alex was being harassed. He was about to interrupt and protect her when Josh Martin placed his hand on his shoulder in restraint and shook his head.

Nadine asked again, her voice clear, "Did Lester Whitset rape you, Alex?"

She dissolved into tears. She was sobbing so hard her shoulders were shaking. She was hyperventilating.

Robert held her in his arms, reassuring her that it made no difference to him. He told her over and over that he loved her.

Finally, Alex calmed down a little and said in a small, still voice that was almost a whisper, "I don't know. I just don't know. I can't remember!"

Nadine leaned over and put her arms around Alex. "It's all right if you don't know, Alex. A lot of women don't know. They can't remember. They repress the terror of what happened to them." Nadine continued to offer her reassurance for several more minutes until Alex calmed down.

Alex clung to Robert's hand and turned to face the police officers. "You mean there are other women who don't know if they have actually been raped or not?"

Nadine smiled and responded, "Yep, Alex. That's right. You are certainly not alone in this. What's important now is that we get you examined so that we can tell—"

Alex shrank from the thought of a rape examination. It was so humiliating and embarrassing. She remembered having to do them when she worked in the emergency department. "No, no, I won't go."

Nadine looked at her firmly and said, "You've got to go, Alex. If you don't, you will never know if you were physically raped and the uncertainty will haunt you forever. You'll never recover emotionally from the experience." Nadine turned and prevailed upon Alex's relationship with Robert. "You've gotta go get checked out now so you and Robert can work through this together."

Robert was nodding his head, aware of the implications that could result if Alex never knew whether she was forcibly raped by Whitset. "Nadine's right, Alex. We need to do all we can so we

can work through this. I'll take you to Memorial Hospital in Gulfport."

"Jack has made the arrangements, Alex. We'll check you in under an assumed name. No one will know you have been there. It'll be confidential. I'll go as well if you like." Nadine squeezed her hand.

Alex looked from Robert to Nadine. She said to Robert, "Would you mind if only Nadine went with me? I'd rather you go check on Monique. Besides, someone will recognize you there."

Robert was surprised and a little hurt. "Of course, Al, whatever you want. I am anxious about Monique. I'll see you back at your house around lunch time — okay?" He raised his eyebrows questioningly at Nadine Wells.

"Yes, that will be enough time. She can even get a few hours' sleep. We'll call your cell when all is done." Nadine thought how lucky Alex was to have a man like Bonnet on her side.

It was after five o'clock in the morning when Nadine and Alex left Monique's apartment on Royal Street. Alex was about to ask Nadine if she could go home to take a shower and change clothes when she remembered that she couldn't. It would destroy any evidence they had against Whitset. It made her crazy that she didn't know whether she was raped or not. What kind of an idiot was she?

There was little conversation between the women as they drove out I-10 toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Alex slept most of the way, exhausted beyond belief. When they pulled up in front of Community Memorial Hospital, Alex said very simply to Nadine, "You know, Nadine, no matter what they find, I have been raped." Her voice was teary. She sounded so fatigued and depressed.

"Yes, Alex. You have been raped. You are absolutely right and how well I know."

Alex looked at Nadine curiously, as they entered the emergency room door.



Weston Whitset was frantic. He was hiding, partly occluded in a doorway setback in the Quarter, a wine bottle in his hand, looking like most of the drunks at that time of the morning. He'd been running forever. He still couldn't believe that the police officer had barged into that shrink bitch's apartment and he hadn't heard him! Damn the voices! If they hadn't been talking so loudly, he wouldn't have been taken by surprise. He cursed the voices out loud. Several people walking by looked at him curiously, but he didn't care because he figured they were as drunk as he was.

Weston continued to think. It had just been getting good with Alex. He had been watching her for several months and gaining control over her had become his life's work. Sex with her was a necessity; "a driving obsession" is what that shrink of his in Alabama would have said. Weston knew she had wanted him too. He'd seen it in her eyes several times in the last couple of days. Of course, she had tried to hide it from the others. He had picked up on that. But, he knew she wanted him. Weston couldn't believe she had been playing hard to get over there at Monique's. She was acting like a tease. He hated prick-teasers! What a slut! Well, that had been part of her game. But he had showed her, hadn't he? Just like the nurse pig. He smiled at the memory.

Weston stayed in the doorway, drinking his wine. The voices were quiet now, allowing him to think without interruption. Well, at least he had killed the imposter shrink bitch. There was comfort in that. He had heard her skull crack! It was a beautiful sound — better than any symphony Weston had ever heard. It had been wonderful! He had almost gotten off on the sound itself. Weston smiled as he remembered the terrorized look on her plastic face. The powerful, plastic shrink bitch. Her plastic, fake head had cracked under his trusty pipe. He loved it. Weston jerked his head up when he realized he was drooling again. The liquid had run down onto his shirt.

Far in the distance, he heard police sirens. He guessed he had better keep moving. He felt panicked again. Where should he go? Where could he go? The voices were screaming at him, just screaming. He tore at his face and his hair, trying desperately to quiet them down. Then, he started walking. He stayed close to groups of tourists in the Quarter, attempting to blend in.

His wine bottle was empty, and he needed a drink. He decided to duck into one of the bars, and he knew just the bar he was going to! It was on the other side of Dauphine Street. They would never look for him there! It was a male Vampire Bar and he'd been before. He just loved the place. So many people like himself. He checked his watch. It was almost two a.m. One thing about New Orleans, you could drink twenty-four hours a day, and the male Vampire Bar never closed until dawn. He was good for five or more hours. He'd figure things out by then... how to make his next move.

Weston sat in the dark pub for several hours, drinking double bourbons. He enjoyed watching the men flirt with each other and pretend to feed on each other's blood. And the costumes, wow, so Goth, devilish, fancy, and expensive. Some of the guys were pretty funny, others... well... he wasn't sure about them. There was a rumor that the Sire visited this vampire club. Weston didn't really know what the Sire was, but he had been told that if the Sire chose you, well, you were set for life. He didn't really know.

The men were interesting in the way they communicated. The place was a regular tea room, lots of action. Men just came and went. All kinds of men, pretty men, studs, bodybuilders, executive types, Voodoos, Occults, and, his favorite, daddies with little kids at home. He loved these best. They were so perverse that he was envious of their skills. What double lives they led! They made it with their wives, were appropriate with family members and work, had kids, coached the Little League, and

then they came out at night and acted out their perversions. It was disgusting, but Weston loved disgusting and perverted. He shook his head. The more he thought about it, the more it calmed him. It was a little wicked, and Wes loved wicked.

He continued to watch the men. It was fascinating! It was entertaining to watch the men seduce each other. First, there was the eye contact, then the emotional seduction, then the preliminaries, then the fake blood sucking — at least, he thought it was fake — and then the trip to the restroom, or outside. Then, finally, came the release, Weston supposed. He guessed the alley behind the bar had seen some action. He smiled to himself. Maybe he should consider “crossing the line.” Maybe he had been missing some good stuff all these years.

Weston especially liked guessing who would emerge the most powerful of the dyad. Who was who? Who was in control? Who became obedient? Wow, the more he thought about it, the more excited he felt. He continued to watch the men flirt and preen for each other. Hell, maybe he should start playing the vampire part. He'd been “into” it in his youth but had gotten bored and left it alone for years. It looked to him like the vampire craft had grown a lot since the early years. *Very interesting*, he thought to himself.

Studying these men really calmed him down and shut up the voices. He noted that he was usually right — you could tell at the takeover who was the most powerful! Weston only wished he could have seen some of the kills. He could only fantasize. Weston had never been one for homosexual sex, but... maybe he ought to consider it sometime. After all, variety was the spice of life. He smiled to himself.

It was after five a.m. Weston was the last customer left at the bar, and the bartender offered him a blowjob. Weston declined. The bartender, enraged at the refusal, told him to get the hell out. Weston complied.

The voices were remaining quiet, and now he could decide what to do. He had to make some plans. It would be daylight soon. Where was he going to hide? What was he going to do? Then, the next steps came to him. He knew exactly where he was going! He would be safe there for at least three or four days.

He would be safe until this stuff died down.



Jack Françoise was beat, angry, discouraged, and in so much emotional pain he could barely think. He knew he was in the worst possible situation a police officer could be. He recognized he was vulnerable and knew he should turn the case over to someone who was not emotionally involved. Of course, no one really knew that he and Monique were lovers, no one but Robert and Alex. It had been a secret. Dinner at Palace Café seemed like a lifetime ago now. Would he and Monique ever make love again? Would they ever speak again? The possibility that they wouldn't terrified Jack and took him to an emotional place he had never been before, a place he hated.

He could feel the hot tears pouring down his cheeks. He couldn't begin to describe the pain he felt when he looked down at Monique in the intensive care unit at CCMC. Her beautiful face was pallid, her bright eyes closed. The angry, red streak around her face made by Whitset's knife was clearly visible under the fluorescent lights in intensive care. The sight made Jack want to kill the man even more.

One tube came out of her nose and was hooked to wall suction to keep her stomach emptied. The second tube was hooked to the machine that was helping her breathe. Every now and then Monique coughed, as if she was trying to cough the tube out of her mouth and nose. The nurses said that was good. When she coughed, her eyes opened up wide and they stared straight ahead. Her eyes looked terrified. Jack asked the nurse if she was blind. She assured him she wasn't, but Jack wasn't convinced.

Every time the ventilator alarm went off, it scared Jack to death. He was afraid she had stopped breathing. The nurse explained that Monique was fighting the ventilator. She also said that Monique could probably breathe on her own, but the neurosurgeon had wanted her intubated for the surgery and the first few days afterward, just in case. So, the nurses sedated Monique to keep her calm and from fighting the tubes.

Jack hadn't been able to stay in the intensive care unit long. He felt helpless, useless even. He didn't understand what was happening and he didn't like the feeling. He gratefully accepted a cup of coffee from Monique's nurse and sat down in the doctors' lounge to think — and plan his revenge.

A quick call to headquarters confirmed what the commander expected; the citywide manhunt for Whitset was so far unsuccessful. Where in the hell was that little pervert? What do the insane crazies do when they're scared? Where do the wackos go? Jack pondered these questions as he finished his coffee and left Crescent City Medical Center to begin his own personal manhunt for the bastard who had destroyed the love of his life and raped his best friend.





Weston knew the police were still searching for him. He ducked in and out of the darkened alleyways in the French Quarter. He crossed Canal Street and walked several blocks toward the lovely residential section that surrounded Crescent City Medical Center. He entered the hospital through the radiology department located in the oldest part of the main building. It was dark and desolate. No one was around to see him and Weston smiled at his luck. He rounded the hall, walked toward the service elevators, and pressed the button that would take him to the sub-basement.

As the old, very tarnished elevator groaned and creaked toward him, Weston was pleased with the cleverness of his plan. He told the voices how stupid they were and admonished them for bothering him earlier. After all, he was Weston Whitset, almighty and all-powerful. He needed nothing from the voices that had assumed the identity of his dead brother, Lester, so many years ago. It had been such a clever scheme, and it had worked so well.

For years, Weston had masqueraded as his brother and held positions in psychiatric administration that permitted him to continue feeding his needs without fear. It had been a marvelous game. Weston smiled as he remembered the fun he had at other wackos' expense. God, it had been good. All that sex, all the fun, always emerging on top, being in charge of an army of crazies. Weston exited the elevator with a dreamy smile on his face as he remembered his escapades. Everything had been just perfect until that damned plastic shrink bitch had begun to get in his way.

Where had all these plastic people come from? He hadn't seen one for years. Now, he wasn't certain how many there were. But, of course, Dr. Desmond had been one. He had killed her. Weston became sexually aroused again as he thought about cracking her skull.

And, that damned nurse. She was a pig, but such a temptress. He had wanted her badly. He had to have her, and he had. It had been simple. It had been ecstasy. A night to remember.

He would go back for more when things quieted down, he decided. He'd enjoyed her terror so much that he savored it. That's why he didn't kill her. He wanted it again, the high he got from her fear, from her terror. Angie, the temptress. Angie, the pig. He'd get it, soon, and when he went for her again, she'll be so frightened that the experience would be the best he'd ever had. Maybe he would get her while she was still on the hospital ward. What a lark! What fun! That would be a real coup. Of course, this time he would have to kill her. Weston smiled broadly at his ingenious plan. He wondered if she had woken up yet.

He continued his fantasy as he walked through the darkened tunnel of the medical center. Huge steam pipes hissed at him as he walked by them. The sound was comforting. The steam cleared his mind. Every now and then, he waved and joyfully greeted a large rat or an enormous New Orleans cockroach. They were his friends. Several rats were albinos and had pink, inquiring eyes. They neither bothered him nor required anything from him. Hapless creatures. Helpless, like he made his victims. He loved hapless and helpless.

Weston wished he had a light as he entered the stretch of tunnel between the Pavilion and the main hospital. It was pitch black. There was only a single light bulb about every fifty feet. The engineering people never entered this part of the tunnel. The heating and maintenance facilities for the Pavilion were located directly under the building itself. Weston cursed a little as he wiped the cobwebs from his face. He hated spiders. They reminded him of women who were both as hateful and as dishonest as woven webs of intrigue around full-blooded men. *Such a useless exercise*, he thought to himself. *No wonder they had to be put in their place. Women — disgusting pigs.*

Finally, he reached the seldom-used elevator under the Pavilion. He smiled and congratulated himself on the ingenuity of his scheme. They would never find him, not right here in the Pavilion. The tunnel and the elevator were Weston's secret. He had used them many times to enter and leave the hospital covertly, most recently when he had "used" the nurse. He had even left the outside door to the stairwell open to confuse people. He smiled at his cleverness. He felt himself aroused again at the memory of his night with the pig nurse, Angie.

The elevator opened into an old supply room, which was now part of one of the seclusion rooms. A thin wall and heavy metal door separated the supply room from the small seclusion cell. Of course, Weston had a key to the door. He was sure no one else did. He doubted if anyone even remembered the door was there — except for the patients in seclusion, and no one listened to them.

Weston remembered late last March when he had entered the hospital through the tunnel and the elevator. He had been surprised to find the seclusion room occupied by a young, beautiful woman who had just been admitted for severe depression. Of course, she had been suicidal and hostile, which is why the shrinks had secluded her. He would never forget the look of fear in her eyes when he entered her room through the metal door. It had been an unexpected surprise for him, too. A very pleasant surprise indeed, as it turned out. She had screamed, but the seclusion rooms were soundproof. How handy. How fortunate! And his timing had been just right. He had entered a few minutes past midnight and knew he had a full two hours for fun before the next rounds by the hospital staff.

It had been two great sex-filled and sex-crazed hours. The girl had a beautiful body and Weston had used it fully for his convenience. He couldn't remember how many times he had gotten off, but it had been good. *Ah, life was good*, he thought to himself as he remembered his fortune. After the initial sex act, which never involved penetration, the woman had been submissive and even begged him to kill her. He had accommodated her by helping her slit her wrists. He hadn't wanted to and would've liked to have visited her again but was afraid the shrinks might believe her story. She just hadn't been insane enough. Besides, the best sex of all had been giving it to her while she bled to death. That had also been the best part with the old lady, but she had been an imposter, so it really didn't count as much. She had been a plastic old lady bitch, and she deserved that knitting needle just where he placed it.

Ah, the power of it all, the supreme triumph. Orgasm for one at another's moment of death. Ultimate power, ultimate control. Didn't the shrinks call that something? Necrophilia or something? He liked the word. It had a pleasant ring to it. Several other times he'd enjoyed the "fruits" of the room but had never derived the same satisfaction he had the first time. The first adventure was always the best for him. It was a great setup. Crescent City Medical offered him everything he needed, even a huge bonus at the end of the year for the cost savings he had instituted. His bonus would be even more now that the plastic shrink was dead.

A sudden thought alarmed him. He broke out into a sweat. Suppose the room was occupied tonight? What would he do? Then he relaxed. It would only be a woman in the room. No problem. The seclusion room was on the women's side of the Pavilion I. It was available only for female seclusion. No sweat after all. Cool. Maybe someone would be waiting for him tonight. Maybe even Rose. Weston breathed a sigh of relief. He was tired, and the voices and all the alcohol had finally hit him. He was super human, but everyone had a limit. He walked off the elevator and inserted his key into the lock of the heavy metal door.

As the door creaked open and a shaft of light appeared from the overhead light, Weston felt fear for the first time in his life.

Facing him in the room was the drug crazed, raging face of Anthony Gavette.

Weston was frozen in place.

Anthony stared at him and said quietly, "I've been waiting for you, you slimy bastard. You took my Rose!" Then Anthony lunged at Whitset, knocking him to the floor.



The rape treatment at Gulfport Memorial had been just as awful as Alex had expected. It was the most humiliating experience she had ever endured. She'd always heard rape exams were demeaning during her professional life, but now she'd experienced it. Nadine's quiet presence had been comforting.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she was discharged. The ride back to New Orleans was quiet, both women deep in thought. Finally, Alex asked, "When will I know? When will they tell me if I've been raped?"

"The physician told me he would run the labs himself. He said he would get back to me this afternoon." Nadine glanced over at Alex, aware that she was depressed.

"That long? Why so long?" Alex's voice sounded pitiful.

"They do a lot of testing, Alex. You know that. Try to get some sleep now." Nadine's voice was chiding. She was getting pretty tired, too.

"I just want a shower and something to eat. Then, I want to go to CCMC and check on Monique. I'm really worried about her." Alex's voice faltered as her eyes filled with tears for her friend.

Nadine nodded. "Yes, I talked with Robert. He's also very concerned. Monique's still in surgery. They're doing a craniotomy. She has a depressed skull fracture."

"Did she regain consciousness before the surgery?" Alex was afraid to hear the response.

"No, she didn't. She was completely unresponsive. Robert's also observing the surgery. Said he was hopeful that once they relieve the pressure in her head, she might regain consciousness, maybe even come back full force." Nadine reached for Alex's hand and pressed it. "You know how these things go, Alex. It could be either way." Her voice was sympathetic. The look she gave Alex was understanding.

Alex flinched as she remembered the sound of Whitset's lead pipe splitting Monique's skull. She would never forget the sound it had made, not as long as she lived. She shuddered to herself and cried silent tears for her friend.

"It's so unfair, Nadine. Monique and Jack had just found each other. They're in love. Did you know that?"

Nadine jerked her head and stared at Alex. Her eyes were closed, her head laid back against the seat. Hell no, she didn't know that. She said softly, "No, Alex, I didn't know that. Thanks for telling me."

Alex made no response until Nadine woke her in front of her house. Nadine made them both a sandwich while Alex showered and dressed. It was afternoon. They ate quickly, then they left for CCMC. Alex knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, so she decided to check in on Monique and head for the office.



Don Montgomery was pacing furiously back and forth in his office. Elizabeth Tippet and Josh Martin were sitting at a small conference table. In front of them was the *Times Picayune*. It was the second day the story had made front page. The lead story on the front page outlined the tragic attack on Angie Richelieu and the death of Mrs. Smithson.

Elizabeth finally spoke. "Don, for heaven sakes, sit down. Your pacing is driving me nuts. Stop it!"

Montgomery turned on her. "Tippet, what the hell is going on here? Tell me again! Are you sure Whitset is responsible for the attacks on Alex and Monique Desmonde?"

Elizabeth sighed and turned to Josh Martin and back to Don. "Yes, absolutely. Officer Martin was there! What other proof do you need? He interrupted the attack on Alex. Monique was already unconscious. Whitset is definitely responsible. Can't you get that through your head?" Elizabeth was tired, worried about Alex and Monique, and sick of Don.

Don sat down and glared at Josh Martin. "Where in the hell is Commander Françoise? That useless bastard should be here helping us clean this shit up!"

Josh bristled at Montgomery's reference to the commander. Jack was his hero, and he worshiped the ground he walked on. He was short on energy, patience, and time. He mustered up some self-control and said in a derogatory voice, "Mr. Montgomery, Commander Françoise is out searching for Whitset. There's a citywide manhunt for your administrator. I'm leaving here now to meet up with him, if I can find him."

"No need. I'm here, Josh. No need to hunt." The three of them looked toward the doorway of Montgomery's office and stared at the exhausted Jack Françoise. Jack was so grey with fatigue and anxiety that he appeared to be an apparition. Jack touched Elizabeth's shoulder and sat down.

Officer Martin rose in deference to his commanding officer. "Commander, can I get you anything?"

Jack shook his head negatively and addressed Montgomery. "Is Alex here yet?"

Montgomery stared at the commander and said, "Hell, no! I heard she'd been attacked by Whitset. Is it true?"

Françoise nodded. "Yeah, Whitset attacked Alex and Dr. Desmonde. I understand she's still in surgery. Anyone check on her?" Jack looked at all of them dismally.

Elizabeth answered, "Yeah. I called up about an hour ago. She was still in surgery. They said it would be several more hours. They're doing a craniotomy, Commander. She has a severe skull fracture. Why not come with me and I'll call again." Elizabeth stood alongside Josh, and the three of them left a speechless Don Montgomery in his plush executive office.

As the trio walked toward Elizabeth's office, Jack's cell rang. He looked at the number. It was Nadine's cell. He said, "Hang on. Let me talk to Nadine. I think she's with Alex." He stopped and sat in the lobby, while Josh and Liz waited at a discreet distance expectantly.

Jack stood and gestured with his hand. "Let's go to Alex's office. She and Nadine are over there."

Alex and Nadine were sitting at the conference table in Alex's office. As soon as Jack entered, Alex went over and hugged him. She could feel his silent tears as they embraced. Alex said softly, "Jack, we don't know anything yet. Let's be positive. Robert's up there, so you can be sure she's getting the best." She continued to hold Jack, feeling him shudder as he grouped for composure.

Finally, he let go and smiled at her. "You're looking pretty good, Miss Lawyer Lady. You do have a few bruises and a shiner. Everything else okay?"



"Yep, I'm doing okay. Promise. Nadine has been great. Can you get her a raise?" Alex winked at Nadine.

"I'll do my best." He looked at Josh and Nadine. "Can we talk privately?" He looked sideways at Elizabeth.

"I get the message, Commander. I've got to go clean up our image with the press anyway. You guys be good while I'm gone, okay?" Liz gave them all a big smile. She hugged Alex when she left and said, "We'll talk later, Al. I'm glad you're okay," Elizabeth said, as she left them alone.

Alex smiled at her friend. "Yes, Liz. Later. I'm doing pretty okay. Say some prayers for Monique."

"I've been praying for you all. And by the way, you two owe me. I've been sitting with Don for hours, listening to him rant and rave. Steer clear of him if you can. He's a wild man again."

"Gotcha, Liz. Thanks," Alex said.

Elizabeth gave Officer Martin a special smile as she quietly closed the door of Alex's conference room.

Jack sat down wearily in a chair and said to the group, "I got the preliminary forensics on Angie. We ain't got zip. Nothing."

Alex gasped, "What? Nothing? How can that be?"

Nadine spoke quietly. "It's probably because so much time elapsed between the rape and the collection of the evidence. What about blood and hair samples, Jack? Are they conclusive?"

Jack's face brightened. *Damn*, he thought to himself. *I really am in bad shape. I'm almost useless.* He had forgotten about the evidence, except the rape forensics. "Hell, yeah, we got the hair and skin. We even got the damned bite mark. I can't wait to catch the little pervert." Jack, clearly in a brighter mood, rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Alex was still confused. She felt her heart flutter with fear. She looked at Nadine and said, "Nadine, why don't we have any specific blood groupings? Surely, there should be something!"

Nadine understood Alex's fear. "I guess the specimens weren't collected soon enough to build a good case. Anyway, the genetic markers could only implicate Whitset if—"

She was interrupted by Commander Françoise, who said tersely, "Nadine, suppose the man's a non-secretor? Then we'll never be able to determine..." Jack's voice trailed off as he stared at Alex, whose face had flushed a bright red. She was staring at the conference table, unable to speak.

Nadine knew what they were thinking. If Whitset was a non-secretor, then Alex might not know if she had been physically raped or not. She'd never come to closure on the subject. *Damn*, Nadine thought. *This just isn't fair.*

"Alex," Nadine began. "We don't know anything yet."

Alex stood. She was in the greatest rage she could remember. "Shut up, Nadine! Shut up all of you! None of you know that humiliation, the ignominy I just endured at that Podunk hospital. All of you just get out of my office!" She looked wildly at Josh, Nadine, and Jack. "I said to get the hell out of here, now!"

Jack was shocked. He'd never heard Alex upset like that before. He stood to try to comfort her. As he reached for her, she pushed him away, fighting back hot tears.

Nadine remained seated and looked up at Alex's tear streaked face. "Alex, I know exactly what you've been through. I've been through it myself. We'll leave now and give you time for a short break, but I'll be back here in one hour to see you."

Alex stared at them as they left her office. Then, she put her head down on her conference table and wept, crying for herself, Monique, Jack, and Robert. Her life would never be the same. She just knew it. There was no way it could be.

Commander Françoise, Nadine Wells, and Josh Martin reconvened in the hospital dining room, all of them staring tiredly into their coffee.

Finally, Jack said, "How bad was it in Gulfport?"

"It was as bad as always, Jack. Nothing different or unusual. It's just a demeaning experience for any woman, or man for that matter." Her voice was clear, but her eyes had a faraway look in them.

Jack cleared his throat, uncomfortable with what he was about to say. Finally, it came out. "Nadine, I didn't know that you had been—"

Nadine interrupted him. "I know you didn't, Jack. It's not something I've ever revealed during a case." She looked bluntly at Jack and Josh. "Make sure this goes no further."

"Of course, Nadine. Your secret is safe with us. Right, Josh?"

Josh nodded his head affirmatively and said, "Right, Commander. Right, Ms. Wells. No one will ever know." Personally, Josh never wanted to piss off either the commander or Ms. Wells. They were both pretty scary in their own right.



Robert Bonnet was deeply troubled. As he stood in the shower in the O.R. suite, the warm water seemed to remind him only that he was still alive. He was numb all over. The rest of the world seemed cold to him, cold and unkind and out of sync.

Monique's surgery had progressed well, but Robert was depressed by the extent of her head injury. The neurosurgeon, Dr. Van Hansen, wasn't hopeful for much of a recovery. In fact, early in the surgery, after assessing the extent of her injury, the buildup of intracranial fluid, and its compression on the brain, he had recommended they close, take three EKG readings, and then make a decision. Robert had objected vehemently, even though the clinical picture looked grim.

At a later point, the neurosurgeon had pointedly questioned whether Monique should even have any plastic surgery, suggesting it was a waste of time and doubtful that Monique would ever even ask for a mirror if she ever regained consciousness.

Robert again objected angrily. A volley of harsh words had followed.

Robert really didn't like Van Hansen. He was lousy at the bedside and had the "surgeon rude, superior personality". But Robert knew he was also a great technical neurosurgeon. In the end, the plastic surgeon had come in and done a fairly good job of reconstructing Dr. Desmonde's face where Lester Whitset had tried to obliterate it. Of course, only time would really tell how good she would look, if she even lived.

Robert continued to chastise himself. Perhaps the neuro doc had been correct. Maybe he wasn't seeing Monique's injuries for what they were. Part of the time during the operation, he had found himself remembering their youth together. They had been great friends. They still were. Then his thoughts returned to the "celebratory dinner" they had shared only two days before. Jack and Monique had been so happy that night. Oh, there had been a few tense moments, but Robert knew the two loved each other beyond belief. Now, he had to go tell Jack that things didn't look so good.

"Bonnet, wake up! Are you still in there? You're going to be a prune if you don't get out." Robert recognized the voice of one of the male O.R. techs. He opened the shower door and grabbed a towel.

"Yeah, I'm coming out. Give me a minute." Robert left the shower and was changing into clean scrubs when the tech approached him again.

"You okay, man? You look awful. You're all wrinkled." Tom Finney looked him up and down. He smiled at Robert and gave him a look of encouragement. He studied the surgeon's face and said, "Listen, man, you know how those damned brain guys are. They thrive on pessimism. They always predict the worst... not sure of this, not sure of that, and all that horseshit. Then they look like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy when the patient wakes up and starts bitching about the nursing care. Brain surgeons practice more savior behavior than the rest of you. Don't let him get you down!" Tom slapped Robert on the back.

Robert smiled at the aging tech. He had known Tom for years, even before he was operating at CCMC. Tom had been a nursing assistant first and then an O.R. tech. He knew patients, and he knew doctors. "Thanks, Tom. You're right. I'm really down about Dr. Desmonde."

"Listen, Doc. If anyone can pull through a skull fracture, it's Monique Desmonde. She's a fighter, and a stubborn lady. Don't write her off. She'll come back, if only to prove her jackass surgeon wrong. Wait and see!" Tom gave Robert a big hug before rushing down the Hall. "Gotta go. See you, Doc. Get some rest. You look like hell."

Robert waved at the spry tech and smiled. "Thanks, Tom." He entered the physician's waiting room and called Alex's office. No answer. That concerned him. Then he called Jack's cell. Jack answered and agreed to meet him in the recovery waiting area.

Robert walked slowly into the recovery area. His injured arm was killing him. It was numb and felt like someone was sticking pins in it. He brushed the sensations off. It was just fatigue. It always got like that when he was tired. He checked on Monique in recovery and learned from the nurses that she was stable and had been transferred straight up to the neuro ICU. The room was empty except for Jack and Nadine who were seated together on a couch, talking quietly.

Robert stood in the doorway. Robert felt his eyes fill with tears as he saw the goodhearted, hard-nosed policeman. If he looked bad, then Jack looked ten times worse. The commander was suffering. He looked old and tired. His body language spoke of complete misery and severe emotional pain. His face was, well, what was it? Robert had never seen the look that Jack had on his face. He continued staring at him from a distance, as his mind searched for a word that described how the commander appeared. Finally, it dawned on him.

Jack's face was a mask of fear. The commander was desperately afraid of what Robert Bonnet, his friend the surgeon, would tell them about Monique.

Robert approached Jack. He looked at him anxiously. Robert sat on the coffee table opposite Jack and Nadine. Neither man spoke.

Nadine, fearing the worst, reached for Jack's hand.

If he was standing in front of a firing squad, Robert was sure Jack wouldn't be as afraid as he was now.

"Hey, man. How are you?" Robert asked tentatively. The silence was endless. Françoise seemed afraid to ask, and Robert didn't want to talk. His mind was formulating the best way to tell Jack that all estimates to this point suggested that Monique would be a vegetable.

Jack's eyes implored Robert to tell him something good. Robert knew he couldn't ethically do that.

Finally, Robert said, "Jack, the surgery went well. Monique's in recovery." He paused for a moment, groping for the best words. "To be honest, Jack, the neurosurgeon isn't optimistic about her recovery. Her injury was extensive..."

"And...?" Jack asked in a small voice. If the situation hadn't been so serious, Robert would have laughed at Jack's voice.

"We don't know. The next twelve hours are critical. He put in a shunt to drain the fluid off of her brain." Robert watched as Jack's shoulders sagged and then continued, "But, I'm hopeful that she'll regain consciousness—"

Jack interrupted and said hoarsely, "I don't care if she never practices medicine again. I just want her to be able to be with me, to love me, to stay with me. I love her, Robert. I loved her as she was, and I'll love her for what she'll be. I don't care what she's like after this. I'm going to marry her and take care of her. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do, Jack. And, I'm going to pray that you get your wish. We'll all pray for that, won't we, Nadine?"

Nadine nodded and continued to hold Jack's hand. She asked Robert, "Dr. Bonnet, have you experience with patients like Dr. Desmonde?"

"Yes, I do. I'm not offering any false hopes. I never do. I simply want to say that medicine has been proven wrong many, many times. Monique may come out of this and do fairly well, great even. But, Jack, she'll never be exactly what she was, if she's anything at all. You must understand that."

"I understand, Robert. And I love her. Just keep her alive for me so she has the chance to talk again. Will you do that for me, Robert?" The commander's eyes were filled with tears.

"Of course I will." Robert touched his friend's shoulder. "I will do everything I possibly can. You know we all love her, too."

"Can I see her?"

"She's in the Neuro ICU, the neurological intensive care unit. There are a lot of machines. But I'll take you, Jack. Nadine, would you like to go?"

Nadine checked her watch and shook her head. "I'm going to Alex's office. We've got an appointment. Will you meet me there afterward, Jack?"

"Yeah. I will," Jack said in a small voice.

"Is Alex okay?" Robert asked and looked directly at both police officers.

Nadine hesitated for a moment.

Robert immediately picked up on the hesitation and said, "Is Alex okay?" His voice was low, demanding.

"Yes, physically she's okay. Emotionally, she's drained. You can see for yourself after you two visit Monique. I'll be in her office."

At that moment, the telepage operator stat paged Commander Jack Françoise to the Pavilion. Jack said in a sour tone, "Screw the Pavilion. I'm going with Robert!"

"Let me answer the page, Jack. Otherwise, they'll keep stat paging you over and over. We need a little time and a little silence." Robert reached for his cell, called telepage, and talked for a moment.

Nadine saw his face pale a little.

He smiled at them and said, "Another incident at the Pavilion. It'll wait, Jack. Trust me."

"I do. I don't give a damn about that place anyway. Now, let's go." Jack glanced at Nadine and said, "We'll meet you and Alex in her office. Then, I'll check in the Pavilion." Jack gave Nadine a forced smile and left with Robert.



Weston Whitset wasn't used to feeling fear. He didn't like it. What the hell was Anthony Gavette doing in the female seclusion room? Fleeting thoughts raced through his mind, as Anthony wrestled him to the floor and punched him senseless in the face.

Weston knew he had the edge. Even though Anthony was powerfully built and was heavier than Weston by at least fifty pounds, Weston was smarter. He let Anthony knock him around a few times. Then, he stuck his fingers into Anthony's eyes and gave him a fierce kick to the groin. Anthony, momentarily blinded, screamed, and fell backward. Weston sat on top of him and said, "Anthony, you're a dumb, crazy, worthless piece of shit. Let me tell you about me and Rose."

Anthony lay docile under Weston, mesmerized by his cold, black marbled eyes.

"Yeah, Anthony, let me tell you what it was like with your woman. She's like any other piece. If you're nice to her, she'll put out. No question about it. You see, me and Rose, we got this game. We talk baby talk to each other, and I play with her."

Weston was enjoying himself so much that he ignored the hiss that came from Anthony's throat. He continued, "You see, Anthony, you may be a big man and all, but what I got is packaged just right for your poor little Rose. I sing her a few baby songs, sort of like nursery songs, and then we play married. She likes to play married. She pretends she's a little housewife, the little woman of the house, taking care of the plants and cooking me meatloaf. She loves the game. Then, we start to wrestle, you know. I usually sing to her while I wrestle, and then she starts to take her clothes off for me. Sometimes she knows I'm coming to visit, so she doesn't put any on..." Weston caught Anthony's angry look and used it to his advantage.

"Yeah, sometimes all she has on is a little teeny nighty. Now, last night she had on a new blouse. I made up a little song about her new blouse and it took her about two seconds to take it off, and then... well, you know, it was pretty good. Not too great, but not bad for a crazy woman. Basically, she is much too skinny for me. Just a bag of... no real tits, not like Angie."

Weston felt Anthony stiffen under his body. He said in a placating, singsong voice, "Oh, did you want Angie, Anthony, the big tits nurse? Well, too bad, I got her. She was mine and she was good. Anyway, Rose ain't much, even at her best. She looks like a little beggar girl when she's naked, all bones. Of course, Anthony, that probably makes a big man like you feel better, feel good. And then when she puts her..."

Weston was enjoying himself. He loved to inflict pain on others. He was enjoying himself so much that he was unprepared for the primal scream and thrust from Anthony that sent his body flailing against the wall. Momentarily stunned, he was defenseless when Anthony grabbed him and started beating his head against the hard tile floor. Beating it over and over. Weston's last thoughts were those of searing pain, as he remembered his classmates laughing and taunting him on the school bus.

Anthony couldn't stop beating Whitset's head against the floor. He was obsessed. He beat the administrator until blood ran from his ears and mouth. The back of his head was literally flattened from the beating. Satisfied that Whitset was dead, he threw his body into the closet, closed the metal door. He would tell them at group later that the administrator was dead in his closet. Anthony had sweet visions about the congrats he would receive tomorrow from his fellow patients. He knew they hated Whitset. He had been one of them, but the balance of power had been unfair. Now the balance was fair. Whitset was dead, and in Anthony Gavette's mind, that was really fair. He smiled at the thought.



Bye, bye, Lester, you son of a bitch. Forever!



The day had been endless. Alex was exhausted, mentally and physically. She had sent the talkative Mona home for the day, unable to handle any extraneous noise or conversation. She had called the Neuro ICU and been advised that Monique's condition was unchanged. She was still in a deep coma.

Alex was deeply depressed. The sun had gone down. She considered calling her grandmother in Virginia but knew Kathryn would pick up on the despondency in her voice. Her grandmother was just smart like that, and she could read Alex like a book. She didn't want to upset her grandparents and have them chartering a jet to New Orleans anytime soon.

As Alex sat at her desk, she remembered the day in February, just after Mardi Gras, when she had received Mitch's last letter. In essence, it was his declaration of love. For some reason, Alex pulled out her copy of the letter from her desk and reread it. It only made more hot tears come into her eyes, and she began to cry harder and wish things were different. Alex knew her life would never be the same. She knew she had to leave New Orleans and start over. Things here were just too impossible. There had been too much heartbreak in such a short period of time. First, February, and now all of this.

She continued with her morbid thoughts. She could easily identify her losses — Jack, Monique, Mitch, and possibly Robert. And for what? New Orleans had brought her nothing but heartache and grief for the last six months. The first year and a half in the Big Easy had been okay, but lately...

As she continued to think, her eyes strayed to a letter she had received from her colleague in San Francisco. A large managed care organization was seeking a hospital attorney to set up an in-house legal counsel office. The position was only for a year. Her friend was urging her to come for an interview, assuring her the organization would meet any stipulations she required. Alex began to consider it.

San Francisco sounded like a long way to go alone and start over. Virginia, Texas, New Orleans, San Francisco... Was this a logical progression for her career? But was that what she wanted, a career? Or did she want something else? Hadn't she said only a short time ago that she wanted a husband and a family?

Alex laughed out loud and began to consider how screwed up she was. Her grandparents would die if she moved to California. The congressman was convinced the place was doomed and had been waiting for it to fall off the face of the earth forever.

At this point, though, the opportunity was sounding more promising. Perhaps she should find a position in Virginia after New Orleans. Now, that was a thought. Her grandparents were growing older and she wanted to be closer to them. She missed them dreadfully. And, she missed Virginia, the horse farm, and her horse. Still, Alex continued to think as her office door opened. *Good*, she thought, *a distraction*. Anything was better than thinking about the last forty-eight hours.

Nadine stood in front of her.

"For heaven's sake, Nadine. Sit down. You're looking at me like I might suddenly go into orbit. I'm better. I think. No, I promise." Alex gave the forensic cop a brave smile.

Nadine sat down across from her and said, "Robert just spoke with Jack. The picture is not good for Dr. Desmonde. If I read between the lines, Robert is trying to offer Jack some hope. But I really don't think there is much, at least based on what Robert is saying at this point."

The sharp intake of air seemed to crush her chest. Alex knew her voice was breathless when she asked, "How did Jack take it?" Alex gazed outside at the darkening sky.

"Okay, I guess. He only wants her to talk to him. Says he's planning on marrying her, no matter what."

"I guess you know they have a secret relationship. But of course, you do, I told you in the car coming back from Mississippi. I only learned several days ago. They were so happy. Robert and I had dinner with them — to celebrate. I think they had planned to marry. They were so happy." Her voice trailed off, unable to believe that so much could happen so quickly and be so devastating.

"Yeah, I know. You told me. I hope she comes out of it. They'll be down here shortly. Robert was taking Jack to see Monique in the ICU again." Nadine's voice sounded glum.

Alex shuddered. "Oh my, I hope Jack's able to keep it together. I wish I were with him. The PACU or ICU can be scary and intimidating, to say the least. "

Nadine nodded. "Dr. Bonnet will do a good job. He's a kind, sensitive man." Nadine paused for a moment and looked at Alex directly. "You know, Alex, Dr. Bonnet loves you as well. Did you know that?"

Alex looked uncertain. "I don't know, Nadine. We have a lot of issues to work on. We were married once, and Robert's been troubled with his arm. I can't say for sure things will ever work for us. He's prone to sadness and depression and I don't want to live with that."

Nadine nodded and looked at her quietly, "That's part of his Creole blood. Do you want things to work out, Alex?"

Alex said in a tired voice, "I don't know, Nadine. There is too much happening now. Too many other things to work on. We'll see."

"Will you promise to allow Robert to help you work through this thing with Whitset? Your recovery from the rape will be the same no matter what the lab test determines. Do you understand that?" Nadine looked at her, her dark eyes locked with Alex's blue ones.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I'm pretty confused now. We'll see. I will promise you that I won't shut—" Alex was interrupted when Robert and Jack walked into her office. They both had a sense of urgency about them.

Robert walked over and hugged her for a moment. He could feel how stiff she felt in his arms. He sighed and looked at Jack.

Françoise said in a rough voice, "We've got to hightail it over to the Pavilion. There's another corpse over there!"

"My God, now who, Commander?" Nadine asked in a breathless voice. "Is this ever going to stop?"

"Don't know, Nadine. Josh just paged me again. He said to get over there ASAP. He and Elizabeth are up there, and the forensic team is coming."

Alex looked and felt weary, as she gathered her legal pad and purse. She asked, "Did anyone call Don Montgomery?"

"I'm not calling Don. I can't put up with him now. Let's move!" No one stopped to argue with Françoise.



The Pavilion was bristling with activity. The staff was not aware that Dr. Desmonde has been attacked. Betty Farve had sent Sandy Pilsner to announce it in a staff meeting before after the patients had dinner. Once again, the place was crawling with police. Sandy Pilsner met them at the locked door and ushered them in. Sandy announced she was covering for Donna Meade, who was still out from the injuries inflicted on her by Anthony Gavette.

"Sandy, you just keep showing up like a good penny every time something bad has happened." Alex reached out to hug her. "I heard they'd sent you up here to break the news about Monique."

Sandy hugged Alex back. "I'm hopeful for Monique. We both know people recover from horrific head injuries."

Alex nodded but remained silent.

Sandy continued, "Thank goodness for the added security. This place is crazy! All the seclusion rooms are full, and the place is finally sort of stable. Let's go back to the community room." Her voice was quiet and subdued, but her high color reflected the intensity of the situation.

"Who is dead? Tell us, Sandy." Alex's voice sounded desperate as they walked down the hall and entered the community room. She quickly looked around, relieved that only staff she knew were present.

Josh Martin met them at the community room door. He quietly ushered them over to a nearby table. His eyes were strangely bright. He looked pleased, even happy.

Sandy sat at the head of the table and addressed the group. "A little while ago in the evening group meeting, Anthony announced that he had a dead body in the closet in the seclusion room. No one really paid any attention to him. He had been locked in seclusion since his attack on Donna. Anyway, he began a long story about how his seclusion room had an elevator in the closet and how someone had come in his room. He told us how that someone had been using the seclusion room for his fun house and love nest and how that same someone had raped and killed a female patient earlier this year. One of the nurses remembered the suicide of a young woman in that room late this spring. I began to take notice, so I called Officer Martin here and he and I went with Anthony into the seclusion room. He was right. There is an elevator and the body..."

"Who the hell is in there?" Françoise's voice was furious. "Martin, have you secured the scene?"

Josh nodded and said, "Why don't we just show you, Commander, all of you if you'd like!"

Alex felt her fear increasing as they walked down the hall, passed the nurse's station, and entered the last seclusion room. Smears of blood were on the floor and the wall.

Josh moved ahead of the group and opened the closet. There, on the floor, in a pool of blood, hair, and brain matter, was a very dead Lester — Weston — Whitset.

A pitiful cry came from Alex, as she crammed her fist into her mouth and fainted into Robert and Josh Martin's arms.

At the same moment, Don Montgomery entered the room, screaming and cursing because he hadn't been called immediately. When he saw the dead Whitset, he turned and started upbraiding Jack Françoise for shoddy police work.

Don's voice was loud and angry. "Something's wrong here, Françoise? What the hell is he doing dead in a closet in my hospital? You and your officers are worthless! How am I ever going to explain this one to the media — to the board? My own administrator, dead in his own hospital on his own unit. What am I supposed to say?" Don's face was red with anger.

Françoise's dark eyes gleamed hatefully at the pompous Montgomery. He said in a scathing voice, "I don't really give a crap what you say, Montgomery, but listen to this. *Your* administrator, whom *you* hired *all* by yourself, was an imposter. He wasn't even a hospital administrator. The bastard didn't even have a college degree. What kind of a moron are you?"

Don looked at Jack with disbelief and said, "Listen, you stupid son of a bitch. Whitset is exactly who he is—"

Jack grabbed the hospital administrator by the shoulder and shook him as he interrupted Montgomery's tirade. "Listen, you idiot. Lester Whitset was really Weston Whitset. Lester, a bona fide hospital administrator, died years ago, and Weston, a deranged mental patient who spent most of his life confined for aberrant behavior, assumed his identity. He was a rapist and a murderer. Did you check him out, Montgomery, or did you just hire him because he promised to reduce costs?" Françoise paused for a moment, and then continued to go head to head with the red-faced CEO.

By this time, an audience had gathered outside the room. Françoise continued, completely out of control, his emotional agony unleashed. He said harshly, "By the way, Donald, how big was Whitset's percentage this quarter? What was his bonus for saving costs at the expense of patient care? Thousands of dollars? Talk about incompetent, look in the mirror, you weasel-faced son of a bitch."

Don was white with anger and unable to speak.

Françoise was enjoying the scene but was still angry. He said, "Never mind, you little ingratiating asshole, you don't have to tell me! It's a matter of record that the *Times Picayune* will be hot to know. You're a cheap, stingy, son of a bitch!" Françoise sneered at the CEO.

Don was livid with fury. He lunged toward the commander. Josh Martin was about to come to his commander's defense when Françoise slammed his fist into the administrator's face, cold cocking him onto the floor. A rousing cheer went up from the group.

Alex completely missed it. When she came to, Robert took her home, where she slept for hours.





Alex woke up in her bed in a cold sweat, hearing muffled, choking sounds. Where are they coming from? She looked around her darkened room. It's me, she noted. She felt like she was being suffocated. Her body was rigid and heavy. The illuminated dial of the alarm clock next to her bed said three a.m. At first, Alex's mind was numb and frozen. She felt acute pain in her shoulder as she attempted to roll over. Then, it all came back to her and an agonizing sound came from her mouth as she began to scream.

Immediately, Robert Bonnet was at her side.

She continued to cry uncontrollably. Robert attempted to take her into his arms to comfort her, but she resisted, pushing him away forcefully. She turned her body away from him and curled up into the fetal position in her bed.

Robert was desperate. He didn't know what to do. Every effort he made to comfort Alex made him feel increasingly useless. He was tempted to call Nadine Wells for advice but decided against it. He knew the policewoman had put in the long hours and deserved a good night's rest. After all, she had told him to expect something like this since Alex was in the initial phase of rape trauma syndrome. He tried to remember the things Nadine had told him to expect, but his tired mind refused to let him think back to their conversation. Gradually, Alex's crying slowed to a muffled sob, and Robert went into the kitchen to make her some hot tea. When he returned to her room with a tray, Alex was sound asleep.

Robert went back into the kitchen where he sat for several hours, reminiscing over his life with Alex and the tragic events of the past few days. He felt miserable, guilty. He had enough to contend with before, and now he had no idea where his life would lead or whether Alex would ever recover. Finally, he returned to bed, depressed and sad.

He rested fitfully in Alex's beautifully appointed guest room. His mind kept returning to the attack on Alex and Monique. Why hadn't he insisted on going in with Alex when he dropped her off at Monique's house? Why hadn't he sensed the danger? How could he have been so stupid? Robert continued with his self-deprecation until he could think of nothing else to blame himself for. This was all his fault. It was his fault Alex and Monique had been attacked. It was his fault their marriage had ended and that knowledge was utterly painful to him.

He felt tears jump into his eyes. The dinner he and Alex shared several nights ago had been so promising. He had begun to think that perhaps Alex would marry him again. Now, they had all of this to work through — the rape, the medical problems with Monique, and Jack's grief. Of course, he had been grappling for months with the thought that he would never be able to operate again. A surgeon without hands, an amputee, that's how he perceived himself. That in itself had caused him to be terribly depressed over the past six months. And now all of this. He could only hope and pray that he could cope.

Robert checked his watch for the third time in twenty minutes. It was almost six o'clock in the morning. He checked on Alex and she was sleeping peacefully. He then phoned the neuro intensive care unit at CCMC. The nurses reported that Dr. Desmonde was the same, stable but unresponsive. Robert could only guess how Jack was doing and figured he was feeling just as useless as he was. Thank goodness, he wasn't in Jack's position. At least Alex could think and talk, but Monique probably wouldn't ever come out of her coma. She probably wouldn't even wake up. Tomorrow, they would do the first EEG to measure her brainwave activity. He prayed that the swelling had

decreased. He wasn't ready to tell Jack they needed to disconnect the ventilator and let her die. Please, Lord, he prayed to himself, don't let that happen.

Robert returned to the kitchen and made coffee. The annoying feeling in his gut told him he was hungry, but he had no desire to eat. He continued to sit at the table, silently drinking coffee, and reminiscing over all the mistakes he had made in his adult life. He only wanted his childhood again, just to be young and carefree. Finally, he was aware that Alex was behind him. He could feel her presence.

She smiled tentatively at him, touched his shoulder, and asked, "Could you share your coffee with me?"

He stood immediately. "I can do better than that. I'll let you have your own cup."

Alex had huge coffee cups, just like the ones Alex's grandmother had in Virginia. Robert removed a brightly decorated porcelain cup from the cabinet, made Alex a cup of coffee in her Keurig, and set it down in front of her with a flourish. He was pleased that she looked so rested and relaxed.

Alex savored the rich flavor of the New Orleans coffee. She murmured her appreciation, "Mmm, this is good. I feel like I may be human again. Thanks, Robert. Thank you for staying with me and for always being there for me. It means a lot, especially in times like these."

Robert smiled, feeling a little brighter. Alex looked lovely this morning. Her hair was down and its curly reddish-chestnut color beautifully framed her delicately colored face. Her eyes were clear and blue. There were no signs of tears, dark circles, or fatigue. Only the black eye and the drooping shoulder told of her recent misery.

He said lightly, "You look rested this morning, Al. You must've gotten some sleep."

"Yes, I did. I remember awakening during the night and crying. It all came back to me, but I decided that today's another day and we need to move forward. Have you checked on Monique?" Her voice and her face expressed her concern about her friend.

"Yeah, I have. There's no change. It's still pretty early, Alex," Robert said, noting the crestfallen look on her face. "You know that." His voice was soft, but definitive, as he attempted to comfort her.

Alex nodded, stirring her coffee. She looked up and asked, "Did Anthony Gavette kill Whitset?"

Robert nodded. "Yes, he did. Apparently, Whitset had a secret access to the Pavilion. He used the old tunnels that connected the Pavilion to the main hospital building. Most people had totally forgotten they existed. That's how he had been coming and going secretly for months."

"Wasn't something said before I fainted about his killing a patient in there?"

"Yep, he did. He told Anthony, who reported it to the psych staff, and it checks out. I talked to Jack, who confirmed that a young woman admitted for depression a few months back had committed suicide in the room by slashing her wrists. The staff never knew where she'd gotten the razor. Apparently, Whitset gave it to her — at least, according to Anthony. Or, who knows, perhaps Whitset slashed her wrists and watched her bleed. He seemed to be that crazy."

"Did he rape her?" Alex asked and continued to stare into her coffee.

"I don't know. I don't think they can prove that, but Anthony said Whitset told him all about it. I would guess it's probably true. Whitset was a sick man." Robert looked carefully at Alex.

"Also, Jack seems to think Whitset probably did slash the woman's wrists because there was a bottle of wine and human blood found in his office. They were mixed together. I think forensics is going to type the blood and see if it matches the dead womans."

Alex was appalled and her face was disbelieving. "What, you think Whitset bled the woman's wrist into the wine bottle? How disgusting!" She shuddered at the thought.

Robert nodded. "Yes, grotesque and disgusting. Somehow, he got the blood into the wine bottle. Unbelievable!"

"Un huh, you bet. Real sick. You're sure he's dead?" Alex's voice was tremulous.

"Positive. I'm absolutely sure. I saw him."

Alex looked relieved. "I'm glad. Very glad. I guess that's not the best way to feel, but I'm glad he is dead."

Robert reached for her hand. "I think it's a very honest and appropriate way to feel. I feel the same way."

"Good," Alex said brightly. "I feel vindicated, and I'm hungry. Let's eat. What should we have?"

"I'll cook, you get dressed. You know that breakfast is the only meal I can make." Robert paused for a moment and said with a smile on his face, "By the way, Alex, do you remember what Jack did to Montgomery?"

Alex looked confused. "What Jack did to Don? No, I don't think so."

Delight was written all over Robert's face as he told her, "He cold-cocked him! Knocked the hell out of him! It was great!"

Alex burst into laughter. "You're kidding! When?"

"Yesterday, just after you fainted. I wanted to take a picture with my iPhone but didn't. Everyone standing around gave Françoise a huge cheer!"

Alex continued to laugh. "I'm sorry I missed it. Jack's been dying to do that for a long time and Montgomery finally pushed him over the edge. I just wish I'd seen it—" She was interrupted by the phone.

Robert answered and said, "Speak of the devil." It was Jack. They talked for several moments. Robert gave a delightful war whoop and hung up the phone. He was smiling a huge smile.

"Robert, what is it? What did he say?" Alex's voice was excited, impatient.

"Jack swears that Monique just squeezed his hand. He swears she can hear him. He said she opened her eyes!" Robert was ecstatic.

"What do the nurses say? Do you think Jack could've imagined it?" Alex felt hopeful but looked uncertain.

Robert stared at her and said firmly, "No. If Jack saw Monique with her eyes open and felt her squeeze his hand, then it happened."

Alex smiled happily. "Let's hurry up and eat. I want to go see for myself."

"Me, too. Get dressed and we'll eat in a hurry. Jack also wants to give us the final information about Whitset before he closes the case."

Alex felt her happiness ebb away and felt fear engulf her. *He must have the results of my lab reports*, she thought to herself. *At least I'll know*. Then, she remembered. *Well, maybe I will know something*.

The couple ate a quick breakfast and hurried to the hospital. They found Jack in the waiting room outside the intensive care unit. He looked forlorn, exhausted, and gloomy. His face brightened when he saw Robert and Alex.

"That damned doctor who operated told me there was no way Monique squeezed my hand. He said her brain is too swollen for her to do anything like that."

Alex felt her heart sink. She walked over and gave Jack a huge hug.

Robert said to Jack, "If you felt her squeeze your hand, then she squeezed your hand." Robert reassured him with a smile. "I'm going to go look in on her." Robert was mentally cursing the neurosurgeon. What a bastard the man was; but that being said, he was a great neurosurgeon.

"I'm going to go, too. The hell with that man. How about you, Alex? By the way, you look mighty good today." Jack leaned over, hugged her again, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Alex turned toward him and winced as her shoulder reminded her it was broken, smiled, and once again returned the hug offered by the thickset, kindhearted police commander. She whispered clandestinely, "I heard you knocked out my boss!"

Commander Françoise's eyes lit up, and he smiled from ear to ear. "You're damned right, I did, Al. I would have kept hitting the son of a bitch if Josh Martin hadn't stopped me. Little prick has had it coming for months..."

"Probably all of his life," Alex surmised.



Alex had a hard time controlling her emotions when she looked down at Monique Desmonde. She had forgotten how horrible craniotomy patients looked after surgery. Monique's eyes were both black, and her face was swollen. She wasn't recognizable. Alex managed to keep herself together but felt her heart sink as she heard Jack talking softly to her. She also began to talk to Monique. But there was no response. Monique seemed to be in a deep coma. Alex was beginning to doubt what Jack had seen. She looked over and saw Robert reviewing Monique's chart. He shook his head at Alex and came to the bedside.

Robert and Alex stood quietly looking at Monique.

Jack continued to hold her hand and talk to her. Finally, he said, "Well, she ain't talkin' now, but that doesn't mean she won't wake up a little later, right, Robert?"

"That's right, Jack. Let's go." Robert's voice was gentle.

"Nah, I'm staying a while longer. Can we meet in your office later this morning, Alex? I'll have everything by then and I'll give you both the finals. Nadine's coming at ten o'clock." Jack looked sad.

"Sure, Jack. We'll see you then."

"I'm going to the O.R. to get a shower and change my clothes. Either of you need anything?" Robert asked.

"No," Jack and Alex said in unison.

"I'll walk out with you, Robert. See you in a little while, Jack. You want any donuts?" Alex asked in a teasing voice.

"No, I'm not hungry lately," Jack said a little dismally. He knew what his friends were thinking.

On the way out of the unit, Alex asked Robert, "What do you think, Robert? Do you think Jack just wanted to believe Monique was coming out of it?"

"I don't think anything. I'm just praying Jack is right." Robert's voice was tense, and Alex could feel his disappointment. "That being said, she's still in a deep coma, and I certainly didn't see any response at all."



Mona, Bridgett, and Latetia were drinking coffee and gossiping in Alex's office. All three stood and hugged her when she came in.

Bridgett looked rested and she was laughing. "Guess what, Al? Angie's much better today! Last night she began to come around. She began talking about the attack and said it was Whitset who attacked her. Angie was a little emotional when Jack told her that Whitset was dead. It takes her a while to understand stuff, but then she said she was glad."

Alex hugged Bridgett again, as her secretary continued to talk.

"Anyway, she seemed relieved that Whitset was dead. Nadine told her that her responses were natural, well, you know, normal. Anyway, she is so much better, and I feel so grateful to you all." Bridgett looked like her old self. Her blonde hair was piled high on her head, her blue eyes were sparkling, and the rings of fatigue around her eyes were gone. Her clothes, once again, were outrageous. She wore a pink mini-skirt, an orange tank top, and a lime green blazer. She couldn't be any brighter. She even had on three-inch gold heels, and the largest lime green necklace and drop earrings Alex had ever seen.

Alex shook her head when she noted Bridgett's outfit, but was so happy for her that she just said, "Bridge, I'm so glad. I know Angie's going to be fine now. She is strong and practical, just like you, and she will be able to work through it. Besides, she has her husband and Jessica to pull her through. They'll help her refocus her life."

Bridgett hugged Alex again and said, "Alex, will you help me help her? You are so good at helping people with things."

Alex felt her heart start to beat frantically. She understood then that Bridgett didn't know that Whitset had attacked and raped her as well. Alex didn't know if she would be able to help herself, much less Angie.

"I'll do my best, Bridge. You know that. And by the way, you're so bright that most people would need sunglasses to look at you today. What an outfit!" If Bridgett picked up on the hesitancy in Alex's voice, she didn't let on.

Bridgett looked a bit chagrined. "Yeah, but I wanted to look cheerful for Angie. Believe me, she had plenty to say to me about my outfit. She's so conservative. She doesn't dress like me at all anymore. She used to hate it when Momma dressed us alike in bright colors."

Latetia, laughing at them, commented, "Yes, Miss Bridgett, now, she does wear the bright clothes. No question."

Alex's spirits rose as she looked at Leticia. "Latetia, how's the boss this morning?"

Latetia smiled coyly at Alex and said, "Well, Miss Alex, Mr. Montgomery isn't in this morning. I doubt he'll be here for the rest of the week. Rumor has it that he has a black eye, among other injuries. I even heard he needed to see his dentist 'cause he lost a few teeth!" Latetia was smiling broadly, her white teeth shining.

Alex held up her hand to stop her and said gaily, "Say no more, Latetia. Let's just revel in rumors and the memories! And, Miss Mona, how are you today?"

"I'm all right, Alex. I'm glad to see you're looking so good. Much better than yesterday! I guess I'm a little sad, though. Looks like I'll be out of a job soon. Bridge is coming back next week." Mona looked a little forlorn.



"Get off it, Mona. You know you can only stand working a week at a time. If you need some extra work, I'm sure Alex can arrange it. Right, Alex?" Bridgett winked at Alex.

Alex smiled at both women. "Yeah. You bet. Just let me know, Mona."

Bridgett changed the subject. "How's Dr. Desmonde, Alex?"

Alex shook her head. "Not good, Bridgett. She's the same. She's in a coma. Dr. Bonnet is hopeful that she'll regain consciousness soon. Her neurosurgeon is less hopeful."

Bridgett and Latetia looked sad.

Mona said expectantly, "Commander Françoise was in here earlier. He said she had squeezed his hand."

Alex nodded her head and said, "Yes, I know. He told me, too. But now, she seems to be back in a deep coma." There was silence and Alex continued, "Bridgett or Mona, could you have dietary send up some coffee and donuts for us? Jack and Robert are coming over soon and will be in my office."

Bridgett said with some authority, "The commander just needs to be patient, Angie was in a coma too, and now she's just fine."

"Why don't you remind him of that, Bridgett, when you see him today," Alex suggested. "He could use a perk."

Bridgett gave Alex a bright, dazzling smile. "I'll do just that, Alex. The commander is a good man."

Alex nodded in agreement while Mona went to call dietary. Then, she waved goodbye to the secretaries and went into her office.

As Alex savored the silence and elegance of her office, she noted she had less than an hour before Jack, Nadine, and Robert would show up. It occurred to her that no one knew about her rape except for Jack, Robert, Josh, and Nadine. That was comforting. If Bridgett or Mona knew, she would've picked up on it. Alex felt some relief that her confidentiality was intact.

As she continued to think, she again noticed the letter from her friend in San Francisco. Alex found herself reading the letter and scanning the organization's annual report. Her interest in setting up their legal department was heightened. More than ever, she felt a pressing need to get out of New Orleans and away from Crescent City Medical Center for a while. Perhaps she could arrange for a year or two sabbatical. Maybe by then, Don would have quit, and she could come back. She was infinitely sick of him and his juvenile antics. But she might as well forget California. Her grandparents would have a fit, particularly the congressman. She really needed to get closer to Virginia. It occurred to her that this was the second time she had had these thoughts in a very short period of time. *Maybe, though, she should consider California for a year.*

Mona buzzed her and said the others were in her conference room. Alex went in, her heart pounding, as if she were about to be executed. Now she would find out if she had been forcibly raped or not. Then she could make plans and get on with her life.

Jack, Robert, and Nadine were drinking coffee and talking quietly. Only Robert was eating a donut. *A bad sign*, Alex thought. Jack had never turned down a donut before. She studied his face as she sat down. It was dismal as he spoke to them. He looked like a whipped puppy.

"I don't have much to tell you," he began. "First of all, Whitset was responsible for the rape and beating of Angie and the murder of Mrs. Smithson. The evidence is conclusive; the bite marks match up perfectly."

Alex and Robert sat quietly, and Nadine said, "Go on, Jack, what else?"

Jack sighed and continued, "There's also evidence that Weston Whitset killed his elementary school teacher when he was seven years old. After that, he was committed to a state institution for the

criminally insane. Anyway, Weston assumed the identity of his brother, Lester, about twenty years ago. Lester was a hospital administrator in the British West Indies and died there rather unexpectedly. As a matter of fact, he died during a visit from Weston. Weston Whitset had been released earlier from a forensics unit and had gone there to visit. Apparently, Lester Whitset's death was never reported in the United States, but Weston Whitset's was." Jack looked around at the incredulous stares of the group.

The commander continued, "Therefore, the psych hospital wrote him off and never expected him back for follow-up. There was some speculation of foul play in Lester's death, but the evidence against Weston was inconclusive. After a year or so, Weston Whitset reappeared in the United States as Lester Whitset and assumed his brother's identity and occupation."

Alex moaned and said, "Oh, my God, this is unbelievable!"

Françoise agreed, "Yes, unbelievable, but true. Anyway, the records at the Pennsylvania psychiatric hospital noted that Lester Whitset had called from the West Indies, shortly before his death, and expressed concern because his brother had stopped taking his medicine and was acting strangely. Shortly after that, the hospital received notice of Weston Whitset's death, so they closed their case."

Robert interrupted, "So, was it proven that Whitset killed his brother?"

"No," Jack said. "Lester Whitset apparently drowned while sailing. An autopsy revealed he had been taking illegal drugs — a real surprise to everyone. Anyhow, the investigation and evidence against Weston was inconclusive. It's an incredible story!" Jack lamented, as he shook his head.

"What was Whitset's psychiatric diagnosis?" Robert asked.

Jack shook his head and said, "I'll try to explain, but it's hard. He was diagnosed with autism when he was little and then as a paranoid schizophrenic. He was dangerous and violent. I'll never understand why they let him travel out of the United States." Françoise shook his head disgustedly.

Alex remembered back when psychiatric hospitals had emptied their patients into society. The timing was about right, the late 1960s and early 1970s. "Not so surprising, really. Has anyone in psychiatry reviewed Whitset's records from Pennsylvania?"

Commander Françoise smiled at her. "Funny you should mention that, Alex. Our state forensic psychiatrist called me an hour ago. He said that, based on his review of Whitset's records, he would diagnose him as having delusional misidentification syndrome."

"What! What in the heck is that? I've never heard of it. Delusional misidentification syndrome. Is that for real?" Robert asked.

"It's apparently a syndrome in which the affected patient believes that people in his environment experience radical changes in their psychological identity without a change in their physical appearance. In this case, the forensic expert said he based his opinion on the fact that Whitset was actually suffering from Fregoli Syndrome. Fregoli's occurs when the patient has the delusion that others exhibit radical changes in their physical identity without changing their behavior."

"Huh? Say that again, Jack. I want to be sure I understand," Nadine said. The others nodded their heads in agreement.

"I wish Monique was here to explain it. I really can't. Interestingly enough, she had suspected it and had noted that as a potential diagnosis in his file in her office. Let me try to tell you what I can." Jack looked so tired and sad that Alex was alarmed for him.

Jack repeated the definition of misidentification syndrome and continued, "Whitset's records say that he reported his schoolteacher turned into plastic before he killed her. He said she was a plastic person, an imposter, as he referred to them, and he had to kill her because his voices told him to. The

forensic psychiatrist thinks that is why Whitset tried to destroy and eradicate the faces of Angie, Monique, and Mrs. Smithson. The shrink thinks Whitset saw them as plastic people. Apparently, he believed that his job was to kill imposters!"

Noting the confusion on the faces of his colleagues, Jack tried again, "In other words, Monique, Angie, and Mrs. Smithson turned to plastic in front of him. A delusion, I guess. Anyway, whenever Whitset got angry with them, they appeared plastic to him. They were physically, in his mind, the same people with plastic faces. They were the same people with the same behavior, but, Whitset, the wacko, considered them imposters and his enemies. Since his voices told him to destroy imposters, he went about his mission."

Alex felt sick to her stomach. "This is hideous, just grotesque. It sounds like the plot for a horror movie. I can't believe it happened here at Crescent City!"

Nadine nodded her head in agreement with Alex and said, "Yeah, it's a ghastly story. Isn't it ironic that it was Whitset who was actually the imposter? Do these types of patients usually commit rape, Jack?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know, Nadine. The state guy didn't say. There is no evidence to suggest they do. I forgot to ask, I was so appalled at the story. Anyway, Whitset did have an aberrant sexual history. There were several sexual situations when he was hospitalized, so I guess it's hard to say. We do know that Whitset raped people."

"I guess Whitset planted the evidence to try to implicate Jim McMurdie, didn't he?" Alex asked.

Jack answered affirmatively. "Yep, and almost got away with it too. I think he knew Monique was on to him. I think that's why he went after her. Just like Whitset's schoolteacher, Angie, and Mrs. Smithson, I suppose Monique turned to plastic and appeared as an imposter in Whitset's sick, whacked out mind." Jack's voice was sad and forlorn. "I hate crazies," he added.

There was a long silence as each of them considered Jack's story. It was a lot to take in and understand.

Finally, in a quavering voice, Alex asked, "Jack, do you have the results of my rape tests?"

The commander looked at her gently and said, "Yes, I do, Alex. The tests are inconclusive. Whitset was a non-secretor and..."

Alex felt her heart sink. *Now I'll never know*, she thought to herself.

Jack interrupted her thoughts and said, "However, the other tests were conclusive. The physician reported no evidence of penetration or any other physical evidence that would support an actual physical rape."

Alex felt optimistic for a moment, until Nadine's sharp voice interrupted her.

"You still encountered a psychological rape, so you'll have to be prepared to work through the trauma. The emotional piece is unchanged. You do understand that, don't you, Alex?"

Alex nodded and said, "Of course I do. Thank heavens that Josh Martin arrived when he did. I'll be thankful for that for the rest of my life." In her heart, Alex knew that she hadn't been raped by Whitset. For some reason, that gave her comfort, and she was ready to move on.

Robert took her hand and smiled at her.

Alex resisted the urge to jerk it away from him, not quite understanding why she was having such a negative reaction to Robert. He had been just great, wonderful to her in fact. *What the hell was wrong with her?*

Just at that moment, Mona appeared at the door, breathless, and said, "Commander, Commander, the nurse in neurosurgery is on the phone. She has news for you. The phone in here should ring in just a moment."

Jack jumped up and grabbed the conference phone.

Alex, Robert, and Nadine looked at him expectantly, hope on each of their faces.

Jack broke out into a gleeful laugh, saying, "I'll be right up." He turned to his friends, "She's awake, she's awake! She asked for me! I'll see you yo-yo's later."

Jack hugged Alex, Nadine, and Robert all at the same time and then literally danced out of Alex's conference room.

"Think he'll take the elevator?" Alex quipped.

"Nah," said Robert. "He'll run up the four flights of stairs! I'd better arrange for a crash cart by the elevator."

They all burst out laughing, all aware of Jack's elevator phobia. Life was good after all.





LATER THAT EVENING, Alex and Robert were finishing dinner at Café Dégas, one of Alex's favorite neighborhood restaurants. The mood had been light and joyful after the great news about Monique. Now, as Alex looked around the restaurant, she found herself a little depressed. Café Dégas had been Mitch's favorite restaurant and they had dined there often. Her thoughts returned to Mitch and how much she had loved him — *or, at least, thought she had.*

Robert leaned forward and asked in his deep, beautiful voice, "Why so pensive, Alex? We're having a wonderful time! We have so much to be thankful for."

Alex looked at him, smiled lightly, and said, "Yes, we do, but I need to tell you something, Robert."

Robert felt the walls crashing in. He knew it was his depression returning. "Yes," he said hesitantly, afraid of what she would say and knowing he didn't want to hear it.

"I'm going to Virginia for a few weeks. You know how I go back home for renewal. I need to see Dundee and ride her through the woods. I need some time away. I also need to check on Grand and Granddad."

"Yes, I know that," Robert said, his voice anxious, hoping that Alex would invite him as she had in February.

Alex knew what he was thinking, but she also knew she needed time alone. She continued, "I need some time to myself. So much has happened. I'd like to spend some time in friendly, familiar surroundings."

"I understand. I'll be here when you get back. You know that." His voice was low and gentle, his French accent subtle, refined, and cultured.

Alex was trying to choose her words carefully. She knew Robert loved her and she didn't want to hurt him any more than she had to.

She continued, "When I return from Virginia, I think I'm going to consider an opportunity in San Francisco. They're looking for an attorney to set up a legal department in a new managed care organization. I've gotten several letters from them and I..."

Robert felt like something was grabbing his heart. He looked at her sadly and said tenderly, "I understand, Alex. I want you to do what's best for you. I have always wanted that." His eyes were sad.

"I'm not planning to leave forever. I'm only going to take a sabbatical. Maybe a year or so, just to get this legal department up and running. I will come back to New Orleans. You know my grandfather would just die if I moved to San Francisco permanently. He's half dead now because I'm living here."

Robert nodded and smiled. "Yes, I know. I am well aware," Robert said, trying to make light of the situation.

"Anyway, he's convinced it's past time for California to fall into the ocean. It's just that... I need time to think things out and recover from this year. So much has happened..." Her voice faltered.

"You don't need to explain, Alex. I know you need time. I'll be here when you get back. I'll take care of things here — Monique and Jack, and the like. And I'll clean this place up while you're gone. I'll be sure Farve is gone when you return and will work hard on getting Montgomery out of here too." Robert's voice was strong.

"Thank you, Robert. Thank you for loving me enough to let me go." She looked at him sadly.

"I do, Al, and I will." He leaned across the table and gently kissed her. In his heart, he believed he had lost her. But he could still hope, right? He could wait for her forever... and then some.





• • • •

JACK FRANÇOISE SAT back in the recliner in his office on Royal Street, his door shut against the noise of the bullpen, his eyes closed tightly as they oozed silent tears. He had been motionless for hours, battling emotions he never knew he had. For the first time in his life, Jack felt hopeless, useless, and drained of everything that was good in life.

He had returned from CCMC late in the afternoon where Monique, who had been doing well since she had awakened several days ago, had once again lapsed into a deep coma. Her neurosurgeon was an asshole and was not hopeful that she would awaken again. Of course, the jackass doctor had never thought she would wake up to begin with. Robert encouraged Jack to be hopeful, but of course, Robert was of no use because he was devastated over Alex's plans to leave CCMC for a year in San Francisco, pending Don's approval of course. Robert viewed her exodus as a direct rejection of him and their future. Unfortunately, his therapist was in a coma and unable to help. *Things really suck around here*, Jack thought to himself.

To make matters worse, his nemesis, the mayor had called the commander to City Hall and berated him for not finding the killer of Senator Beau LaMont and DNC Hayes Hunter. Jack figured the governor was giving the mayor grief and since shit flowed downward, it was now his turn. The mayor didn't give a damn about the two kids who had been murdered on the same day. What a surprise! Jack knew that Dr. Madeline Jeanfreau had connected the political killings with the murder of the kids, but he hadn't had time to meet with her to examine the evidence. There was never enough time and never enough energy to get things done.

Jack sighed to himself as the tears began to cease. He felt his weariness subside and despondency decrease. Tomorrow was another day. Hopefully, it would be a better day. Perhaps, Monique would squeeze his hand, and he could focus once again on finding St. Germaine.

After a short nap, Jack took a deep breath, rose from his recliner, swung open his office door, and roared greetings to his nightshift. They rallied around him in support. The NOPD of the 8th Police District loved and respected their leader. Jack felt his vigor and energy return. He *would* make it and so would Monique, Alex, and Robert. He was confident again. Life was good.

**The End**

• • • •

CONTINUE THE HEART-pounding medical thriller series with Alex, Robert, Jack and Monique with [VIRAL INTENT](#).

• • • •

Want to join my VIP Readers Group? Stop by and sign up.

[www.judithlucci.com](http://www.judithlucci.com)

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

**JUDITH LUCCI** is a Wall Street Journal, USA Today and Amazon best-selling author. She is the award-winning author of the Alexandra Destephano Medical Thriller and the Michaela McPherson "Two Sleuth's and a Dog" Crime fiction series. Her newest series, Artsy Chicks Mysteries, features a group of eccentric and talented but zany artists in their Art Gallery at a Mountain Resort.

In 2017, 'Viral Intent' (Book 3) Alexandra Destephano Series) was awarded a Gold Medal by Readers' Favorites for 'Best Political Thriller' as was her crime thriller 'The Case of Dr. Dude' (Michaela McPherson #1) for a Gold Medal for 'Best Amateur Sleuth of 2017. 'The Most Wonderful Crime of the Year' won an additional gold medal for 'Best Holiday Read' of 2017.





WASP  
BY FIONA QUINN  
**Author's Rating:**



**Language:\*\* Sexuality:\*\* Violence:\*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

WASP is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

©2017 Fiona Quinn

All Rights Reserved

Fonts with permission from Microsoft

Publisher's Note:

Neither the publisher nor the author has any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites and their content.

No part of this book may be scanned, reproduced, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without the express written permission from the publisher or author. Doing any of these actions via the Internet or in any other way without express written permission from the author is illegal and punishable by law. It is considered piracy. Please purchase only authorized editions. In accordance with the US Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at [FionaQuinnBooks@Outlook.com](mailto:FionaQuinnBooks@Outlook.com).

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.



**Zoe knows the secrets, now they're coming for her.**

The enemy will stop at nothing to get to Zoe and the military secrets that could change everything. What Zoe knows is getting people killed. Is she next?

**Gage is a hardened Marine special forces operative with only one soft spot: Zoe.**

Her desperate screams echoing from inside her home switch his instincts from lover to guardian. To keep America safe, to protect the love of his life, Gage is coming full throttle.

USA Today Bestselling author Fiona Quinn will take you on a thrill ride, weaving an intricate plot that puts Zoe's scientific mind and Gage's battle-hardened skills to the test. With the safety of the US at stake.





Zoe

*Dabbur zann ala kharab esshoh*

**The buzzing of the wasp brought ruin to its nest**

*~ Egyptian Proverb*

• • • •

Zoe twisted her body into a new position under her blankets. Tugging the covers up under her chin, she desperately wished for sleep to overtake her anxious, over caffeinated mind. She squinted at the clock readout glowing from her bedside table, calculating. It had been forty-two hours since she'd last closed her eyes. And even that had been a nightmare-driven sleep, leaving her worse off than when she'd gone to bed.

That night, her flip-flopping and moaning had propelled Gage from her side. He'd stomped across her room, pulled on his pants, and headed home to “actually get a little shut-eye.” She hadn't heard from him since. Zoe rolled over to punch at her pillow, trying to find a restful position to curl her body.

*He didn't answer my text.*

Her friends had warned Zoe about seeing a new guy just as she'd signed contracts to start a lab project, especially one this big and this time sensitive. But first off, Zoe didn't like to be told what to do. And second? Gage was a Marine Raider, an elite special operator, with a highly capable warrior's body. Why shouldn't she have a little indulgent pleasure to balance out the stresses of her day? Days. She hadn't slept for days.

Metal on metal, a scrape sounded at Zoe's front door, followed by the slow moan of uncoiled hinges. A smile curved her lips as she imagined Gage sauntering in to her apartment to answer her request for some stress relief.

*Good. This is exactly what I need.*

She sat up, regretting having pulled on Gage's sweats to wear to bed. She flipped her covers to the side. It would be nicer if he found her in something lacy...or maybe nothing at all. Zoe gathered the hem of the black hoodie to tug it off, but whispers from the living room stilled her hands. More than one set of heavily booted footsteps stole over the wooden floor, followed by the scratch of a drawer sliding open.

Zoe froze. Her mind was on fast forward, but the joints of her body held tight, as if rusted and ineffectual. Her brain screamed at her arms and legs to move, to grab a weapon, to hide. Something. *Anything.*

As she cowered there, her ears worked to dissect the moth-like movements down the hall. She registered the sound of each leaf of paper as it was lifted and rejected. She had a good idea why someone had broken into her condo. Her liaison, Colonel Guthrie from DARPA—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the R and D arm of the US military—had warned her to take extra security precautions, but she had scoffed at the idea. Few people actually knew what Zoe did for a living, and as long as she was tight-lipped, she thought she was safe. She was foolish, was more like it.

*This could be an ordinary breaking and entering*, she tried to reason. But her gut refused to be that naïve. Everyday robberies didn't happen on the twentieth floor in a secured high-rise. When the intruders were done sifting through her desk, surely they'd come and wrench answers from her. Zoe couldn't handle pain. She wasn't a hero. She'd tell them everything.

Straining against her fear-paralysis, Zoe slid off the bed. First her toes, then her knees found the rug. As she pushed and forced herself into action, her brain whirled, feeding her information. She knew that her limbic system was working hard to keep her alive. Though letting off the brake on her body's movements would go a far distance in helping her. Ironic that the system meant to save her was probably going to expose her instead. Her mind whirled with odd tidbits of information that she knew couldn't be random. Her brain was sifting through data it had accumulated in its twenty-eight years of life and was thrusting certain stories forward. Survival strategies.

The loudest message came from a book she had read about Nazi Germany. The Jews, in hiding, would gather all of their bed linens and turn the mattresses over so the Gestapo wouldn't feel the warmth from where their bodies had lain. Zoe eyed the crumpled linens on her queen-sized bed. She forced her arm to smooth the covers into place and shake the pillow so it looked like a sloppily made bed. She snagged her phone from the nightstand as she pulled her arm back to her side. The effort left her panting.

Her unyielding lungs had lost their elasticity. In the ninth grade, her friend, Hope McBride, stood in front of the class to give a speech and stopped breathing until she turned red, then blue, then passed out on the floor. That's how Zoe had learned the phrase *anxiety induced syncope*. The idea of passing out with intruders in her apartment was even scarier than her current panic, so Zoe worked to suck more air up her nostrils.

*Hide*. She had to hide. Zoe let gravity pull her the rest of the way to the floor. The sheepskin rug muffled the sound of her collapse. She rolled, tugging her body past the green dust ruffle until she lay under her bed. It was hide-and-seek 101—the very first place anyone would search. Her body iced at the thought.

*Light waves*, her brain whispered. That was how the intruders would become aware of her. Her body mass would stop the light from hitting the rear wall. *Move. Move now!* The best she could do was to swivel and align her hips with the far corner of the bed, letting her legs extend out the length of the wall; her torso stretched across the headboard. She glanced down at the phone clenched in her fingers and drew a blank on whom she should call for help. Someone from DARPA? The Pentagon? Zoe was learning to hate adrenaline. Thoughts refused to crystalize. Pulling up her recent calls, hoping for inspiration, she saw FBI Special Agent Damion Prescott's name and tapped out a text that read: **SOS**. She pressed send, then quickly squeezed the button to silence the ringer.

Zoe listened past her panting. The guest bedroom door scraped open. Then the bathroom. They were getting closer. Zoe toed the elastic at the ankle of Gage's sweat pants over her feet. She turtled her head and hands into the perspiration-soaked hoodie to hide her skin. The number 9-1-1 suddenly surfaced and floated to the top of her swirling thoughts. She dialed.

"9-1-1. Where is your emergency?"

Zoe wanted to jump through the phone and throttle the man for answering so loudly. "Shh. Listen." She managed to say just as her bedroom door snicked open. Zoe pushed the phone into the front pocket of the hoodie, hoping the dark fabric would hide the screen light. Her body was traitorously loud. Her pulse swished rhythmically in her ears. Her heart rate galloped. Her breath came in ragged gulps. Zoe knew they would hear her. And if they didn't hear her, they would surely smell her as her

adrenal glands forced fear stench through her pores. The intruders would drag her out from under her bed. Then they would...

Before Zoe's brain formulated a prediction, a loose floorboard squeaked as someone moved into her room. The bedroom light clicked on and exasperated voices conferred. She heard someone move toward her closet and the whoosh of hangers being thrust aside. Zoe stopped breathing. A hand shot under her bed. Fingers splayed wide, it swished through the air before it pulled back out again.

As foreign words in deep male voices jumbled their syllables together, Zoe tried to pick out what language the men were speaking. There was a pause in the men's discussion, then in heavily accented English, "She isn't here. Her bed hasn't been slept in." He was on his cell phone. "Yes, okay... Be there in five."

The front door whined on its hinges. "Hey, Zoe. I'm here." The sexy grin in Gage's voice pried open Zoe's jaw and dragged a horrified scream up her throat.



## GAGE

• • • •

Gage's reaction was instantaneous. Suddenly thrown back to his days in the Middle East when he'd be laughing in the streets with his buddies then shot at from behind, his survival instincts didn't need priming. He was on the starting block ready to jet into action. Gage raced down the hall.

A man in tactical gear with black face paint distorting his features filled Zoe's bedroom door. A long blade glinted in his hand. Without breaking stride, Gage's heel shot out to catch the guy's knee, forcing it backward. The intruder's arms flew up for balance. Gage slammed his fist into the tango's throat, crushing his windpipe.

As the hostile collapsed, Gage caught movement in the bedroom's far corner. An unsub, identically suited up, sprang toward the fight. Gage leapt over the dying man to get his feet clear of obstruction. The second tango depressed the button on his stun gun. Sparks crackled as he descended on Gage. Gage blocked the man's arm, twisting his body inward and exploding out in a back fist that broke the man's nose. Gage's boot settled on the man's stomach as he push-kicked him out of reach, driving the man into the highboy. The intruder's head whipped back with his momentum, cracking against the sharp edge of the wooden lip. Gage hurled himself forward, wrapped his fingers around the man's trachea and squeezed until the threat had been neutralized.

Gage pushed back, winded by the exertion. He scanned the room, then shot through the condo, scouring the place for any other intruders.

Returning to the bedroom, he reached under the bed and dragged Zoe out into the open. Her body was slack; her skin gray. He held shaking fingers to Zoe's carotid artery, muttering a prayer under his breath that he'd find a pulse. In the field, he never felt fear when he killed the enemy or saved a victim—the fear came when he thought he'd lost someone from his team, his family.

With the steady thrum of her heartbeat under his fingertips, Gage sucked a lungful of air through his nostrils and sent a cloud of stress back out past his lips. He slapped his fingers lightly against Zoe's cheek. "Zoe? Hey there, Zoe. Open your eyes."

Her mahogany hair shifted back and forth, the long strands tangling in her eyelashes as she roused from her faint. Suddenly, Zoe's lids opened wide with shock. She scrambled to her knees, fists raised protectively. "Gage?" she whispered, as if not trusting what was in front of her.

"It's me, Zoe. You're safe." His heart beat furiously against his ribs, pumping blood to his muscles, held at the ready. His face was contorted into the brutal scowl he wore into battles. He worked to relax his stance, to take the violence out of his eyes, so Zoe could feel secure.

Zoe's gaze shifted to the intruders in their heaps of wayward body parts. Gage watched her eyes lose their focus and roll back in her head. Her body seemed to melt. Clapping iron hands onto her arms, he lowered her onto the rug. "Zoe, it's going to be okay. You're safe." He put conviction into the words he hoped would bolster her, but his warning antennae buzzed. He didn't really know if she was safe or not. "Stay with me, Zoe. Come on. Deep breaths."

She nodded and sucked in a lungful of air. He focused on her body, sprawled limply in front of him. His hands swept methodically over every inch of her as he looked for blood or other signs of

trauma. “Did they hurt you, Zoe? Did they touch you?” His mind tried to grasp why two armed men were in Zoe’s condo.

“No, I hid.” Her words rattled between chattering teeth.

Gage pushed to standing. He kicked the black military-issue bag lying near the bureau. Zip-ties, a prison hood, and a neatly folded field stretcher scattered across her floor. He kicked the bag again to reveal a plastic bag with syringes and a vial of transparent liquid. In one stride, he towered over the second man he had killed. He pulled his phone from his pocket and took a picture of the tango’s face, then one of his profile. Gage scrolled through his apps list and pulled up his fingerprint display. Using the hem of his shirt to cover the man’s hand, Gage rolled the guy’s thumb and index finger onto the screen.

“They were here to kidnap you?” Gage stooped to gather the same identification info from the guy lying in her the doorway. “Why would they want to do that?” Gage dipped his head as he checked the guy’s pulse, to be doubly sure that there was none.

“Kidnap?” Zoe tried to jump up, but fell forward onto all-fours, her stomach heaving.

Gage shoved his phone back in his pocket and wrapped his arm under her hips. He half-carried, half-dragged Zoe to the bathroom. As she hunkered over the toilet, sirens sounded in the distance. Zoe pulled her phone from her pocket and whispered, “Thank you. I can hear them coming.”

Gage read the numbers 9-1-1 on the screen before she tapped the red dot to disconnect, leaning with a moan back over the toilet bowl.

“It’s going to be all right.” Gage smoothed a hand over her hair and gathered the strands into a makeshift ponytail away from the bile Zoe was gagging out. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Funny, but as many times as he’d said that out loud, his words held zero conviction. He had been through enough crap on his special ops missions that he’d learned to trust his instincts. And right now, every cell in his body said this was just the prelude.

Zoe tilted her head to the side and swiped the back of her wrist across her mouth. Her skin, which was normally sun-kissed tan, a gift of her Hawaiian ancestry, was still pale and clammy. Gage pulled off his jacket and tucked it around her. She plopped onto her bottom and pulled his jacket tightly about her shivering frame as she squirmed backward and hunkered against the bathroom wall like a hurt animal.

A fist hammered against her front door. “Police. Open up.”

Gage put a steady hand on Zoe to make sure she wasn’t going to keel over and smack her head into the tub, then made his way to the front door.

“Hands. *Hands!*” The officer shouted with his finger twitching near the trigger of his holstered gun. Gage laced his fingers, planted his hands on the top of his head, then took two slow paces back to give the officers space to move into the condo. Gage followed the gaze of the cop in front as it landed on the contorted leg of the dead man at the end of the hall. The cop rolled Gage and slammed him up against the wall. Gage’s hands flew out and smacked against the drywall to stop his nose from being crushed. A forearm pressed into his back and his feet were kicked to widen his stance. Nervous hands patted him down, yanking his knife from his waistband.

“Special Agent Damion Prescott, FBI.” Gage heard at the door. He wished he could turn his head to see, but the officer’s hand splayed across Gage’s scalp, fastening him in place with what felt like the officer’s full weight.

*FBI?* Gage’s mind went to the reasons why tonight could have possibly played out like it had, and all he could come up with was that the Zoe he thought he knew was not the real Zoe. She must be involved in some pretty deep shit. As the officers introduced themselves as responding to a 9-1-1 call

for help, Gage let those thoughts float around in his head. Testing them out. He couldn't believe for a second that Zoe would do anything outside of the law. Nope. He wasn't buying it.

Prescott, judging from his institutional looking suit, moved past him to stick his head around the bathroom door. He swung his focus toward Gage. "Is she hurt?"

"She's in shock." Gage didn't move from his wide legged stance, his cheek crushed against the wall. "She needs an ambulance." He heard one of the officers in the front room call for a paramedic.

Prescott pushed farther into the apartment to stand in front of Zoe's room. "The apartment was searched and secured? Only two?"

"Yes, sir," Gage responded.

"Would you let him off the wall already?" Prescott asked the police.

When the officer released him, Gage gave himself a shake.

Prescott looked past him toward the officers, who had tripled in number since Gage had opened the door. "This is a case of national security. The Bureau will be along for the ride."





## GAGE

• • • •

Gage stood with his back against the cold surface of the fridge, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He was squeezed into the tiny kitchen with DCPD Detective Adamson and Special Agent Prescott. Both of them were asking questions and scribbling notes, even though their tape recorders sat on the counter beside him, digitally capturing every word out of his mouth.

“What can I say? I don’t know what’s going on. I got a text from Zoe saying she wanted me to come over. I finished up with work—”

“At Quantico? Is that your base?”

“Quantico for now, my unit is based out of Lejeune.” Gage scrubbed a hand down his face. “I grabbed a quick shower and drove up here to spend the night. When I walked through the door, Zoe was screaming her head off and some knife-wielding ops guy was lunging at me.”

“Ops? How do you know that?” Prescott asked.

“He was combat trained. It was his stance. His eyes. The way he held his weapon. The knife was held backward in his hand. Once you’ve been face to face with the real deal, it’s not hard to spot someone with advanced training.”

Prescott nodded.

“The only reason I prevailed was that I shocked the hell out of them when I walked through the door.” He nodded his head in the direction of the dead men. “They came ready to restrain a sleeping female, give her a shot, and wait the twenty minutes or so for efficacy in order to do whatever the hell they were sent to do. From their gear, I’d guess a snatch and drag.”

“Sent?” Adamson asked.

“It sure looked like a mission. Someone outside must have been running them.”

“Do you think they were US military?” Prescott asked.

Gage sent him a scowl. “We weren’t exactly exchanging phone numbers to hook up for a beer later. They didn’t say anything from the time I arrived on scene until they were neutralized.”

“So, Zoe screamed. You see two guys. You assumed they were there for criminal reasons, so you killed them.” Adamson skimmed a finger down his notes as he listed off the sequence, then looked up at Gage with raised eyebrows.

Gage closed his eyes then opened them in disbelief. “Serious?” he asked.

“They could have been playacting some kinky scene.” He tipped his head. “Is Zoe into that kind of thing?”

“She’s Ms. Kealoha to you,” Gage snarled as he pushed Adamson back against the counter and pinned him with a hard bone from his forearm against the detective’s windpipe. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?” he growled through clenched teeth.

Prescott stepped forward to lay a hand on Gage’s shoulder. “Hey, hey, hey. I apologize for the detective. Let’s cool the temperature down a bit.”

An EMT walked into view as he pulled a stretcher down the hall. When Gage moved toward Zoe, he heard Adamson snarl, “Don’t you *ever* apologize for me.”

“He just killed two men with his bare hands to save his girlfriend’s life. Do you really want to wrestle with that tiger while he’s in combat mode?”

Gage reached for Zoe’s hand and entwined his fingers with hers. She looked up at him; her beautiful obsidian eyes shining with horror. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry,” she stuttered out.

Gage kissed the back of her hand. “I’m glad I was here for you. You’re safe now.” He tried to sooth her with the calm tone of his voice. He still didn’t believe this was the end, but those were the words that sprang from his lips. It physically hurt to see her so vulnerable. She shook violently under a space blanket that wrapped her body, keeping her shocked system from further collapse.

“We’ve got to get her to the hospital now, sir,” the EMT said.

Gage bent to brush a light kiss onto her cheek and released her hand. “I’m going to help the police, then I’ll come to be with you.” He looked at the EMT as they headed out the door. “Which hospital?”

“Inova Alexandria.”

“As soon as I can, Zoe, okay?”

• • • •

THE FORENSIC PHOTOGRAPHER had been in to document every inch of the crime scene. The medical examiner had collected the bodies and taken them to the morgue for identification. The police were finishing up, and Gage was given permission to pack a bag to take to Zoe.

As he moved to the bathroom, Gage kept his ears open for any stray intel being passed back and forth between the PD and the FBI. Just outside the door he heard Prescott cornering Adamson.

“Hey, if anyone from the media asks, it would be great if you all could seed some misinformation about the victim dying in the attack—keep the bad guys off her trail until she can be taken to a safe house for debrief.”

Prescott thought Zoe was in danger too. Enough that she warranted a safe house. His intuition wasn’t off.

“You want me to lie?” Adamson asked.

“Lie? No. That would be hard to backtrack. Just plant a seed. Say something like you need to contact the family, with a look of sorrow in your eyes.”

“Sorrow?”

“Yeah, dust off your acting skills.”

Both men moved, and Gage pulled a travel case from the bottom drawer of the cabinet. He filled it with Zoe’s toiletries and makeup, eyeliner and mascara, some tinted gloss. She liked the natural look. To him, she was effortlessly beautiful. And honestly, Gage couldn’t imagine that she cared enough about what others thought of her to go to any extensive effort.

He bent down to pick up her phone from where it lay on the bathmat, then pulled her purse forward to tuck it in the front pocket. A lanyard with two work identification badges lay exposed on the corner of her vanity. He lifted them to inspect the picture of Zoe in her lab coat. He’d never seen her dressed for work. It was a DARPA issued SCI biometric badge. His brows drew together. “Sensitive Compartmented Information, Zoe? *Dr. Zoe Kealoha*?” He flipped to the second ID, a tag for Montrim Industries. He examined her photo. Same gentle curve of her lips, same intelligent eyes framed with black plastic geek-girl glasses, same pristine white lab coat, hanging from her slender frame, same *Dr. Zoe Kealoha* printed beneath. “What the hell?”

Prescott leaned a shoulder against the bathroom door jamb. His gaze moved from the lanyard in Gage’s hand to look him squarely in the eye. “What are you thinking?”

Gage shoved the IDs into the purse and zipped it shut. “She needs her glasses.” Gage crowded past Prescott, moving to Zoe’s bedroom to retrieve her glasses from the top of the alarm clock where she always put them while she slept.

“Do you know what Dr. Kealoha does for our government?”

They were alone in her room. The techs were in the hall, snapping their cases shut. Gage focused over on him. “Not a fucking clue. She told me she was a lab tech.”

“Yeah, well it’s more like ‘she does tech in a lab.’”

“Do you know what she’s working on?” Gage had tried for nonchalance, but he knew his voice was colored a deep shade of pissed off. Six months together and he had no clue she held a doctorate or worked for the military. What else was she keeping from him?

“I know one of the projects she developed, because I’m field testing the prototype. But what she’s doing now? I’d say knowing that would give us some pretty big clues as to why someone wanted to take her for a ride tonight. I’d really like to find that out.”

*You and me both, buddy.*

• • • •

THE LAST OF THE LAW enforcement showed themselves out the front door, encouraging Gage to lock it behind them. Gage checked his phone for the time; it was nearing zero one hundred hours. The hospital probably wouldn’t let him slip in to see Zoe in the middle of the night. He rubbed his index finger back and forth over his chin. Surely, she would have called him if she’d been released. He did a quick search for the hospital number, and dialed. He had little hope of gathering any information because of HIPAA restrictions. But the nurse who answered said that he was listed on Zoe’s advanced directives’ form on file. While he waited to talk to Zoe’s nurse, he wondered when Zoe had filled out those forms. How long had she thought that he was one of the people she could rely on to make a health decision if she was incapable? That thought just about winded him. If any other woman he had dated had been so presumptuous, without even a discussion—yeah, he wasn’t really into taking on a burden like that for them. But for Zoe? It felt like a victory of sorts. He’d need to take those thoughts on a long jog after this mess settled down a bit.

“Gage Harrison?” A female voice spoke past the background noise of metal on metal and low-pitched conversations.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Dr. Kealoha was admitted for shock and exhaustion. We were having trouble getting her vitals regulated, so she accepted sedation. will reassess in the morning.”

“She’s sleeping now?”

“We have her in room 606 with an IV running, so we can adjust her meds as needed. She’s resting comfortably.”

He remembered how vulnerable she looked on the gurney. How fragile. “Can I come and sit with her?”

“We have an open visitation policy. But between the hours of 9 pm and 5 am, you’ll need to show your ID and sign in for a visitor’s pass.”

His nerves iced. “And anyone can sign in during that time? Anyone can come see her?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know that Dr. Kealoha was attacked, and that’s why she’s in the hospital, right? Is there anything that can be done to increase her security?”

“I’ll bring it to the security officers’ attention. We can restrict her nighttime visitation to you and Colonel Guthrie, who is also on her directives list. I’m not sure what can be done during regular visiting hours, but I’ll ask.”

“Thank you.”

After tapping a finger on the screen to end the call, Gage opened his gallery to take a good hard look at the pictures he’d snapped of the men who had come after Zoe. Of all the questions asked and answered that night, the one that poked at him was whether these guys had been American. Prescott was insinuating that there might be a foreign group interested in Zoe, or maybe not Zoe as much as her research.

Gage scrolled through his contacts until he got to Titus Kane, a retired Marine Raider now functioning as a force commander for Iniquus. Iniquus was an entity who signed both private and public security contracts with deep-pocketed sources. They often served as intermediaries when the governmental alphabets weren’t playing nice in the same toy box. Iniquus was free to cut through the red tape and push the envelope on what constituted the letter of the law to take down bad guys, especially in politically delicate areas of the world. With Titus’s encouragement, Gage had recently interviewed for a job with them. Iniquus had a sterling reputation, and they treated their operatives with respect and provided them with ample resources to get their jobs done. Gage still had another month to decide whether or not to re-up with Uncle Sam. But for now, it was those resources that Gage had his focus on.

“Kane here.”

“Do you ever sleep, man?” Gage leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“Just drinking my morning joe. I’m on graveyard tonight. What’s up?”

Gage quickly briefed Titus on the evening’s events, which was followed by a long pause before Titus said, “Glad she’s okay, man. You followed protocol and took photos and fingerprint ID?”

“Affirmative. The tangos were painted, so it’s hard to see the planes of the face. The ear pics are pretty clear. I was hoping you’d give the data a whirl through your search engines. See if you couldn’t pop up an ID.”

“Roger that. Send them through. I’ll get on it before I punch the clock.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Sempre Fi, brother.”

*Okay, that’s good. That’s a step in a forward direction.* He needed to take another step and another and another until he figured out who had gone after Zoe and how to keep her safe. He was up and pacing. He felt caged in and wanted to be out beating the bushes for whoever pushed the buttons to make those tangos jump. He’d learned the hard way on his very first deployment, you had to chop the head off the snake to kill it.

Gage ran through the hospital conversation again. Who was this Colonel Guthrie to Zoe? Why was he on her advanced directives list? Was he someone from DARPA? Gage knew a guy named Colonel Stan Guthrie, his unit had run parallel ops on occasion with his. He liked the guy; they got along just fine. He moved to the counter, dragged Zoe’s purse over, and fished out her phone. After swiping the code onto the screen to access her contacts, he looked up Guthrie.

Gage examined the icon next to the Colonel’s name. Same guy. He wondered if the hospital had gotten in touch with him, and if he knew what was going on. Gage considered calling, but then, he didn’t know what kind of relationship the colonel and Zoe had.

Zoe and Gage had never had the “exclusivity” discussion, but he had been monogamous with her. Since he met Zoe, all other women had fallen off his radar. Of course, his decision making wasn’t

necessarily Zoe's decision making. Gage typed the Colonel's address into Google Maps. He wanted to look Guthrie in the eye when he told him about Zoe's attack, get some kind of read on what their relationship was all about.

*What the hell else am I going to find out about you tonight, Zoe?*



## GAGE



“Hooah, son. It’s a might late to be ringing folks’ doorbells, don’t you think?”

Colonel Guthrie was dressed in blue striped pajamas and a plush robe that he held tight against the December cold.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, I’m here because of Zoe Kealoha.”

“Zoe?” The Colonel scanned over Gage’s shoulder at Gage’s car parked by the sidewalk light. “Come on in, Marine.” He stepped back from the door, and Gage moved into the dimly lit craftsman-style home.

Gage shot a look up the stairs.

“You didn’t wake the wife. She’s off visiting her sister. I was just about to have a finger of scotch to settle me in for the night. Can I pour you a tumbler?”

“Thank you, sir, but no.”

Gage stood in the middle of an oriental rug as the colonel moved to a side table crowded with lead crystal decanters. “It’s nigh on zero dark thirty. I’m sure you showing up at this hour means bad things for Zoe.” Guthrie moved over so they were standing side by side and eye to eye, both just over six feet tall. “Let’s have it.”

“Sir, may I ask how you know Zoe? Do you work together?”

“I recommended her for her current position. At DARPA, I’m her direct supervisor. Her dad and I were in boot camp together. He was smart and got out once he scratched twenty years onto his belt. Every time my contract comes up, I get bitten by the same damned bug and sign up for another round.” He took a swig from his glass. “When Hani Kealoha and his wife were headed back to the islands to retire, he asked me to keep an eye on Zoe for them, be there if she needed me.” The colonel’s face grew stern. “You’re here, and she’s not, so what’s going on? And how did you come by my name as having a connection with Zoe?”

Gage gave him a sanitized version of the night and concluded with, “Both of our names are on her hospital directives, sir. I got your address from her phone. She’s being treated for emotional shock after the break-in. She’s also suffering from exhaustion from lack of sleep. I thought it would be best if I came by in person on my way to the hospital.”

The colonel knocked back the rest of his scotch. “Not hurt though, you say? Just nerves and exhaustion?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. That would be one hell of a phone call to her parents.”

The front window lit up as a car pulled up on the front lawn and parked kitty-corner in the grass. “What in the hell?” The colonel moved to throw the front door wide. He stood with his lips pushed into a tight pucker. Gage could hear a car door open.

“Chuck, you son of a bitch. What the hell are you doing on my lawn, you drunken shit-for-brains?”

A man in a grey suit staggered toward the front door. The colonel glanced back toward Gage and scowled. “Son...” His head swung back to the drunk staggering up the stairs. “God damn it.”

Gage got the message. “Would you mind if I helped myself to a glass of water in your kitchen?”



Colonel Guthrie reached out and thumped Gage's shoulder. Gage moved toward the back of the house where he expected the kitchen would be. His ears pinged when he heard the colonel say, "Senator, you're going to get arrested for DUI, and you don't need that kind of publicity."

"She's *dead*," the senator sobbed.

"Who, Barbara? Shit, Chuck, come on. Let's sit down before you fall down."

"Not Barbara. I told you... Oh my God, I loved her. I really loved her."

"You mean—? Oh, holy hell."

"I stopped by a pub for a beer and a steak. I'm looking up at the news, and there's her picture. They said she's dead." A long pause was punctuated with a groan. "I have hearings in the morning. She was my main researcher. Somehow, I have to sit there and face the day without letting anyone know how much she meant to me. I won't be allowed to grieve. We went over all of those notes together. How can I look at my notes without remembering her beautiful black eyes? How silky her hair felt as she let it paint over my stomach?"

"All right, stop. Facts. You were having an affair with your researcher, she died tonight—"

"Her picture was on the news," the senator slurred out. "They're saying it's under investigation. They'll find out that she worked for Montrim Industries, and that she was a whistleblower. They'll dig deeper, and they'll figure out we were lovers. My wife is going to know. My career in politics is over. *Over*. Just as I was primed to stop Montrim."

Gage was prowling the kitchen. The senator had said three things that made him think that this was about Zoe—the woman had black eyes, she worked for Montrim, she did research. There was also that conversation between the FBI and DCPD where a misunderstanding was supposed to be seeded about Zoe's possible death. Had the reporters run with that idea? Had they reported it as a suspicious death? Or was Gage overreaching because everything for him revolved around Zoe right then?

"Chuck, listen to me, you have to lay low, let this storm pass—give the Montrim fight to someone else."

Gage moved on silent feet into the hall and was now plastered against the wall leading to the living room so he could hear better.

"I have to go after them!" the senator roared. "They're playing with apocalyptic weapons of war. Look at the experiments they're doing with weaponized sound waves."

"Ah, but it's better than nuclear, isn't it?" the colonel asked calmly, reasonably. "You need to let this crusade against Montrim go. Think what they're doing for us. If we had that sound technology, we could wipe out the enemy and leave their infrastructure unscathed. And there would be no lasting residual effects on the environment. Think of the soldiers' lives that would be saved." Colonel Guthrie was talking logically, which Gage thought was a waste of breath. "Sure, the area would have to be repopulated from the bugs, to the animals, to the humans. But it is so much better for the world than nuclear. In this day and age? You can't *not* have a deterrent." Guthrie stopped and laughed, a thin, forced laugh. "Listen to me trying to reason with a drunk. Chuck, let's talk about this when you've got your wits about you."

"We tried it already with the nukes and where did that get us?" the senator asked dolefully.

"The sound deterrent is formidable and one of the best weapons possible to create a post-nuclear world. There would be no nuclear showdown. We'd simply deploy the sound waves before they pushed their buttons."

*What in the hell are they talking about? Could Zoe be working on apocalyptic weaponry? As gentle as her soul always seemed to him, that...that was a mind blower.*

“See? Saying it that way, you’ve convinced yourself, and you can convince others, that it’s benign. Simply wipe everyone out of a certain area, and we can move in. But you’re talking about *every living thing*. Women, children, infants in arms. *Genocide*. And it’s so much easier to make the decision to use sound weaponry over nukes because we wouldn’t have the ongoing radioactive consequences. Thereby making it more likely that it will be used.”

The colonel’s voice came from over in the corner where he had poured his drink earlier. Gage could hear a glass stopper being pulled from the neck of a decanter. “Okay, devil’s advocate here. If we don’t get there first with the research, someone else will, and we’ll have no defense against this thing. Are you willing to let China get their hands on this technology first?” There was a pause in which Gage imagined the colonel belting back his drink. “Senator, why are you screwing up my lawn in the middle of the fucking night?”

“I need you. I need you to come and testify at those hearings.”

“Senator, honestly, I’ve told you. I will not testify against Montrim. I’m not ready to retire yet. And me going up against the defense contractors? I’m not suicidal. Look, it’s almost two in the morning, you’re sloshed. Why are you here?”

“Please, Stan, I’m drunk. I’m sick with grief. I can’t face my wife tonight. Can I stay?”

The colonel released an exasperated sigh. “The guest room is up the stairs, second right.”

Gage moved back into the kitchen, yanking his earbuds out of his pocket and sticking them into his ears. By the time the senator was climbing the stairs and Colonel Guthrie had made his way to the back of the house, Gage stood at the kitchen door, looking out on the manicured garden with his head gently bobbing as if to a good tune.

“Sorry for the interruption. What were we saying?”

Gage pulled the buds from his ears. “Did your friend leave?”

“He’s upstairs, sleeping it off.”

Gage nodded as he stepped forward, his hand extended to shake with the colonel’s. “Okay, I’m on my way to the hospital. You have company, so I’ll call you if anything concerning comes up.”

“Thanks, Marine, I’d appreciate that.” Colonel Guthrie shook Gage’s hand, then he moved to a shelf and picked out a card from a small stack. “This one has my private number on the back.” He handed it over then tapped it when Gage had it in his fingers. “It will get me on the phone instead of an answering service. Use that if you need me.”

Gage moved through the front door, down the steps, and over to the senator’s car. As the senator had made his way to the house, he’d left the car door standing open. A wallet lay on the ground. Gage picked it up and gave it a quick onceover. He reached into the slit meant for business cards and pulled them out, turning them over and fanning through the stack until he found three where “private cell” was handwritten on the back along with a number. If he ever needed to ask the senator a question, Gage didn’t want to be last in queue on some aide’s list of people to ignore that day. Gage pocketed one of them, slipped the rest in place, then put the wallet on the floorboard. He pulled the keys from the ignition, set them next to the wallet, and quietly closed the senator’s door.

Gage climbed back into his SUV, feeling like he was waiting for a grenade to explode.



## GAGE



There were no cars on the highway as Gage drove to Inova Alexandria Hospital and parked in the garage. The closer he got to Zoe, the louder his danger signals pinged. He met with the security guard at the front desk and was relieved that the guy did a thorough job with the identification process.

“Has anyone else been in to see her?” Gage asked.

“Not so far, sir.” The guard passed him back his military ID and driver’s license.

Gage gathered his things and made his way to Zoe’s room, nodding at the desk nurse as he passed by. Standing by Zoe’s bed, the room dark except for a dim utility light, Gage’s gaze followed the tubing from the IV bag down to her elbow. She had curved into a ball around her pillow, her long hair fanned across the white sheet, her face peaceful and still. He put a hand on her back to feel the reassuring rise and fall of her breathing.

Gage swallowed down the bitter taste that sat on his tongue. He didn’t know what to think. He scanned the room, then moved to a chair in the far corner. Pulling out his phone, then sliding down to rest his head on the back of the seat, he splayed his long legs out in front of him. He’d learned how to relax and rest his body whenever possible to recharge for the next battle. And Gage knew in his gut that there were more battles to come.

He checked to see if anything had come through from Titus. There was nada. Next on his list was finding out who the senator was talking about when he said his lover had died. He started with local News Nine and on their website’s front page was a picture of Lily Winters, Zoe’s college friend who had stayed with Zoe while she left a bad marriage and found a place of her own. Lily had moved out of Zoe’s apartment...what? Maybe three weeks before?

The news reported that Lily Winters had fallen onto the Metro platform without enough time for anyone to jump to her aid. Gage hit the arrow to watch the video that came with a “Sensitive Subject Matter” warning label. The sound of a reggae band loudly playing the steelpans came to an abrupt halt when a scream went up. Someone had recorded Lily lying on the tracks, looking like she was unable to move. Adrenaline? Drugs? Alcohol? Gage registered fear in her wide-open eyes and raised brow, so he put an x over the second two options. The crowd was yelling for her to get up, to hurry, as they looked down to where she lay beneath them.

As the light of the subway powered forward, their cries became a horrified mantra, like a choir they sang in unison, “Stop! Stop!” They leaned together out into the open space, waving their arms frantically to signal the engineer to apply the emergency brakes. It must have worked, because the subway seemed to slam to a halt. The video panned back to Lily, who had managed to get herself up on her feet. She stretched her hands toward the men who would pull her to safety. She took a single step forward. The video bounced up, missing the last moment as the subway hit Lily and came to a stop a mere two or three feet further down the track. Screaming could be heard from the platform, anguished cries of disbelief.

Lily was dead. Shit. Gage wiped his hand over his face. He didn’t really know her but from brushing by her in Zoe’s hallway or grabbing a quick breakfast before he took off for Quantico. She seemed like a nice person. Intelligent. Sarcastic with a bawdy laugh. He seemed to remember that she

worked as an accountant. Had she said she worked for Montrim? He didn't think so. Gage glanced over to where Zoe's unmoving body lay under the hospital sheet and cotton blanket. He was going to have to tell Zoe about her friend before she heard about it online. Zoe was still in recovery from her own shocking experience and now here was another one for her to assimilate.

Gage did another search and decided that Lily's death was the only one that was being reported locally that night. Lily must be the Senator's mistress and the whistleblower. *Maybe*. Gage realized he was jumping to conclusions.

If Lily was the mistress, then she must have been trying to help the senator take down her employer. If the employer was Montrim Industries, well, that was a major player in the vast military complex that Eisenhower had warned the country about over fifty years ago.

Zoe worked for Montrim. Or at least, she had an access badge. He wasn't clear who exactly Zoe worked for. He looked at the time stamp on the subway video, twenty-three twenty hours. Only an hour and a half after he'd opened Zoe's door and neutralized the tangos. Was it possible the intruders weren't after Zoe at all? Maybe they had been tasked with taking Lily captive. She had been living in that apartment up until recently. Someone could be working from old intel.

Gage wanted some answers. How did Lily land on that subway rail? Why couldn't she move to get up? Was she really the woman who was sleeping with Senator Chuck Billings? Or was Gage pushing to put two and two together when that wasn't the equation at all? He'd know whether Lily was Billing's lover if he could get a look at her phone. Gage pulled the business cards he'd been collecting tonight from his pocket, wondering which one might be his ticket to some answers. He picked out the one for Special Agent Damion Prescott, moved into the hall so as not to disturb Zoe, and tapped in the number.

"Prescott here."

"Special Agent? This is Gage Harrison. Have you got a minute?"

"Where are you?"

"Up at the hospital. Zoe's been admitted for shock and exhaustion. She's asleep right now."

"I appreciate the update."

"Sir, I'm wondering if we couldn't give each other a helping hand." Gage scrubbed his fingers over his eyes.

There was a pause. "How's that?"

"I came by some information that might be helpful. A correlation that you might not turn up on your own. But there's something I need in return."

"Withholding information on an ongoing case is a serious problem, Major." Prescott's voice was shaded a bright color of "don't fuck with me."

"There's a woman in the Alexandria, Virginia morgue who may have a connection to the case. I'll be happy to explain that connection if you can help me get a look at her phone. I want to see who she's been calling."

"When was she taken in?"

"Around midnight."

"Tonight? Is this Lily Winters and the Metro rail accident?"

"Yeah, I'm not convinced it was an accident as much as an on purpose."

"Huh. And you think this is connected to the Zoe Kealoha attack?"

"I'd have to let you draw your own conclusions, sir. But yes, that's what I think. Is it possible to meet me down at the medical examiner's office? I need to be back to the hospital by zero five hundred hours."

“Because?”

“That’s when the guard at the front desk loses his ability to keep Zoe’s room free from bad guys.”

“Got you. Lily Winters was hit by a subway. Her body’s going to be crushed. Exactly what information do you think you’re going to get from seeing her?”

“My understanding, sir, is that any personal effects that belong to the deceased are gathered up and taken with the body to the morgue. Isn’t that the case?”

“Yes, if they find something.”

Gage leaned into the wall as a janitor pushed a bucket on by. “My theory can be proven, if I can see her phone.”

“If her phone was with her, it’s bound to be destroyed. What do you think’s on it?”

“Corroboration of a connection that I’m trying to make for you.” Gage was growing impatient with this back and forth.

“The Medical Examiner’s Office doesn’t open until eight. Chances are good that we won’t get anywhere until then. But I get that your window is tight. We can take a run at it. Worst case, they turn us away. Or the phone isn’t functional.” Prescott paused. “But whatever the outcome, you’re going to make the connection for me.”

“Agreed.”

It was a long shot. But at least he’d squeezed the trigger. Now Gage needed to wait and see if he got a bull’s eye.



## GAGE

• • • •

Gage's footsteps echoed off the cement ramp as he jogged toward his car. He didn't have time to play around. Zero five hundred hours was moving up fast. His tires squealed as he took the corners to the exit at speeds not intended for a hospital parking garage. Without having to dodge traffic, and by playing fast and loose with the red lights, he was parked and climbing the stairs just behind Prescott.

Prescott flashed his badge and the security guard pushed the door wide.

"We don't open 'til eight, sir."

"I'm working with Homicide Detective Kirk Browning on a case of national importance. It's time sensitive. I just need a quick answer from the medical examiner, and then I'll be out of your hair."

The guard gestured toward the sign-in book and gave Gage the stink eye while Prescott scrawled illegibly over the line. Without asking for directions, the special agent stalked toward the elevator, obviously familiar with the building. "We'll go in together, and you're going to keep your mouth shut. I'll do all the talking. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

The elevator pinged; there was a heavy thud, then the doors hesitated for an overlong pause before they squealed open. Prescott put his hand out, letting Gage walk in first. "The phone holds the key?" Prescott asked after the doors shut again. "How are you going to access it?"

"Lily Winters and Zoe Kealoha were friends—"

Prescott let out a low whistle. "No kidding? Huh."

"I've seen Lily unlock her phone before. If she didn't change her code, I should be able to get us access."

"There's more to that story than Zoe and Lily are besties."

"Not besties. Friends. But yes, I'll tell you more after I see the phone and can confirm what I think I know."

The doors slid open and Prescott gestured to the right. They walked down the empty hall to a double door where Prescott punched a button that buzzed an alarm. He took out his FBI badge and held it close to his face as he looked into the camera above the doors. They were beeped through.

"Dr. Tooker, good to see you again. Looks like I woke you up. I'm sorry." Prescott grinned and held out his arms to give the woman a hug.

It was the sour faced woman with tightly permed hair who had collected the bodies at Zoe's condo. Gage had seen her from where he'd sat on the guest room bed, out of the way. She squinted her eyes at them and grunted.

Prescott let his arms fall as Dr. Tooker made her way to the light switches and flipped them all on. "We open at eight. How'd you get past the security guard?"

"Charm." Prescott dipped his head sheepishly. "I know this is unconventional, Mandy, but I'm on a case that's time sensitive. Someone's life could well rely on my getting answers fast. I'm depending on your goodwill to help me out."

"Goodwill at three a.m. is going to be hard to come by. What exactly do you need? I put your guys in the fridge and that's about it. Autopsies in the morning."



“I’m interested in the Lily Winters case. Is her autopsy scheduled too?”

“She’ll be number three in line. Her body’s not in good shape. I’m not sure what you expect to get from seeing her.”

“Did she come in with personal effects?” the special agent pressed.

Dr. Tooker moved toward the refrigeration unit, and pulled open a drawer with a black body bag. “I found her purse beside the tracks. She must have dropped it as she fell in. The straps were cut off by the subway, and it’s filthy from getting dragged, but the bag itself is intact.”

“I need to see her phone,” Prescott said with a chummy smile.

Dr. Tooker rolled her eyes at him, then unzipped the body bag. Gage looked down at Lily’s corpse and didn’t recognize her. He barely recognized her as having human form. He wondered if she had committed suicide like the news reporter had suggested. It was a pretty gruesome way to go. He shook his head.

His mom died in a car accident when he was fourteen. That’s what the police called it, an accident. She was driving too fast while intoxicated and hit a tree without wearing a seat belt. She died on impact. Gage imagined that much like Lily’s body, his mom’s would have been equally gruesome.

Of course, what the officers didn’t know was it hadn’t been an accident at all. When he had come home from school, he had found two notes side by side. One was a note from his dad saying he’d found his true love and had left them. “Left her” is what it actually said. But the “them” was implied. The other note was his mom saying how she couldn’t live without his dad, so she’d decided to end it. Gage never told the officers about the notes. He’d ripped them up and flushed them down the toilet. With no family to call on, Gage was shipped off to a home for boys where he lived until he went to college.

Gage was glad that Lily—whether this was suicide, a terrible accident, or something darker—didn’t have children left to wonder if their mother had known they’d loved her. Or the even bigger question—why she had decided to leave them. Gage knew why his dad left; he was an asshole. To be honest, Gage had been happy when he read his note saying he was gone. But his mom? That one haunted him.

The medical examiner turned and handed out nitrile gloves, which they pulled on, then she moved the purse to a stainless-steel tray. The phone was nestled in the inside zippered pocket. Dead.

“No battery,” Dr. Tooker said and raised her brow.

“iPhone. You don’t happen to have a charger, do you, Mandy?”

Dr. Tooker moved toward her desk and unplugged her phone. “Yes, if it’ll get you out of here sooner, and I can get some sleep.”

Gage’s gaze scanned over to where an unmade cot stood in the corner. Obviously there for the medical examiners who were on night duty.

As soon as the phone blinked to life, Gage unlocked it and moved quickly to Lily’s list of recent calls. As he scrolled through the screen, Prescott and Gage each took photos with their own phones.

“Hey, who is this guy with you?” Dr. Tooker asked.

Prescott didn’t look up from their task. “Some random homeless dude I found on the sidewalk. I told him if he could wait a few minutes, I’d buy him some breakfast. You know I have a heart of gold and can’t stand to see my fellow man suffering.”

Dr. Tooker snorted. Her phone buzzed, and she moved to answer it. Gage scrolled back through the last month of numbers before he moved to messages and did the same. Either Lily deleted her texts on a regular basis or she just didn’t like to text, she didn’t have much there for him to record. Most of the names looked like family members.

“Okay, Damion, that was a call about a traffic fatality. I need to head out, so we need to zip Lily Winters and her things back up.” She moved over to them and took the phone away, pulling her cord from the bottom. “It’s time for you all to leave. If you need anything more, you can show up during regular hours.” Dr. Tooker put the purse back with Lily’s remains.

Prescott leaned in to Gage. “You get what you need?”

“Not sure.”

“It’ll have to do.” Prescott put his hand on Dr. Tooker’s back as she pushed the drawer in place. “Mandy, thank you as always. I owe you a drink. A stiff one.” He added with a wink.

Dr. Tooker snorted. “Funny.” Then she grabbed her keys and pushed the two men through the door.

Dr. Tooker turned right. They turned left to move back to the elevator, and out the front door. As they reached the street, Prescott broke the silence. “You still have time before five. Let’s grab a quick cup of joe. You must be dragging ass.”

He was tired, but Gage had been trained to fight for days and nights on end, through pain and exhaustion. He had to admit, this was a different kind of tired. It wasn’t physical as much as emotional. This whole experience was eye-opening. He hadn’t realized how much Zoe meant to him. How invested he felt in her well-being. Even though he didn’t seem to have even a basic grasp on who she was, right now he’d move mountains to keep her safe. Gage looked up the street toward an all-night diner and nodded his head in that direction. With their hands pushed deep into their pockets and their heads tucked into their collars, the two men moved through the early morning chill.

Inside, Gage ordered a tall coffee to go. Black. Prescott lifted a brow, and then ordered the same. “Anxious to get back?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re worried about her safety. And you should be. Until we can get a better feel for what’s going on, the FBI considers Zoe to be in imminent danger. I’m working on arrangements for a safe house for her. I need you to call me as soon as she’s getting ready for discharge.”

Gage accepted the thick paper cup from the waitress and reached for his wallet.

Prescott put his hand on Gage’s arm to indicate that he’d get the bill. “Zoe’s wearing a wedding ring, and you’re one of two people on her hospital list. To some eyes, it might look like you’re married.” Prescott pulled a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and exchanged it with the server for his to-go cup. “Who’s she really married to?”

“She’s not. Guys think that an attractive woman on her own is an opportunity. Zoe hates it when strangers talk to her. She wears the ring as a deterrent. If they bug her anyway, she tells them her husband’s a Marine Raider. That usually does the trick.”

Prescott put his loose change in the tip jar and put the bills in his wallet. Nodding at the door, they made their way back out to the street. “Does that bother you? Zoe insinuating that you’re married?”

“I don’t think she’s ever insinuated anything about me personally, I think my job gave her a title that sounded like muscle would be applied if anyone bothered her. And I can promise you, it would be.”

Prescott tipped his cup for a sip. “I can see that.” He stopped under a street light. “Did you find what you thought you would?”

“Yes, sir.” Gage put his coffee cup on the ground near his feet. He pulled out his phone and picked the image that had three calls to a single number unidentified by name or icon just hours before her death. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a business card with “private cell” scrawled in blue ink.

Prescott’s gaze slid between the two. “Whose number is this?”

Gage flipped the card over to show the name *Senator Charles Matthew Billings* on the front. “I overheard a conversation, but I didn’t have a lot of context. You need to take this as a step above pure speculation.”

“All right.” Prescott leaned his shoulder against the streetlamp post.

Gage picked up his coffee. “A couple of hours ago, Senator Billings told a friend of his that he was having an affair and that the woman died last night. She was his lead researcher for the Montrim Industries trial being held by the Senate oversight committee.”

“You said Lily and Zoe were friends and that this could have something to do with Zoe?”

Gage took a sip from his cup. “I’m not sure. I don’t want to run you in the wrong direction, because that might endanger Zoe.”

“Spit it out. We’ll use an abundance of caution with all our decision making.”

“Lily died not two hours after I neutralized the men in Zoe’s apartment.”

“Seems a hell of a coincidence. But I’m not sure—”

“Up until a few weeks ago, Lily was living with Zoe while she got her feet back under her following a divorce.”

“Lily lived with Zoe. Two thugs break in to that apartment. Lily dies shortly after. Crap. They might have been going after Lily, and Zoe happened to be there.”

“It’s a possibility. Or the two things might have nothing to do with each other.”

Prescott’s phone buzzed. He slid it from his belt holster and stepped away from Gage. “Prescott here...I don’t care. We need this in place...well, jump over his head to someone who will authorize.” Prescott threw an exasperated arm in the air and let it land on his head. Pulling the phone back to his ear, he growled, “Do it.” He hung up, strode down the sidewalk then turned and stalked back to Gage. “The safe house wasn’t authorized. I’ll keep working on it. It shouldn’t take me long. Sometime later today probably. Can I depend on you to keep Zoe in your sights until then? Let me know if anyone else tries to contact her, or goes to see her?”

“Roger that.” Gage looked down at the time, zero four thirty five hours. “Shit. I’ve got to go.” With a backward wave, Gage jogged toward his car. He had to get back to Zoe. Now.



## GAGE



No sooner had Gage found his place in the corner of Zoe's hospital room than the door pushed open. Gage was immediately moving to get between whoever this new player was and Zoe.

"CIA, son. Relax." The guy moved farther into the room. "The name's Parker." He yanked out his wallet-badge and flicked it open for Gage to see. Parker nodded toward Zoe's sleeping form. "She looks like she's getting some rest. Good. Good." He pulled a chair from one end of the room all the way over to place it directly beside the chair Gage had occupied seconds before. He patted Gage's chair. "Let's chat."

Gage crossed his arms over his chest to make his biceps bulge in an obvious display of physical capacity. He leaned his shoulder into the wall to let the agent know he wasn't going to be compliant. Something about this guy set off his warning signals. Could be, Gage acknowledged to himself, that he was primed to be combative from his night of adrenaline and confusion. He'd see how things progressed before he kicked the guy out on his ear. Right now, curiosity had the edge. He wanted to know why the CIA would be visiting Zoe before sunup.

"Hell of a shock, what happened tonight." Parker crossed his ankle over his knee and adjusted his trousers. "She's been working around the clock on her project. But you already know that, eh?"

Gage didn't answer.

"I understand from the DCPD, she's been diagnosed with exhaustion." There was a pause, and Gage could feel Parker gathering carefully selected words. "Sleep deprivation does terrible things to the brain. Makes people paranoid, creative about reality, overly emotional, poor girl."

Gage said nothing.

Parker cleared his throat. "Ironically, being exhausted also makes sleep come harder—nightmares and sleep talking are common. It's good that she's getting the meds she needs to get some rest." Parker crossed his arms casually. "You sleep over at her place much? Ever know her to have problems like that? Talking in her sleep?" He quirked a brow. "If so, we should let the doctor know so he can adjust her protocol."

Something in the studied ease in Parker's body made Gage shake his head. "Not that I know of. We don't really have that kind of a relationship."

"No? I thought you were the boyfriend." Parker canted his head, the look on his face saying he didn't believe Gage for a second.

"We see each other. I don't think I fall into the boyfriend category. She's pretty busy, and our schedules don't always mesh. I'm jumping between Lejeune and Quantico. She's up here in Alexandria."

"What do you know about her job? She must have told you something," Parker asked.

What did Gage know about her job? Well, he didn't know she was a damned Ph.D., that's for sure. She'd told him she worked in a lab. A "lab tech," she had called herself. But lab techs don't have doctorates, and they sure as hell don't have top secret clearance or the CIA and FBI buzzing around.

"She does something with robotics, I think. We really don't talk about our jobs," Gage replied.

Parker stood and gazed down at Zoe. "I bet you don't do a lot of talking about anything at all, eh?" He sent Gage an I've-got-your-number grin, and Gage wanted to slam his fist into the guy's jaw.

Parker moved back to his seat to answer a text, and Gage looked down at Zoe's drugged state.

Gage had lied to the CIA operatives. He was definitely Zoe's boyfriend. His mind jumped back to one of the last conversations he'd had with Zoe. He'd asked her a question about something random. She had been staring at the wall and pulled out of her trance to ask, "Do we have to talk?"

"No. Not if you don't want to." He'd chuckled at her candor.

"Good, thanks," she'd said as she opened her computer.

"You know, my friends think I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

She'd turned and raised her brow. "I don't know your friends." She didn't say it like a bitch. There was nothing bitchy about Zoe. Her voice had been pleasant and matter of fact. She saw the world through Zoe-colored glasses. Pragmatic. Non-judgmental. Clear about parameters. Hoping everyone would respect hers in return.

"They've seen your picture."

"All they could get from that is what I look like, right? That's kind of a shallow way to decide if you're lucky or not." She tipped her head and looked at him with curiosity. "Why were you showing them my picture?"

Gage smiled over at her. "Putting a face with a name. You know, their girlfriends want to talk to them constantly. Ask them how they feel about stuff."

Zoe's eyes turned thoughtful. "Communication is important to maintaining a healthy relationship."

Gage's smile turned into a grin. "That kind of sucks, since my girlfriend hates to talk."

"Girlfriend, huh?"

"Okay?"

She turned back to her computer. "I guess. Now can you leave me alone?"

That was Zoe in a nutshell. He got that Zoe spent a good part of her time in her head. He was sort of medium on the introversion continuum and liked the time he spent rattling around in his own brain.

At the time, he had been happy about his good fortune in finding a woman who put out zero in the way of couple-vibes or demands. There was no honey-do list or expectations. It was all just...fun. He enjoyed Zoe.

He had flopped back on the couch, thinking he really was a lucky guy. He found Zoe to be an odd mix of edgy and sweet, and it intrigued him. Now that Gage knew she was involved in something damned serious—possibly life threatening—he wished he'd asked more questions instead of just heading back to base when she'd had trouble sleeping. What had she been wrestling with? Did she know she was in trouble? He had thought that their relationship was comfortable and fun. But that had changed seven hours ago when he crushed some guy's windpipe to save her.

The doorknob turned, and Gage took advantage of the distraction to step back into the shadows. A head peeked around the doorframe.

"Grossman, good. What've you got?" Parker waved the guy in.

"Besides acid indigestion? I've got a deadline in my rearview mirror." He strode over to the bed. "How's she doing?" he asked Parker.

Parker raised his wrist to check the time. "She has another few hours before they let her wake up."

Grossman reached over to Zoe's IV and read the prescription label on the bag. "Good." He nodded. "This'll wear off quick and won't give her a hangover. She'll be functioning again in no time. So she was hysterical? Where are the bodies?"

“The medical examiner took custody of them. The DCPD and FBI are working on identification.”

“Shit.”

Parker turned and gestured toward Gage. “And this is the hero of the night.” The tone he used seemed to pass information from Parker to his colleague. “Gage Harrison, meet Jim Grossman, also CIA.”

When Gage took a step forward and extended his hand for a shake, he made sure his face wore the impassive mask he’d used to become his unit’s poker champ.

“You’re the guy who took down the kidnapers? Hell of a feat, soldier. You did Uncle Sam proud tonight, and did your nation a huge favor.”

Gage detected the ember of a lie in the way Grossman squeezed his hand a little too hard and a little too long, and stared into his eyes with a flint-edged gaze. Gage didn’t trust this guy any more than he trusted Parker. “I’m a Marine, not a soldier. Just glad I got there when I did.”

“Are you standing post?” Grossman asked.

“I’m going to stay with Dr. Kealoha until she’s released.”

Grossman pursed his lips then focused on Parker. “I’ve got a fire to put out. We need to know when Dr. Kealoha wakes up so we can have a chat.” He pointed at Gage. “You don’t have clearance to be in here for that.”

“Sir, I’ll wait and ask Zoe what she wants.”

Grossman and Parker exchanged another silent look.

Gage had relied on his ability to read body language to stay alive during his three deployments to the Middle East. He couldn’t always pick out the words when people spoke in their particular dialects, but he always knew when to dive and cover. And Gage knew that Parker and Grossman had their fingers on their triggers. They were dangerous as hell.

A nurse popped the door open. “Gentlemen, I need to hang a new IV bag and check vitals.”

“That’s okay, ma’am, we’re headed out. Lover boy over there,” Parker rolled his head toward Gage, “can’t be persuaded to leave the good doctor’s side. I’m afraid you’re going to have to put up with him.”

Grossman and Parker each reached into their wallets and produced business cards. “We’d appreciate a call when she wakes up. You can buzz either one of us.”

Gage accepted the cards, he needed them to help him keep track of all the players. One after the other, the scrimmage line was filling up in front of him. He watched as the agents walked out of the room. The CIA handled America’s foreign intelligence. Why were they operating on US soil? And why the hell would foreigners want to kidnap Zoe?





## GAGE

••••

As the nurse checked Zoe's vitals, Gage paced. From their timekeeping and their concern about the aftereffects of Zoe's medicine, it seemed to Gage that the CIA was working something urgently sensitive. Gage peered through the blinds at the dark parking lot, but saw nothing that drew his attention. He thought about Grossman saying "our girl." Could Zoe be a CIA asset? Hell, could she be an operative for the CIA? Maybe she was playing on the spooks' field. Gage's cellphone vibrated in his pocket. He swiped his screen to read the incoming message.

Titus: **What's the sitrep?**

Gage texted: **FUBAR sir. 2 CIA were here.**

The reply came immediately: **CIA?**

Gage: **Asked a lot of questions. Advise.**

Titus: **I'd keep a tight watch.**

Gage: **Any progress on the IDs?**

Titus: **Nothing domestic, the parameters have been expanded to international. It's going to take time for the computers to search. More as I have it. Out.**

Gage glanced at the nurse who sent him a shy smile. "I'm not Doctor Kealoha's nurse on duty, that's Stacy." She pointed to the board with the name written on it. "She got hung up with another patient, so I'm filling in. If you have any questions, I'll tell Stacy, and she'll come in and talk to you."

"How do you think she's doing?" Gage asked, tucking his hands in his pockets.

"From these readouts, Dr. Kealoha's fine. She'll be right as rain after her rest. Her vitals are looking good. This new IV bag is for hydration, not sedation. She should stay asleep for a while, though. We'll let her wake naturally." The nurse turned and cleansed her hands with hand sanitizer before she pushed her computer station into the hall, holding the door so it would close silently behind her.

Gage pulled his chair back over to Zoe's bed and sat down with his elbows on the safety bar and his chin on his fists. He desperately wanted to smooth the hair out of her face, to run a hand down her back, to pull her into his arms. But she needed to be whole and healthy to deal with this situation, and he didn't want to rouse her from her sleep.

The CIA asked if she'd been having nightmares and talking in her sleep. A sign of exhaustion. *Why aren't you sleeping, Zoe? Huh? What's on your mind? You're always so laid back...*

He tried to think back to when this had started. The last time he'd tried to spend the night was the worst, but she had been flopping around for the last month. Before that, she had slept like a rock.

Spending the night with a woman wasn't something Gage did as a rule. He'd found that women read too much into their relationship if he woke up beside them. The act of spending the night led to too many future plans. It was easier to go home and keep the boundaries solid. Less confusion. Less upset when he had to leave on assignment and had no details to share about his comings and goings. There were no promises he could offer that he'd come home safe and sound. He didn't have the kind of job that lent itself to reassurances.

It wasn't like that with Zoe. She was uncomplicated. He stopped to laugh at how wrong that statement was. She *presented* as uncomplicated, he amended. Their relationship had been uncomplicated, at least.

Zoe seemed self-satisfied. She seemed to have complete faith in his ability to do his job and get home. There were no tears or angst. It was easy, really easy to be with Zoe. Their relationship was such a relief to him, and he'd never really reflected on his spending the night. Getting up in the morning and heading back to Quantico didn't have emotional weight. He never felt like he was leading her on, because she didn't seem to have an agenda for him. His mind flitted back to thoughts of the CIA and FBI, wouldn't that be the attitude an operative would have? Seemed to him that might fit.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. He needed another cup of coffee bad, but hell if he was going to leave her alone to roam the halls and find a machine. He looked out the window as the tops of the trees started to show an outline against the blue-black sky. He slowed his breathing and let his mind wander. Sometimes when he was on the battlefield, taking a moment and listening to his thoughts instead of raging forward against the enemy gave him the perspective he needed to make good choices. Oddly, what he was thinking about were those trees.

When he was at UVA, taking the obligatory literature class to meet his requirements, he had been struck by a poet that... Gage leaned his weight onto one hip and pulled his phone from his back pocket. He pulled up a search engine, then stared at the ceiling. He couldn't remember the poet's name. The only thing that came to him was "marriage" and "oak tree." He typed it in with little confidence. But the second link on the list was "On Marriage" by Kahlil Gibran. Gage read the short poem.

*Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.*

"Let each one of you be alone," Gage murmured. He liked that phrase. Back in Charlottesville, it had been an epiphany. It had led to him breaking up with the girl he'd been dating for almost two years. She was beautiful, smart, witty, and athletic, but the more she scripted their future, the more heavily she leaned on him. Almost every decision she made, she filtered through him—from her choice of majors to what to wear when they went to grab some pizza. It seemed to him that the longer they were together, the more she was devoid of her own opinions; she deferred to him too much. It was her background and upbringing, he knew. Her mother submitted to her father in all things, and that had worked for their marriage.

Gage didn't want anything to do with that kind of a relationship. It felt burdensome. It was a responsibility he'd never looked for and didn't feel comfortable shouldering. He wanted to be with someone who brought new perspectives, ideas, and interests to the relationship, expanding his paradigms rather than absorbing his thoughts and tastes until they weren't two people but one.

His girlfriend had thought that was the goal—to make two into one. But this poem defined for Gage what he wanted in a relationship—someone who was strong. Independent. Someone who knew her own mind. Had her own friends and interests. And they could share, or they could just be amicably and happily together without needing to share it all. His world shouldn't construct anyone else's world. Being in Special Forces, he couldn't guarantee the person who walked out the front door would be anything like the person who came home. If he came home at all.

Gage had searched a long time to find someone who was strong enough to stand on her own and not fold under the weight of a relationship with him. He thought he had found it a time or two. But as the relationship became more serious, the women he had dated seemed to morph and change, as if to

make themselves his ideal—not realizing his ideal was that they simply be themselves. Sometimes he found himself falling into that trap too, shifting for a time to become something he wasn't in order to preserve the peace or maintain the status quo. But inevitably, that strategy would backfire. Who had the tenacity to maintain a charade like that?

*And stand together yet not too near together:*

*For the pillars of the temple stand apart,*

*And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.*

That's the line he remembered—trees not standing in each other's shadow. Standing strong by themselves. Zoe had that inner strength. She was happy within her own skin and didn't seem to need outside validation. It was a very appealing trait.

He stared down at the words of the poem without really seeing them. Zoe seemed to be perfectly content on her own. She also seemed to be perfectly content when he was around, even if they were just two bodies in the same place. He closed his phone as Zoe gave a little moan and straightened her legs. He watched to see if she was coming to, but her lips parted in a sigh, and she continued to sleep.

Gage thought back to the last night they'd spent together, the one that ended with him stomping out of her condo at zero dark hundred to drive back to Quantico to hit the racks when she was tossing around and keeping him awake. He should have stayed and tried to find out what was going on with her. A missed opportunity, in retrospect. And he shouldn't have missed it

She had been quiet that day. That wasn't unusual. When they were at her place, he'd usually read or whatever, and Zoe would wander around in her own little world. He'd stay quiet and out of her way when she got that look in her eye, when she pulled her brows together and stared into the distance. He had a sister who was an introvert, and he knew that expression meant Zoe needed to spend time alone in her head. He got it. At least, he thought he did. Now? Shit, nothing was clear. What had she been thinking about all those times, staring at the wall, mumbling under her breath? Warfare?

He watched the slow rise and fall of Zoe's chest and shook his head. He couldn't believe that this woman, who never had a bad word for anyone, who wore a sweet Mona Lisa smile as her natural facial expression, could ever contemplate creating the level of destruction that Colonel Guthrie was encouraging. Could she?



## GAGE



A knock sounded at the door. Gage was out of his chair in an instant. *Speak of the devil.* Colonel Guthrie stuck his head around the frame. Before he could speak and maybe wake Zoe, Gage was at the door, moving the colonel back into the hallway.

“Just checking in, how’s our girl?”

That was the second time that morning that Zoe had been referred to that way, and it was like nails on a chalkboard to him. Zoe was no one’s “girl.”

“She’s doing fine. Sleeping.”

Colonel Guthrie held out a cup of coffee and a bag with a bakery monogram on the front. “The coffee’s black. I didn’t know how you took it. There’s cream and sugar in the bag with a breakfast sandwich. I thought you’d probably need a pick-me-up by now.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The colonel rocked back on his heels and shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat. “I haven’t called over to Hawaii, yet. It’s about midnight over there right now. I didn’t want to pull her parents from their bed and have them worried all night—not until I talked to Zoe myself or had something a little more definitive.”

“I’m told she’s fine.”

The colonel nodded. A close-lipped smile stretched across his face and worry clouded his eyes. “I’ve known Zoe since she was in diapers. And even though she’s nearly thirty, I can’t seem to make her age past her fourth birthday in my mind.” He looked past Gage into Zoe’s room. “Almost thirty. Huh. Doesn’t *that* feel like a kick in the nuts.” He scratched the line of his jaw. “You’ll keep me in the loop, with what all’s going on? If she needs anything at all, you’ll reach out?”

“Yes, sir. I have your card.”

“All right then. I’m heading to the office. Thank you, son, I appreciate all you’ve done. All you’re doing.” He slapped Gage on the shoulder and headed down the hall.

Gage moved back into the room and pulled the business cards he’d accumulated over the last eight hours out of his pocket. A police detective, a colonel, a senator, a special agent with the FBI, and not one, but *two* CIA operatives. He fanned them out. With all these experts worried about Zoe’s wellbeing, you’d think he held a winning hand. It felt more like a shitstorm to him.

Zoe moaned, and Gage moved to her side.

“No one will know.” She whispered it so softly that Gage wasn’t sure he’d heard her right.

He crouched by the bed so his ear was near her lips. “Know about what?”

“Sphecious...” She lifted her hand and rubbed the tip of her nose. Her eyes were still closed.

“Sfeeseus? Is that what you said?”

When she didn’t reply, Gage tried to sound it out and come up with a spelling that seemed reasonable. Google was good at filling in the proper word if he could get his guess anywhere close to being right. He couldn’t remember seeing a word that began with “sf”, so he tried “sph” like sphere. Did she mean sphere? Maybe she meant “spacious.” “Sphecious,” he typed. Google sent him to a

Wikipedia page for a wasp, genus *Sphecius*. He looked over the description—large, solitary, ground dwelling, predatory. This couldn't be right. She worked with robots. *Possibly* worked with robots.

Very quietly, so as not to fully wake her, Gage whispered, "Hey, Zoe? Do you know what *Sphecius* is?"

"Wasp...wasps." She sighed and seemed to fall deeper into sleep.

His phone buzzed, and Gage moved to the far corner of the room. "Titus, man, I was about to call you."

"Yeah, well, I've got some good news and some bad news."

"Shit."

"That about sums it up. Is she still conked out?"

"The nurse stopped sedation a while back. She said Zoe's just sleeping now."

"Didn't you tell me that the special agent on the case was setting her up in a safe house? This might be the time to give him a call and rock Zoe on over there."

Gage was on immediate alert. "What did you dig up?"

"The two guys that you killed last night? They're MIA, assumed dead."

"Come again?"

"They're listed as Israeli Special Forces, killed in a bomb attack in 2006. We'd need DNA to make it one hundred percent, but with the combination of the ear scan, face scan, and fingerprints you sent, we're still hitting probabilities in the low-nineties on both of them."

"What could they possibly want with Zoe?"

"Good question. Why don't you get her moved, then call me back? I already talked to command and was given permission to lend Iniquus assistance, pro bono. They don't like the idea of foreign mercenaries playing with our DARPA scientists."

"Prescott told me this morning the safe house plans for Zoe have been nixed. I'm on my own to protect her for the moment. Surely if they knew who these guys were, it would change their minds?"

"I don't think it's wise to wait on FBI red tape to get sliced. I think you need to shake her awake, get her dressed, and move on out the door. The hospital leaves her too vulnerable with too many ways to make bad things go down. I'm headed your way. I'll take you to an Iniquus location. That should buy us some time to figure out what's going on."

"Thanks, man, I owe you. She's in room 606 at Inova Alexandria. Hey, on the off chance, have you ever heard the word *Sphecius*?"

"*Sphecius*? No. You can tell me where you heard it when I pick you up. I'm heading for the garage now."

As he hung up the phone, the door pushed open slowly. Gage shook his head. This hospital room was like a circus tent. Ring one—CIA. Ring two—DARPA and the colonel. In two strides, he was jerking the door open to see who was in ring number three. A small man with the pointed face of a weasel and small, wiry frame, stood outside the door. "I was told this was Dr. Kealoha's room."

"That's correct. She's asleep. May I help you?" Gage held the door, so the man couldn't see in, and stared him down. The guy was dressed impeccably and had the polished feel of a man who enjoyed being pampered.

"Oh, ah, no. I came to check on how Dr. Kealoha is doing." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a card.

"Topher Bilik. I'm the director of one of Dr. Kealoha's ongoing projects at Montrim." He held out his card and adjusted his body into a posture of power. At least that's what Gage thought the guy was

doing. Gage took the card and slid it into his pocket without a glance. He didn't offer up his own name in return.

"Zoe works at Montrim," Bilik added, then tilted his head, trying again to peek around Gage's muscular build into the hospital room.

Gage stared at the guy, wondering why the heck he'd showed up to see Zoe at this hour of the morning.

"How is she?"

"Fine." Gage arched his brow. "How'd you know she was here?"

The man took a step back, as if thrown off balance. He quickly recovered himself and offered up a plastic smile. "Oh, Colonel Guthrie called me last night."

"Last night?" Gage tilted his head. "What time last night?"

Bilik scratched his upper lip. "Early this morning, I guess."

"He woke you up with this? There's nothing wrong with her."

Bilik seemed to realize how odd that would be. He tried to change the subject. "Is there anything Dr. Kealoha needs? She's a shining star at our organization. We want to make sure she has everything she could possibly need."

"Why would Colonel Guthrie wake you up in the middle of the night?" Gage wouldn't let it go. "Why couldn't it wait for morning? Why did he call you in the first place?"

The man gave him a bloodless smile. "If you'll be so kind to pass my card to Dr. Kealoha and let her know I stopped by? I'll call her on her cellphone later." He turned, and with his arm up in a goodbye, he skulked toward the elevator.

Gage shut the door and moved back toward Zoe, wishing she'd come to. He held his phone between his palms and stared out the window. Too many players were worried about Zoe's wellbeing, and Gage had lead in his belly. It was the feeling he got on a mission when there were bad things on the horizon. He furrowed his brow as he dialed his superior. "Sir? Major Gage Harrison here. I'm respectfully requesting leave to take care of a situation of exceptional circumstance." His gaze fell on Zoe as she stretched out her legs and blinked her eyes open.





## Zoe

**The better the fruit the more wasps to eat it**  
~ German proverb

• • • •

Zoe squinted as she took in the industrial efficiency of the hospital room. Lying there, she worked to understand her surroundings. She remembered being brought in on a stretcher, but everything seemed fuzzy—her memory of why, and the things around her.

“Here you go, Zoe.” Gage stood at the side of her bed, placing something in her hands.

She sighed with relief as she realized they were her glasses. “Thank you.” She sounded a little tipsy to her own ears. Whatever they gave her last night had done the job. Zoe remembered talking to the nurse in a darkened room, and now she was awake again with the sun streaming through her window. Time had moved forward without her. She glanced over at Gage, who wore a bemused look on his face. His eyes, which could magically change from blue to green to black as coal, were locked on her. Right now, she could easily read affection and concern in their depths, and also a little bit of that look he got just before they... Zoe felt her cheeks turn pink.

Gage chuckled. “I’d pay good money to know what you’re thinking.”

“Have you been here for a long time?” She glanced at the wall clock, then over to Gage. He wore the same clothes as last night, along with the rough shadow of an unshaven face.

“In and out since last night. Mostly in. I wanted to keep an eye on you.”

Zoe pushed the button on her bed, so she could sit upright. She crossed her legs under the cotton blanket. “All right, Captain America, what happens now?”

Gage sent her a curious look. “Why did you call me that?”

“What?”

“Captain America.”

“Oh.” She tilted her head and examined him. “Must be the body language.”

“Body language?”

“Do you have to repeat what I say? It’s irritating.”

Gage raised a brow.

Zoe scrubbed a hand over her face. “Okay, body language, in one of my robotics classes, the professor was really into discussing body posture and facial displays so that we could help humans connect with the robots.”

“Why would he care about humans connecting with a machine?”

“We were working on a prototype for domestic help. A robot to interface with families. I got into the habit of watching bodies and faces for my research.”

Gage shook his head, and Zoe read that as “you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Your body language, especially right now, reads as trustworthy, intelligent, courageous, and having deep affection for me. You know, a total Captain America.” That last word caught in her throat.

Gage chuckled. “You don’t think those are good things?” When she didn’t answer, he added, “This is an odd conversation. Zoe, you don’t flatter people as a rule.”

The corners of her mouth tugged down and pressure built behind her eyes.

He cleared his throat and wrapped his hands around her guard rail. "You're obviously not trying to stroke my ego." The statement sounded like a question, like he'd found some puzzle that needed solving. "You're usually not sarcastic either. I don't know why the look on your face is throwing me so hard. I hate that you're frowning at me, you've never done that before."

Zoe blinked back tears. "I've never felt this way before." She reached behind her and pulled her pillow around so she could hug it. "I am so deeply, profoundly grateful." She sniffed hard. "Beyond words. It's actually kind of like a tsunami rolling through me right now." She attempted a quivering smile and something that sounded like she wanted it to be a laugh. "Yeah, I feel like I could be swept away and probably drown in all of these emotions."

Gage waited silently as she fought for some semblance of control. When her breathing came a little steadier, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. Something happened with that kiss. Some kind of promise was made. He pulled her head to his chest where she could hear his heart beating. He was so steady.

After a long moment, she got hold of herself. She sat up and pushed her hair back over her shoulders as she asked, "Has anything happened since last night? Did they find out what those guys wanted?"

Gage's face shifted to stoic. He cleared his throat. "Zoe, I have something I need to tell you."

She raised a brow. Then a quick knock on her door and the entrance of a nurse stalled any further exchange.

"Good, you're awake. I'm doing a last round before I go off duty, and you get a new nurse. The doctor is right behind me." She pushed her rolling computer system beside Zoe's bed. "Unless there's an issue, it looks like you'll be discharged this morning." The nurse glanced over at Gage and smiled. "Good morning."

Zoe considered the way the nurse's tired countenance brightened like her happy pill suddenly kicked in, and realized that Gage had caught this woman's attention. While the nurse documented numbers on her computer, Zoe considered Gage. He was cute. She could see why the nurse would perk up at the sugar rush of some unexpected eye candy. Cute was probably the wrong word. Cute really didn't belong to a man with Gage's hardened warrior's body. His face was ruggedly handsome, more so now that he was sporting stubble on his normally clean-shaven face. She guessed the cute description came from his smile, and how his eyes crinkled at the corners when he was amused. Gage's eyes were his best feature, she thought. Well, no. He had some other features that sat at the top of her list too. As that thought came to mind, Zoe caught Gage's gaze, and he winked. Her pink flush turned to bright red, and he started laughing. The nurse glanced up with a question in her expression, and Zoe looked away quickly, fiddling with her fake wedding ring.

"Can I ask you to wait outside for a moment, please?" the nurse asked Gage.

Gage crossed his arms over his chest. He took on the feel of a boulder that couldn't be moved. Entrenched. This must be one of his war faces. Gage had used a different war face last night, and it was intimidating as all get out. Zoe had grown up in the defense world. She knew that Gage belonged in the sphere of the elite soldiers, but it had been a concept rather than a reality for her until last night. To meet Gage, well, he was an easygoing guy. Her old roommate, Lily, had called him affable. Zoe could get on board with that adjective. But now she also saw him as deadly. He had killed to save her. Tears prickled the corners of her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. How did you thank someone for something like that?

"I think Dr. Kealoha would like some privacy while I remove her catheter."

“Oh, yeah, right.” Gage rose to his feet, towering over the petite woman.

The nurse smoothed her hands down the front of her blue scrubs and tilted her head back, so she could smile up at him. “Thank you, this won’t take long.”

• • • •

THE NURSE WAS EFFICIENT, perhaps a little brisk. Zoe could understand that. They were on duty for twelve hours at a time. If Zoe had just finished a twelve-hour shift, she’d want to get off her feet too. Zoe definitely understood the toll that long hours at work could take. She had been pushing hard to get her project in place. She wanted to be done, done, done with her contract and move on. She needed a project outside the world of military research that was more life-affirming, like what she’d done in biomedical engineering. She would do anything to go back to when she signed those darned DARPA contracts. She’d rip them to shreds and march right out of the office. Now she was hospitalized for exhaustion and, call a spade a spade, hysteria. “Shock” was prettying things up a bit. What she was was a big, fat mess. But not for long. Soon she’d have her prototype in the field. Then she could hand things back to DARPA. She planned to take a long vacation to somewhere where she could be alone with nature, and alone in her head where she was happiest. Then she could make some decisions about what her future looked like.

As the nurse exited, Gage came back through the door with a doctor Zoe hadn’t met.

“Dr. Dithers,” he said. “I’m the hospitalist on duty.” The doctor stood at the end of the bed and talked to the clipboard he was scribbling on. “Are you ready to head home? You’re feeling okay?”

“I am, thank you.”

“All righty then. If you’ll sign this, you’re good to go.” He held out a plastic clipboard and pen for Zoe. “You’ll want to follow up with your physician about your sleep issues, and consider seeing a mental health professional if you notice any adverse effects following the break in. It’s best if a counselor works with you earlier rather than later. It leads to a better outcome.”

Zoe offered him a tightlipped smile and signed her name without reading the document. She watched the doctor move out of her room, then threw the covers off. Last night, she had been wearing Gage’s black sweats with no shoes or coat. Maybe Gage could pull the car up to the exit, and she could run out. She hated hospitals, and the sooner she was out of there the better. But she also didn’t know where she would go. Home didn’t feel safe.

Gage lifted her overnight bag from beside the chair and placed it on the bed. “I brought you some things. I hope that’s all right.”

Zoe opened the bag, chewing on her bottom lip as she flipped through the neat piles that he had placed inside. Wow, he brought a lot of outfits. It looked like he’d packed for the week and not just a twenty-minute trip across town. “There are a lot of clothes here.”

“Special Agent Prescott said you might be moved from the hospital to an FBI safe house. I wanted to make sure you had what you needed.”

Zoe’s mind galloped at a rate that made it hard for her to pin down any thoughts. Finally, she landed on, “You make it sound like there was a change of plans.”

“Not a big change, but Iniquus will be putting you up in one of their places instead of the FBI.”

“Iniquus is the security group you were interviewing for, right?”

“Right. A friend of mine, Titus Kane, is a unit commander there.” Gage pointed toward her door. “He’s in the hall, waiting for us.”

Zoe lifted her favorite plum-colored hoodie and hugged it to her chest like a teddy bear. “I’m confused.”

Gage put his hands on his hips and sent her an appraising look. “We’re all confused. But we’ll figure it out. The first step is to get you somewhere safe so we can all share information and come up with a plan. I need you to get dressed, okay?”

She reached behind her to yank the ties and release her hospital gown. It slid to the floor at her feet. She stood there naked, with goose flesh rising across her skin. There was a tingling in her scalp and her mouth had gone dry. The full burden of why she was sedated last night was coming back to her. Two massive goons had broken into her apartment, and Gage had killed them to protect her. Tears prickled the corners of her eyes. *He needs me to get dressed so he can get me somewhere safe.*

She searched the bag until she found the stack of bras and underwear. She saw that he’d brought her what she considered her “date night” panties and not the comfy cotton hipsters she wore for every day. She pulled out a pair and sent an “Oh, really?” look over to Gage. It was her way of trying to normalize a situation that was everything but normal. “You don’t want to give me a few minutes of privacy so I can get dressed?”

Gage let his eyes slide slowly over her naked body. He frowned and shook his head, though his eyes were bright with merriment. “No can do, ma’am. I’ve been tasked with guarding your body.”

He was teasing, but a new vulnerability raked over her.

“I put your toiletries bag in the outside pocket—it’s got your toothbrush and stuff.”

Quick as she could, Zoe dressed. A hasty brush of her teeth and hair, a zip of the case, and she was almost ready. “You picked all of my favorite outfits.” Zoe crouched to pull on her boots.

“Well, I picked the things I see you in most. I wanted you to be comfortable.”

She stood and flipped her hair back out of her face. “You pay attention to my clothes?”

“It’s my job to be observant.” He raised his brows in silent question.

Zoe nodded. “I’m comfortable, thank you.” That was only partly true. Her clothes felt comfortable, but she herself was not. She had no idea what to think about a move to a safe house.

Gage picked up her case and reached for her hand. Zoe grabbed it like it was a lifeline.



## Zoe

**He puts his hand into a wasp's nest.**

**~ Hungarian Proverb**



Zoe felt conspicuous walking out the door, flanked by two powerhouse men. She wasn't exactly diminutive. She stood five-foot-ten, but the heels of her boots put her over six feet, nearly eye to eye with the guys, but while they embodied latent force and solidity, she was stumbling along, twitching at every movement and sound.

Titus was a little overwhelming. He had a shaved head and a square jaw. A scar wrapped around one side of his neck and stood out as a pink and white slash against his coffee-colored skin. Zoe wondered how someone got close enough to slice him. His single facial expression seemed to be a glower. But maybe it was the circumstances. Maybe he'd soften around the edges when she was tucked into his safe house. He made Zoe nervous.

Sandwiched between the men, they all moved as a single unit, taking up space on the sidewalk, then in the garage.

Titus had brought a gunmetal grey Hummer that looked like it was going to war. At the sight of it, Zoe started to shake. As she climbed into the back seat of the vehicle, she wondered about the choice of cars. They wouldn't exactly blend. It would be hard to lose someone in this thing if they were being chased. Zoe couldn't imagine that it could go very fast. Of course, if the worry wasn't about blending and outracing, and was more about providing cover and protecting them against being rammed off the street, this might be good. Or maybe this was simply what Titus drove every day, and there was no thought process at all.

Zoe settled in, the heavily tinted windows gave the passengers in the back some concealment. No one would know she was there unless they were already being followed. Gage tipped her overnight bag into the cargo section, then shifted in beside her. Titus would do the driving. Before they took off, Titus handed a pistol to Gage and a couple of extended magazines. "There's an MP5 under my seat if you need it. Mags are in the seat pocket."

*So this is what people mean when they say quaking in your boots.* Zoe yanked her seatbelt hard across her hips to help hold her in place.

Titus spun the wheel, and they moved onto the street. As if synchronized, Gage looked right while Titus scanned left. Then Gage scanned left and Titus looked right. Zoe focused on her white-knuckled grip on the seat belt.

When they finally reached the highway, the men seemed to ease a bit, even if the shift was microscopic. Titus adjusted his rearview mirror and used it to stare at her. "You can settle in. I'm going to take you on a little tour to make sure we didn't pick up a tail."

"A tail?" She threw her body around to look out the back window.

"Normal operating procedure. Hotel Iniquus is in Maryland, outside of town, and we don't want to lead anyone to your safe house."

"Of course, thank you," she whispered.

Gage had reached into his pocket and pulled out a bunch of business cards. He laid them out on the seat between them. "Here are some players with a big interest in you. Do you know them?"

Zoe read them over. A detective. The colonel. Prescott, well she had sent him an SOS. Parker and Grossman, the CIA shithheads. Topher Birch. He had spoken with Gage? And why was Senator Billings's card here? A frown pulled between her brows.

"Do you trust these people?"

"I'm not sure." Zoe's voice trailed off as she sunk deeper into her head, trying to figure out the connections. How did Gage get all of these cards?

"Do you think it's possible that the intruders were sent by someone you know?"

Zoe shot Gage a look of dismay. She had no idea. Her eye caught Titus's in the rearview mirror.

"Are you still fuzzy from the meds?" he called back over his shoulder.

"I can't feel my lips." Zoe wasn't sure if that was the meds still at work in her system or her anxiety.

"Coffee?" He moved to the far right-hand lane.

"Bless you." Zoe turned to look out the window and rested her forehead on the cool pane.

"Zoe?" Gage called to her quietly. He unraveled her hands from the seatbelt and laced his fingers through hers. She closed her eyes. "Zoe. I have something I need to tell you." His voice was as gentle and smooth as lake water on a summer night. She could float on it in perfect peace, staring up at the wide expanse of stars. That's where she imagined herself to be. Willed her mind to go. She didn't want to hear what he had to say. She knew whatever it was was bad. Fog coated her thoughts like it had last night when she couldn't even remember how to dial 9-1-1.

She didn't respond. Gage didn't push. Yet.

They went through the Starbucks drive-thru. Titus ordered her some food as well as coffees all around. She took the food bag gratefully and ate. After a while, when she felt she'd worn the cowardice mantle a little too long, Zoe looked over at Gage. She forced the corners of her mouth into the semblance of a smile. "Okay, I'm ready. What do you need to tell me?"

Once again, Gage reached for her hand and placed it between both of his and rubbed. "Zoe, you're as cold as ice."

"I'm all right. Can you just spit it out? My imagination is creating some pretty demonic monsters in my head."

"It's about Lily."

Zoe blinked. "Lily Winters?"

He nodded. "I'm so sorry, Zoe, but Lily died last night."

Zoe opened her mouth but nothing came out. None of the questions that pushed themselves forward demanding to be answered found a voice. *Are you kidding? How could this happen? Are you sure? Did she suffer? How did you find out? Where was she?* All Zoe could do is jerk her head back and forth in some kind of denial. As if to say Gage was lying to her. But Gage never lied to her. Ever.

"She fell onto the tracks in the Metro and was hit by a subway before she could be helped."

"That's really..." Zoe's words trailed off as she searched for a word. The right word. "That's really an improbable way for her to die."

"The news said that she was leaving the theater. The Metro station was crowded for that time of night as people were going home from the performance. She was at the front."

Zoe shook her head.

“Is there any question in your mind—is there any chance at all that she might have committed suicide?”

“No.” The word burst out of her mouth without any thought. She should reflect about it before spouting off. She should be clear and precise. She pulled her hand free of his. She needed to process what had been going on in Lily’s life. Lily had divorced. But Lily was happy now that she was no longer tied to her domineering husband. She liked her job; she’d had a new project that kept her busier than usual. But she seemed excited by what she was doing. She had a new man in her life, Charlie. “No to suicide. I’m pretty sure I can say no. Just yesterday morning she sent me a video by mistake when she was trying—did you pack my phone? I can show you.”

“I put your phone in your purse, but it’s on airplane mode. Let’s leave it there for now.”

Zoe blinked. Did he think someone was tracking her through her phone? That was the only reason that she could come up with for his saying not to use it. Her heart rate was off at a gallop.

“Can you tell me about what you want me to see?” Gage asked.

Zoe turned and searched the traffic out the back window, as if she knew how to spot a tail.

“No one’s following us,” Titus said as he flipped on his blinker and moved toward an exit ramp. “We’re almost to our destination.”

Zoe swallowed hard. “Yesterday morning was um...Thursday morning. Lily was supposed to go out of town tonight with Charlie, the guy she’s been seeing. He was taking her to a little bed and breakfast on the Maryland coast.”

Gage leaned forward. “Charlie?”

“Yes. Lily was so happy about it. She sent me a video she made for him by accident. What she really meant to send me were pictures of her trying on outfits. She wanted to make sure she was packing her cutest clothes, so she was trying them on and snapping pictures and sending them to me.” Zoe thought back to the pictures. Lily’s face had shined with expectation and joy. It was the happiest that Zoe had ever seen her. “She didn’t commit suicide. And it sounds like an improbable accident, even if the Metro was crowded.” Zoe rubbed a hand over her mouth and nose. They had gone numb again. “You remember that Lily lived with me. Is it possible...”

“I’ve considered that the people who broke in were coming after Lily and not you. It is possible. But we’re only at the beginning of trying to understand what happened. So it’s best not to jump to conclusions.”

“No. Data needs to be thoroughly examined before a conclusion could possibly be drawn.” Dread was the only word that Zoe could come up with to describe this feeling. Horror, maybe. She felt like she needed more oxygen than what she could get through her nose. She opened her mouth to take in big gulps of air.

“Zoe, look me in the eye. Right now. Look at me.” Gage’s voice pulled her from a very distant place.

She worked to comply. But she felt like she was drowning. Like she couldn’t get her head above water. She was flailing and floundering, desperation flooding her system. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Titus was on the side of the road in a split second. Gage reached past her to shove the door open then held her hips while she leaned out and gagged up her just consumed breakfast. When the horrible retching calmed, Titus handed her a bottle of water. She swished and spit, dragging her wrist across her mouth. She reached for the door handle to pull it shut, but she didn’t have any power in her arms. She was powerless.



Gage reached out and shut it for her. He trapped her chin in his fingers and swiveled around so he could scrutinize her. His eyes were deep blue right then, and they shined with concern. Zoe felt like she should be handling things better. In her world of science, she liked to see cause and effect. She preferred when things were linear and defined. What was happening in her head and in her body was chaos, and she hated it.

Titus swung the Hummer back into traffic. “This is an overwhelming situation, I know. I have lots of experience at this, so does Gage.” He nodded Gage’s way. “This isn’t a movie where a good guy shoots a bad guy and then moves on with their day, completely fine. This is what happens in reality. Your reactions are absolutely normal. Okay?”

Zoe could see Titus in the rearview mirror. He wore the same expression he’d worn since she met him in the hospital, impenetrable and stern.

His voice, though, conveyed humanity if not warmth. “Gage says you’re a scientist. Mental health research tells us that it’s important in the long run that you don’t stifle your emotions and play brave. That reacting like this is actually a good sign. It’s psychologically healthy. I’m proud of you.”

Weird that he should be proud that I’m quaking and puking, Zoe thought as she nodded her acknowledgement to Titus.

He caught her eye in the mirror. “We’re here with you. You’re safe. But you need to go ahead and let your body do what it needs to do. Don’t force those feelings away. Be brave. Be strong. Deal with them as they come. Can I depend on you to do that?”

Zoe nodded again, like she had any control over her body’s reactions at this point.

Titus reached for his coffee mug and took a long swig. “Lots of nutritious food. Lots of sleep. Some exercise. You don’t want a big old case of PTSD, now do you?”

Zoe shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

“Good. And thank you for not puking in my car.” He rolled his lips, and if Zoe squinted, she could actually see the shadow of a smile there. Gage was holding her hand as they powered down the road a short distance and came to a halt.

Titus popped his seat belt and turned toward them. “This is it.”



## Zoe

**Repeated visits to the mud pit enable the wasp to build its house.**

**~ African proverb**

• • • •

To call this a “house” would be an incredibly elastic stretch of the word. Zoe stood in front of what looked like an abandoned manufacturing plant. White paint curled and hung from the metal exterior. Rust accented the door with bright orange streaks along its hinges. “Safe” seemed right though. No one would suspect that anyone inhabited the interior other than maybe a rat colony. Zoe felt her nostrils flare and her nose wrinkle at the thought.

Gage pulled her bag from the back of the Hummer and came to stand beside her. Zoe sent him a wide-eyed gaze. She wondered if this was going to be a dump and run. Were the guys going to open the door, wish her well, and go home to their own beds? *Gage didn't sleep last night. He's been up protecting me. I should hope that he'll go and get some rest.* Though it felt abundant in its selfishness, what Zoe really hoped was that he wouldn't leave her here on her own.

Titus moved to the back of the vehicle where he removed a computer case. As he strode forward, keys in hand, he aimed for a doorway partially hidden by what had been a fire escape. The door screamed its resistance when he pushed it open. In single file, they moved into the open space. There, in the center of the enormous factory floor, was what looked like a large cube. Titus entered a code on the door handle and pushed it wide, as he snapped on the lights and gestured Zoe in.

Night and day. That's the only way to describe the transformation that took place as she stepped from the filthy factory into the apartment. It was an open space with a modern, clean design. The high ceilings gave it an open, airy feel, despite it being windowless. The wall color was the cool tone of tropical water, set off by crisp white woodwork, that felt soothing and fresh. The furniture looked comfortable. There was a wall of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves with a library ladder attached to a rod so it could slide along them. As Zoe moved farther into the space, she saw that the kitchen was up-to-date with stainless steel appliances and granite countertops. There was a bar. Zoe considered and then discarded the idea of a shot of vodka.

“There are three bedrooms, each with their own bathroom.” Titus indicated the three doors on the far side of the room. “When the safety door to the inner complex is properly shut, there are no telltale signs that anyone is in here. No lights. No movement. The walls are built to be noise resistant instead of noise cancelling. That's so you can have some sense of what's happening outside the cube. It means no yelling. No blaring music or television. You need to keep it down. But you don't have to tiptoe around.”

Zoe opened and then shut each of the bedrooms. The last one, larger than the others, squeezed her heart. It held a queen-size bed, a bunk bed and a crib inside. A family had been in hiding with little kids. She sniffed the air, it had the slightly stale scent of a hotel room with a whiff of lemon. She moved to the kitchen and found a powder room and a broom closet. Zoe swallowed hard. “Wow,” she said as she turned back to Titus, wondering how long she'd have to hide out here.

“Here's the plan.” Titus put his case on the table and pulled out a computer. “Gage has to get down to Quantico and sign papers so he can take leave and pick up his duffle.”

Zoe's eyebrows were up to her hairline. *Gage is leaving me here*, was her knee-jerk reaction. It was quickly replaced with gratitude that he was going to use his leave to help her. She wondered if she actually *needed* help. Could the bad guys have really been going after Lily? Had someone actually killed her? Surely that was an accident. A horrible, horrible accident, Zoe reasoned, to keep a new wave of bile from crawling up her throat.

"I'm going to take your phone back to Iniquus and get it checked by our forensics department. Then I'll pick up some food and bring it back. What I need you to do right now, Zoe...Zoe, look at me."

Zoe dragged her gaze over to Titus and worked to focus on him.

In a voice even more quiet than his usual low tone, he said, "I need you to make a list of what you'd like to have on hand. Say, enough food for a week to be safe. A grocery list. Include any toiletries, medications, anything that you need to be comfortable." The timbre of his words forced Zoe to focus on his lips in order to hear and understand him. Her mind was stuck on the fact that they both planned to leave. She'd be there alone. She pulled out a chair at the dining table where a pad and pen lay ready for use.

Zoe had no appetite and no desire to menu plan. Her list started: *fruit, vegetables, kefir, pasta, coffee...*

"While I'm gone, you can use this computer to do research. *But*, Zoe, this is extremely important. Do *not* contact anyone. Not in any way, shape or form. You are not to go on *any* social media platforms. No Twitter. No Facebook. No Google+. I'm trusting you. Normally, we don't allow Internet in our safe houses. But I think it's important that you have this for your research. You can access news sites, for example."

"Zoe, do you know Charlie's last name?" Gage's question seemed to come out of the blue.

Zoe shook her head and added: *sandwich rolls, deli meats and cheeses, eggs...*

"Do you know how Lily and Charlie met?"

As she scribbled *chocolate. Lots of chocolate. Wine if it's not already here*, she said, "All I know is that he was considerably older than she was, and that felt a little weird to her at first. Why?" Zoe sent Gage a hard stare.

"I have a theory about who she was seeing. I have some circumstantial evidence, but—"

"Evidence? Do you think this guy might be responsible for Lily's death? He wasn't with her at the theater, I can almost guarantee. Lily said Charlie was getting ready for some big political showdown. He wasn't coming up for air until the weekend."

"She never posted his picture? How long had they been seeing each other?" Titus asked.

"No to the pictures. I can't remember the time frame. It would be on her calendar though."

"We don't have access to that," Gage replied.

"Sure we do. She has it on Google calendars." Zoe gestured toward the computer. She turned to Titus. "Can I go on Google calendars?"

"You have her password?" Gage asked.

"She has so many passwords to remember at work that she just has a single password she uses in her personal life—outside of her banking, of course."

"Does anyone else have that password beside you?" Titus asked.

Zoe shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Okay, first things first. I need you to get into her accounts, her email, her calendar, everything you can access," Gage said. "I need you to take screen shots of everything. We need to get that locked down before anyone has a chance to wipe it."

“You think someone would?”

“We don’t know what’s going on. The important thing here is that we preserve everything ASAP in case it turns out there’s something significant in play.”

Zoe pushed the list toward Titus and waved her hand, gesturing for him to hand her the computer. “I’m not that particular, get whatever’s easiest at the store. I can make do.”

Titus pushed the computer toward her. “Glad to see you have your priorities straight.”

Titus ripped the list off the pad. The men moved toward the door. Zoe refused to watch them leave. She pulled up Lily’s accounts, not taking enough time to read them as she did a screen grab, dumped each image into a folder, and moved on to the next. Zoe imagined that she was racing some nefarious character in some underground dungeon, trying to beat her to the information, and her fingers flew over the keyboard. Lily was dead. That was a fact. Gage had said he went to the morgue and saw her body himself. Why would he do that? How could he do that?

*Surely this is just an exercise in...* She shook her head. What word did she want? Over-cautiousness? Conspiracy? Paranoia? Who would want to kill sweet Lily? She was a CPA, for goodness sake. She liked cats and hot cocoa and reading romances. She grumbled the entire time she exercised because she hated it so much, but she never missed a day because it was on her list of things to do. And nothing made Lily more anxious than not marking off every last item on her to-do list. Reliable Lily. Generous Lily. Funny as all get out Lily with her dry sense of humor. How could she be dead? Zoe pulled the pad of paper over and wrote: *Check Lily’s “to-do” list.*

As Zoe pressed save and moved on to the next screen, she wondered about Lily’s ex, Graham. What a misogynistic creep. Zoe had never figured out how those two had fit together as a couple. Obviously, they hadn’t. Their marriage hadn’t lasted long. Zoe picked up the pen and wrote: *Is there any way to get a hold of the security tapes from the Metro?* Then she moved on with her task. Zoe wasn’t sure how far back they needed the calendar. She arbitrarily cut it off at two years. She closed the screen then went to Lily’s Hotmail account.

Lily was very organized about her accounts. Everything was in nice neat little folders and her mailbox was basically empty otherwise. Since Lily had last logged in to her account, there was just some spammy crap about lady Viagra, time shares, and some guy who was willing to share his five-million-dollar windfall from Zaire. Lily hadn’t been dead long enough for more items to accumulate. Time was doing odd things in Zoe’s head. It seemed she had been living this ordeal forever. But no, she reminded herself, this had all just happened last night. *Two men broke into my apartment, Gage killed them, and you died, Lily.*

That the events happened in such quick succession made them seem like they absolutely must be connected. But she wouldn’t jump to conclusions. Her mind had been data driven for so long, it would be odd to suddenly give in to this emotionality. The sooner that Zoe could connect with her rational mind the sooner she’d feel more comfortable. She looked around the safe house and felt the solidity of the emptiness. How alone she was. Normally, that was what she craved—time without interruption so she could be in her head moving things around. Now? It was seriously creeping her out.

Zoe forced her attention onto the emails. There were too many to open and capture them all. That would take days. Did Titus mean for her to get *all* of them? The folder for the vet, she could probably overlook, because Lily’s ex got the cat in the divorce. It was a hateful cat who destroyed the furniture and loved to jump onto counters and bat your drink to the floor. *Enjoy the cat, Graham.*

Zoe skipped over the folder from Lily’s sorority, and the one from her synagogue, and moved to the one marked XX. She had saved the first three items when everything in the folder disappeared.

Zoe pressed undo and saw the icon swirling, and for a moment the folder filled again. Once again, the items disappeared. One by one, Zoe watched all of the folders being discarded. The “deleted items” folder now numbered in the thousands.

“No. No. No!” Zoe yelled at the screen as she tried to figure out a way to save them from being destroyed, but once the last file had been emptied, even the one from the vet, the discard folder went to zero. Zoe stared at the screen. Who would do that? And why? She clicked around to see if there wasn’t a ripcord she could pull, some parachute that would open and save the email. But she couldn’t find anything. They had been purged from the system.

As a last-ditch attempt, Zoe pressed refresh. The screen brought up the sign in page. *That’s odd.* She typed in Lily’s email address and passcode, and the red font in the box said that the password was incorrect. She tried again. Still incorrect. Someone had changed the password. It wasn’t enough that the files were emptied; but now she knew there was no way to retrieve the information.

Who would do this? Why would they care?

She tried Lily’s other accounts, her to-do list at Evernote, her cloud files. Even her Picassa folders. All gone.

To Zoe, it felt like Lily had slipped right between her fingers and disappeared into nothingness. *Lily is dead.* Zoe couldn’t make herself believe it. “Dead,” she said out loud, hammering the word into place, trying to pin it to a hard surface so it wouldn’t keep floating away like a dandelion in the wind. Zoe pulled her knees to her chest and let the tears flow freely. *What happened to you, Lily?*



## Zoe

**And books which told me everything about the wasp, except why.**

**~Dylan Thomas**

• • • •

Zoe uncurled from the ball she had made on the couch. She'd needed to pull the plug and let some of the grief in her chest drain away. She had allowed herself to moan and sob, trying to keep the decibel level within the confines of the safe house walls. She was glad no one was around. She wasn't a woman who felt free exhibiting her emotions. She was publicly pragmatic and only very privately expressive. She had known Lily since they were in undergrad together. Lily was one of a handful of people that were in Zoe's comfort zone. That she allowed to see her cry. Or laugh with abandon. Or be a bitchy, hormonal, ice-cream-eating mess.

*Was. Were.* Lily would always be thought of in past tense now.

Zoe moved to the bathroom and splashed cold water onto her face. As she slid her glasses back in place, Zoe saw her eyes were swollen and her face splotchy. She wondered if Lily was being autopsied now. If the medical examiner could say from the evidence how this had happened. She had to force her thoughts away from the visual of someone doing that to Lily's body.

Zoe's thoughts turned to Lily's mom. She'd have been given the news already. *I bet she had other plans for this weekend. Something different than organizing her daughter's funeral.* Zoe shook her head. She wished she could be there for Lily's mom. Lily's mother, being Jewish, believed that autopsies weren't to be performed. But as a questionable death, the authorities would have no choice. It seemed like salt in a wound. Zoe wondered if she'd be able to go to the funeral. She hoped so. Zoe moved

Zoe sniffed loudly, squared her shoulders, and sat back at the computer into the kitchen to get a glass of water. These kinds of thoughts weren't helpful. Helpful would be figuring out why someone would want to wipe all of those emails.. She put Lily Winters's name into Google to see if there was more information about the event available. "Event" was a nice, safe, scientific word. "Event" allowed Zoe to stay analytical. That was a better place for her to be. Especially holed up all alone in a safe house.

Zoe clicked on the top article on the Google suggestions list, the "Breaking News" article from CNN. Odd that Lily would be mentioned on CNN. There was video of Senator Billings standing behind a podium. His wife, dressed in black, stood next to him. She looked like crap. Like she was still in shock from some horrible event, and Zoe wondered why she was torturing herself by appearing in public when she was obviously going through a private hell.

The senator cleared his throat. "I stand before you today with a heavy heart. Last night, a wonderful person, an amazing person, lost her life in a terrible accident on the Metro line."

Zoe watched the senator's wife. When the senator said "wonderful" and "amazing" Barbara Billings curved her stomach in as if she was being punched. Mrs. Billings struggled to hold her shoulders back, to keep her lips from quivering. It was horrible to watch, and Zoe wanted to turn her head and give this woman some privacy, but simply couldn't.



“Lily Ann Winters was working with me on a project of immense import to the United States—indeed, to the world’s security. Her research was invaluable to the American public.” He gripped the podium and rocked back on his heels then forward. His head dropped and he no longer stared defiantly into the camera lens. “Over the time that I worked with Miss Winters, I was moved by her patriotism, her strength of character, and her sunny personality. I grew to love her, very much. Lily and I developed an intimate relationship. It was improper of me to stray outside of my marriage of twenty-two years. It was improper for me to fall in love with a colleague. I have nothing more to say on the subject, other than that it was Lily who shined brightly at a time when I was surrounded by the darker forces of humanity. I deeply cared for her. She made me happy. Her death is a great loss to me and to the American public.”

The camera panned to Senator Billings’s wife, whose face had turned ashen. She was swaying like a metronome, back and forth. A woman in a red trench coat stepped up behind Mrs. Billings, placed a folding chair behind her knees, guided her to sit, and kept a steadying hand on her shoulder. Mrs. Billings kept staring forward, never looking to see who had saved her from a faint. *What kind of jerk would put his wife through a press conference like this?* It was inhuman. Zoe felt like a voyeur peeking through a window into someone’s very private pain, and felt ashamed to have in any way participated in it.

“How could you have been involved with a married man, Lily?” Zoe muttered at the screen, her mind racing, searching for scraps of conversation that they had shared. “That was so antithetical to your values. Barbara Billings is obviously devastated. You’d never do that to anyone. Ever.” *What the heck is going on?*

“As much as I would like to have some time to mourn Lily’s death and to work through this with my wife,” Senator Billings continued as he turned, and for the first time realized that Mrs. Billings was physically and emotionally collapsing on national TV. He stared at her for a moment, then looked at the person holding his wife upright, then moved back to the mic. “Our nation is in peril. I will be conducting the first day of senate hearings into the kinds of weaponry that Montrim Industries is developing and the—”

There was a light knock on the safe house door. Zoe pitched herself out of the chair and away from the computer, her gaze swinging around the room for a place to hide.

“Zoe? Titus Kane. Open the door.”

Titus. Zoe felt a little foolish. Her nerves had been spiking since the night before. And maybe there was a tinge of guilt mixed in for having watched the CNN report. Zoe moved to open the door.

• • • •

THE CUPBOARDS WERE filled with the copious amounts of food Titus brought in with him. He handed her a bag that must have contained a good five pounds of chocolate. *Thank God*, Zoe thought.

“Let’s talk about your phone.”

“Did you bring it back?”

“No. You had an app on there to follow you via GPS. Another one that allowed people to see what numbers you called and who called you. And a keystroke app.”

“Someone was tracking my texts?”

He nodded. “Who would want to keep tabs on you?”

Zoe shook her head.

“Montrim?”

“I don’t work for Montrim, I merely have lab space at Montrim. They shouldn’t care what I’m doing.”

“The military?”

Zoe shook her head again.

“What about those operatives from the CIA?”

Zoe rolled her lips. *Yeah it could be them. It very well could.*

Titus’s phone buzzed. He pulled it from his belt and checked the screen. “Gage is heading back and asking if you need anything. It can’t be anything from your condo. If it’s being watched, we don’t want to lead anyone to your location.”

Zoe scratched at her head to stop the prickling sensation. She looked over at the bottle of wine Titus had put on the counter. She needed something to take the edge off. “I’m good.”

“Pour yourself a glass if you think it will help. When Gage gets here we need to assemble what we’ve gathered and put it all on the table so we have a better idea what’s going on. I’m going to go get him.”

“Get him? Why get him?”

“His car hasn’t been swept yet, so we don’t know if someone planted a tracker.”

*Oh.* Zoe moved toward the kitchen and put her hand on the bottle. *Maybe two glasses.* On second thought, Zoe actually had no intention of drinking any alcohol. She needed her thoughts to be sharp. Focused. Pragmatic. She didn’t have Titus and Gage’s Special Forces skillsets, but she did have a very good brain. Would that be enough to keep her safe?



## Zoe

**Fire drives the wasp out of its nest.**

**~ Italian Proverb**



“Zoe.” Gage’s eyes were now green with swirls of blue. They seemed turbulent, like a storm kicking up waves of concern. “I need you to trust me. This isn’t going to work unless you do.”

Titus leaned in. “Do you trust Gage?”

Zoe twisted her fingers together in her lap. “With my life—obviously.”

“Now I need you to trust me.” Titus was using his soft voice again. The one that forced her to lean forward and pay complete attention.

She wrinkled her nose. She didn’t like this particular tactic. Zoe wanted to be able to hear and let her mind churn at the same time.

“I’m going to be truthful with you. Gage trusts me—of all the people he knows, I’m the one he called to help protect you.”

Zoe frowned.

“He turned to me because I’m the Commander of Panther Force—an elite group of former Special Forces who work for Iniquus.”

Zoe nodded. She knew who Iniquus was. Not only had Gage interviewed with them recently, but they had been in the paper and on TV. She had never heard anything but glowing terms when it came to Iniquus. Sometimes the admiration seemed to tip into adoration, as if the men and women of Iniquus were superheroes. By all accounts, they were the good guys. The ones who fast-roped off helicopters and swam two miles in the dark of night to save families kidnapped by pirates off of Sudan. The ones who searched for a missing teammate through tropical storms in the Gulf, even though everyone knew there was no hope of survival. And they were as red, white, and blue as the American flag. Titus was with Iniquus, and Gage had called him—Zoe had never for a moment doubted that she was safe in his hands.

“Now, here’s the part that might have you changing your mind about who to trust. Iniquus is headquartered here in DC, and we work as a liaison between different government entities. Gage, can I see those business cards you’ve collected?”

Gage reached into his pocket and handed them over.

“The FBI, the CIA, the military.” As he spoke, he laid down a corresponding card from each. “The legislature, the police. We contract with all of them. They’re our bread and butter. We also do security for people who need us in the corporate world. Montrim is one of our customers.” He laid down the last card in his hand with the name Christopher S. Bilik beside the red foil Montrim logo. “We often go overseas with Montrim executives to provide security in hot spots, though I’ve never met Mr. Bilik. I have worked for all of these organizations. Knowing this, are you still okay with Iniquus protecting you?”

Zoe pulled her gaze from Titus and let her eyes rest on Gage, looking for any sign that he was conflicted. She found only resolve on his face. “Yes, thank you,” she replied. “I appreciate your help.”

Titus's calloused palm gestured over the cards. "I know how they work. I know how they play. And right now, I know you're a hot commodity for someone. All of them have the capacity to have gone after you last night. Or it could have been none of them. It could very well be some outside entity who hasn't landed on our radar yet. That's what we need to start working on now. I need a better handle on what you do and who you think might have targeted you."

Zoe looked between the two men. They both sat at the edge of their seats, their elbows balanced on their knees as they leaned in, closing the circle like a football huddle. Zoe didn't know where to start.

"You both think it was me that was the target and not Lily?" Zoe shut her eyes as she realized how much she had willed the opposite to be true. In her mind, she had decided that some bad men had come after Lily, and, for whatever reason, Lily was the victim of a tragedy. But if Lily had been the target, it would mean that Zoe was not. That she could go home and feel sad, but safe.

"Not after I found the spyware on your phone. You're a person of enormous interest to someone. And we need to know why." Titus hammered his words as if he were nailing a sign in place.

She had allowed herself to lapse into wishful thinking. She had lined up what little information she had and written a story that fit her purposes. It was an unscientific approach, inconsistent with how her brain usually worked. But her brain was usually building and testing ideas in a laboratory, not facing off against bad men with criminal intent.

Facts. Science. Logic. Even if Titus had asked her to be brave enough to experience her emotions and deal with them in the here and now, she thought that it was probably a bad strategy. First, she didn't like to swim around in her emotions. And second, the emotions clouded her thought processes, entangled them in superfluous data, drove her down roads that were dead ends, like the one that went, "surely they were coming after Lily, and I'm safe." Nope. Zoe needed to plant both feet in reality.

She took a deep breath and imagined herself in front of her whiteboard working out a problem. But the faces of the dead men in her bedroom, and Gage's war face when he'd dragged her out from under the bed, formed a barrier between her and logic. Okay, shoving her emotions aside might not be possible, so she'd work to tuck her reactions away the best that she could. She cleared her throat and looked at Gage. "Ready?"

His eyebrows came down low and flat, and he nodded.

"I'm a scientist." She pushed her glasses up her nose into place. "I do research and development in micro robotics. I went to undergrad with a dual major in biomedical engineering and software engineering. Lily lived in the dorm room next door to me freshman year. We liked each other because we both kept our heads in our books. She was working on a degree in accounting. But I'll get to that in a moment." Already her thoughts were jumbled. She needed to untangle the knots to make this as simple and thorough as possible.

Gage stalked over to the table and snapped up the pen and pad. He read over the two items Zoe had written there, then flipped that page over to a fresh sheet as he sat down beside her.

Zoe rubbed sweaty palms over her thighs. "My senior year, I was working on my honor's research project, investigating the usefulness of biomarkers that I'd discovered in human blood."

Titus raised a questioning brow. She held up a hand and said. "First things first. What are your clearance levels?"

Titus put his hand on his chest. "I'm top secret and above."

Gage nodded. "I'm top secret."

Zoe nodded. Top secret. They were safe to read into some of the program. Certainly not all of it. Gage and Titus would need enough to know the who, what, and why of the people who had their

business cards on the table. They didn't need to understand the scientific minutiae. Zoe stared at the floor between her feet and was grateful that both of the men gave her time. She decided she needed to walk them through her timeline.

"I was doing some research one night for an ethics paper, and I came across something called the Innocence Project. This project's goal was to free those imprisoned for crimes they didn't commit. About seventy-five percent of those who were later exonerated had been convicted based on eyewitness testimony. Eyewitness testimony depends on human memory, and we know, without a scientific doubt, that human memory is malleable. Memories can be seeded and otherwise changed by the passage of time, the lighting, the person's mood, their profession, or more insidiously, the choice of words in a police officer's question. That's what I ultimately wrote my paper about, the ethics of using information that we can scientifically prove is flawed to take away someone's freedom." Zoe pushed her hair behind her ears, then got up to pace. She wanted to move away from the intensity of the men's scrutiny. It felt too heavy, and she needed to move her muscles and look at furniture rather than their faces.

"DNA testing is newer than some of the Innocence Project cases that I read about. DNA is costly. The labs are backed up sometimes by a year or more. A lot of people simply don't have access to getting their DNA tested to substantiate their innocence." Zoe looked up and the men nodded. "I had been doing experiments on blood biomarkers. For example, I developed a method to tell if blood came from a female or a male."

"These are hormones?" Gage asked.

"No, hormones fluctuate and can be changed, for example, if a person is undergoing gender reassignment and is using hormone therapy, then that changes the blood levels outside of the norm for birth gender. The markers I identified are stable within the subject over time. They cannot be altered by manipulation."

"Would you be able to give me examples of some markers?" Gage asked.

"Well, two that you might know about are blood types like A, B, or O and their corresponding Rh factors. That's positive or negative. I'm A positive. Gage, you're O positive."

Gage sent her a speculative look.

"It's on your dog tags. Those biomarkers are the ones that most people know about. I have more. Lots more."

"All right. Biomarkers. Go on," Titus replied.

"In grad school, my thesis was built around developing a presumptive field test for law enforcement, so they could rule out an individual who had come under scrutiny for a crime."

"Do blood biometric analysis in the field," Gage said as he scribbled onto the pad.

"My aim was to develop a field rule-in rule-out test. It's meant to merely be a presumptive test."

Zoe had paced to the far side of the room, and Gage swiveled to look at her. "What does that mean exactly?"

"In forensic science, they have the ability to do some testing at the scene of a crime. If, for example, they see something streaked on the floor that looks like blood, they can use a reagent to test it. The results are not definitive—they will simply tell the forensic tech that either the substance *isn't* blood or that the substance possibly *is* blood. If they get a positive presumptive test result—mind you, it could be a false positive—then the tech knows that they should process the area as if it were blood and take the information back to the lab for further analysis."

Gage scribbled some more words onto his pad. "And this applies to your blood biomarkers how?"

“Let’s say that a tech picked up some blood on the scene, and the police have someone in hand they think is associated with that blood, the officer could ask for a blood sample. It would be a quick finger stick and a couple of drops of blood. The tech could then compare the suspect’s sample to the blood on scene and decide right there and then that no, there is no possibility that this is that person’s blood. Or yes, there is a possibility that this is the person’s blood, which would signal a need to order a DNA test. This presumptive test would help a lot of innocent people walk away without having the time and expense of proving their innocence. It would also save time, money, and effort for law enforcement, the American court system, and even the U.S. prison system. Even though this only accounts for a small subsection of crimes where blood was left on scene by the perpetrator.”

“There has to be blood on the scene?” Titus asked.

“For my test? Yes. It can’t be a DNA sample from skin or hair follicles, or secretions like semen. My test only works on biomarkers found in human blood.”

“I can see that having an amazing effect on law enforcement and their ability to manage their resources better,” Titus said. “I notice that you keep saying America and the US in reference to law enforcement uses for your test. Why is that?”

Zoe looked at the ceiling. She was still grappling with what to tell them. Zoe could hear the wall clock tic-tic-ticking, otherwise, there was absolute silence. The more she explained, the more her nerves tingled. Hadn’t she signed contracts that stipulated that to share any of this information outside of the very tight circle of people who signed the contract along with her would be an act of treason? Would she go to jail because she was trying to save her own life?





## Zoe

*Today butterflies, tomorrow wasps*  
~ *Namibian Proverb*



After a long minute sitting in silence, Titus pushed the conversation forward. “Were you able to make it functional?” He had leaned back in his chair, swiveling this way and that to follow Zoe as she paced. It made her feel like she was a duck in a carnival shooting game. She wished he didn’t scowl so much.

Zoe pursed her lips. “I’ll get to that. But there’s another big step that comes next.” Yup, she was going to take the leap. She had no way of seeing over the edge anyway, no idea where this was going to land her. “Christmas of my senior year, before I got my bachelor’s degree and entered grad school, my parents came to visit me from Hawaii. We went to Washington DC for few days to see the sights. One night, we had tickets to a concert at the Kennedy Center. Colonel Guthrie and his wife, Maeve, joined us for the show and then a late dinner.” Zoe stopped to clear her throat. She realized she’d been using a lot of filler. Telling a broad story as a means of stalling. She knew Gage had probably picked up on the change from her normally succinct exchanges. Zoe sought out his gaze. She read curiosity and worry in his expression, but also affection. She sent him a little smile of gratitude.

“Over dinner, my dad was asking how my research was coming. I was explaining the biomarkers and how I was investigating the efficacy of using them in the forensics field and what I planned to do in grad school to further that research. At the end of the night, Colonel Guthrie asked me to come and talk to him before I headed back to school, and I did. He thought that having a compendium of information about the unique markers could have a big impact on the war on terrorism. He envisioned having a parallel system to CODIS. CODIS being the FBI’s database of DNA. I told you about the Innocence Project, and that gathering DNA has prohibitive issues, mainly the back log and expense of testing it. But testing my markers could let the government know if this was a likely person of interest or not. Colonel Guthrie envisioned a military application for building a library of blood biomarker data to try to identify terrorists. The problem for the military at that time—this was back in December 2009 and our fight in Iraq and Afghanistan—was that it is very hard to identify the bad guys in the field. It’s still a problem with groups like ISIS. Their cultural dress and facial hair make it very hard to photograph them and use facial recognition software or ear identification marks.”

Both Gage and Titus nodded their heads.

“One of the things that I found was that ninety-one percent of the unchanging biomarkers I identified are familial. The remaining nine percent are unique to the family member.”

“What aspects are you measuring?” Titus asked.

Zoe blinked. How did he expect her to describe what she had developed to someone who didn’t know squat about the subject? “That’s classified. I’m sharing the absolute minimum for you to understand. And I’m probably breaching my contract by explaining this much.”

“Right now, law enforcement uses familial DNA to identify a suspect,” Titus said.

“Right, exactly. But there are groups that don’t want everyone’s DNA to be gathered and stored, even if someone is convicted of a crime by a court of law. They think it’s unconstitutional and the

question needs to be decided by the Supreme Court. DNA, at this point, is our best identifier. We do need to be very careful about how we use DNA. My tests aren't the same. They can't be used—they were never intended to be used—to identify someone as the culprit. If anyone tried to do that, to use my test to prove guilt, I'd go to court myself to fight it.”

“How did Colonel Guthrie think your tests could help in a war zone?”

“He's a director of DARPA, they subcontract with other entities who do defense research and development. They, for example, subcontract with me. One of the companies they work with is Montrim Industries. Colonel Guthrie wanted Montrim and their contractors to develop a system like the FBI's CODIS. Only this would be for blood biomarkers. Running DNA on everyone is too time consuming and expensive.”

“Who is *everyone*?” Titus asked.

“Everyone in conflict zones.”

“What?” Gage's eyes went wide.

“Montrim sends in teams of health care workers contracted by the US government to help with the whole “win the hearts and minds” campaign. They go village to village, set up a tent, give everyone in the village a basic medical once over, offer them health care intervention, antibiotics, immunizations, vitamins, stitches—whatever is needed. As part of the field exam, they do a blood glucose test. Blood glucose is measured by poking a finger and putting a drop of blood onto a sample strip, which is then analyzed by the machine and the number displayed. The newer strips take the tiniest bit of blood to sample. Older strips, however, absorb a blood sample large enough to analyze for the biomarkers.”

“Right there in the field?”

“No. The analysis would happen back in the Montrim laboratory. Each of the strips was carefully stored, documented, and brought back to Montrim to be put through testing, and the results were stored in a computer database.”

“That sounds like what they were trying to do with Osama Bin Laden.” Gage leaned forward and posted his forearms on his knees. “Collect DNA samples from the compound where they thought he was hiding. They sent the people in disguised as health workers.”

had developed “Montrim started collecting the samples in late spring of 2010. The CIA had access to the data, and when they killed or captured enemy soldiers, they took samples to add to the database. In April of 2011, the CIA decided to gather information from the Bin Laden complex. I only know this because I was in grad school then and a field test machine. It was a rough prototype, not a sleek finished project. They had to hook it up to a computer screen to read the answers, but it was workable. I only had the one. I allowed the operatives to use it for a ‘special project’ so they could get their results immediately. They came to me, and I trained them on using the machine. They took it away, and then brought it back unused. I put this all together as the news reported Bin Laden was killed by SEAL Team 6. Later, Colonel Guthrie, who had facilitated the CIA's access to my machine, confirmed my suspicions.” Zoe shrugged. “Colonel Guthrie said agents went to the complex under the same ruse that Montrim had been using in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. But they were shooed away before they could get a single blood sample.”

Gage shook his head. “Yeah, but the US didn't have a sample of Bin Laden's DNA or blood to compare.”

“We had familial samples. If they got blood from the children, they'd do the presumptive test. If that was positive, they'd send the samples back to the US for DNA analysis. Of course, just because Bin Laden's wives and children were in a complex didn't mean Bin Laden was there. But it would

have been a big clue. And the presumptive tests would tell them whether or not they should go through the effort to test for DNA.”

“That’s nuts, Zoe.” Gage was grinning.

Zoe frowned back at him. “What is?”

“I thought you cleaned beakers in a lab. But instead you were one of the masterminds trying to take down Bin Laden.”

“Yeah, right. That’s like telling the Sig Sauer manufacturer that he’s responsible for the Bin Laden takedown because he built the gun strapped to one of the SEAL’s ankles. I’m just the geek girl in the lab, trying to help the Innocence Project.”

“I’d like to go back to discussing Montrim and their database, if you don’t mind, Zoe,” Titus said. “Montrim set this all up. And you said you were developing a field test. I’d like to hear more about that and where you are with your research currently.”

“Hey, Zoe, are you okay?” Gage had fixed his gaze on her face. “Maybe you should stop and eat something.”

Zoe didn’t want to be “that girl”—the one who was delicate and needy. So even though Gage was right, and she was feeling shaky and sweaty, she wanted to power through this explanation. “I will in a second. Titus, to answer your question, biomarkers were proving helpful in the war against terror. But there was still an unfortunate gap between the time that blood was collected and archived in the States and getting the info back to the boots on the ground. DARPA pushed me to move forward with my long-term goal, helping law enforcement. In order to be of consequence to law enforcement here, and to the armed forces in the Middle East, they needed instant analysis, giving law enforcement the ability to hold a suspect rather than having to let them go while tests were being run.”

“You’re very careful about using the term law enforcement, so I’m assuming that this wasn’t for the police,” Titus asked. Zoe could see his mind churning.

“Right,” she replied.

Gage picked up one of business cards on the coffee table. “So for the FBI, like Special Agent Damion Prescott?”

Zoe debated whether she should respond.

“Did you work with Parker and Grossman?” Gage pointed at the cards.

“No, I don’t work with the CIA. But you were right about Prescott. He’s in charge of the FBI’s side of the field trial. It’s been going on since late 2012.”

“This would save so many resources. It’s an amazing invention. I’d like to get my hands on this for Iniquus,” Titus said.

Gage pushed the business cards back into a nice, neat row. “How did Prescott know you were in trouble? How did he get on scene so fast?”

“When I was under my bed, I sent him an SOS text.”

“And he wanted to safeguard you because of this tech. I wonder why he couldn’t come up with a safe house.”

“I have no idea. Sorry.” Zoe clapped her hands on either side of her head. “I really need to stop talking and get something to eat.” She glanced toward the kitchen. As she said that out loud, she became acutely aware of the nausea that she felt when her mind got so busy that she forgot to take care of her body. She needed fuel. Now.

“I need to call Prescott,” Gage told her as Zoe made her way into the kitchen. “Ask him if he has anything new.”

“Yeah, I’d really like to know too.” She yanked the fridge door open.

“But after you eat I need you to tell me how Lily is involved with this. You started this whole story with Lily living next to you in the dorm and said that you’d get to her in a moment.”

Zoe gathered what she needed for a sandwich. She snagged a nectarine and bumped the door closed with her hip. “When I started my doctoral program, Lily had just graduated with her MBA, she’d taken the CPA exam and had that certification, but she was up against a really difficult job market. Competing against people who had ten years of experience under their belts, while she was still wet behind the ears.” Zoe slapped a quick sandwich together, and she took a big bite. She gave herself a moment to chew and swallow before she said, “Usually, UVA’s Darden program is a launching pad to the best jobs in the US, but with the recession in full swing and industries putting a moratorium on hiring, there weren’t any job openings to compete for. She told me that she had gotten a bite from Montrim Industries and was in town for an interview. We had dinner and she asked what I was working on.”

“Which was?”

Zoe took another bite to buy herself some time. Should she? Shouldn’t she? She swallowed, and then took a few breaths with closed eyes. The full force of both of the warriors sitting in the living room was overwhelming. She looked from one face to the other. She really didn’t have a choice. Zoe sucked a deep breath through her nostrils and on the exhale she said, “WASPs.”



## GAGE



Titus lifted his chin in Gage's direction to catch his attention. After years in battle, where micro-gestures protected their locations from enemy eyes, it didn't take much to convey a message. Gage shifted silently toward his buddy while Zoe was busy eating.

"You said you got data off Lily Winter's phone. When was that?" Titus asked under his breath.

"This morning in the morgue."

"You had help?"

Gage moved Special Agent Prescott's card over to him.

"They should have information from the autopsy by now. If Lily's death was an accident it changes the dynamics of this situation. How about you give this guy a call and see if he won't share his intel."

Gage palmed the card and moved past Zoe, who sat in her own little bubble, munching her sandwich. He made his way to the bathroom and opened his phone. The call didn't go through. He tried Titus's number and got the same.

Gage moved to a bedroom and tried again. His alarm bells were ringing hard. He stood in the door, his eyes on Titus until Titus turned toward him then got up and strolled his way. Gage looked over at Zoe—she was off in Zoe-land thinking her thoughts, letting the gears grind and turn.

Titus moved through the door and shut it soundlessly behind him.

"My phones not functioning. No bars, where there had been four bars when I was here earlier. No connection. Unless you've got something going on here security-wise, I think someone's messing with airwaves in the area."

Titus did a quick check on his phone. When he looked up, he caught Gage's eye and held it in a split second of silent communication. They had a plan and moved on it.

Gage surveyed the front room as he scooped up the business cards and shoved them in his front pocket. He swung his jacket on and snagged Zoe's from the hook by the door.

Titus was busy packing the laptop and pad of paper Gage and Zoe had taken notes on. He grabbed Zoe's overnight bag and tilted his head toward the bedroom on the right. Gage put his hand under Zoe's elbow, his index finger making a hush sign. He swept the last of her food from the counter, dumping it into the garbage. Everything was cleared as if they had never been there except for the groceries in the fridge. Nothing he could do about that.

Zoe's eyes widened, asking him what was going on. He didn't have an answer other than the prickle that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. It was the feeling he got when someone had a bead on him and was about to squeeze the trigger. He moved Zoe to the room that Titus had disappeared into, back to the open door of the bathroom. He could make out Titus's silhouette behind the rippled glass shower doors. He steered Zoe into the bathroom and shut the door.

Inside the tub, on the back wall, Titus had opened an escape hatch. Gage pressed Zoe forward, over the lip of the tub and into Titus's waiting hands. Titus whispered in her ear and pushed her toward the opening. She lifted one foot into the hole then she was climbing down a ladder. Titus nodded toward Gage, who followed her down. Titus handed him the computer, followed by Zoe's bag

then her coat. Gage, in turn, handed them down to Zoe's outstretched hands. Titus entered the tunnel, then pulled the hidden door shut, and locked it from their side, preventing anyone from following them along this escape route. Gage and Titus made quick work of the ladder, coming to rest in a dark underground tunnel. With a snap and a shake, Titus's face lit up in the pink glow of a chem-light. He handed it to Zoe.

"What's happening?" In the dim light, it was hard to read Zoe's face, but to Gage's ear, her voice sounded firm and strong.

"Looks like someone's jamming the cellphones. Someone might have located this safe house," he whispered.

"Are you sure there's not an issue because of the materials used to construct the place?"

It was cold in the tunnel. As Zoe spoke, Gage handed her her jacket, and she quickly pulled it on.

"Or maybe it's our distance from cell towers? Or a carrier malfunction? There are reasons for not being able to make a phone call other than there being wolves at the door, right?" she asked.

"Could be, but it's always good practice to go over an escape route. Let's chuck this up to doing a drill." Titus pulled a bulletproof vest from a hook on the wall. "Here you go, Zoe, it's going to be a little big, but you can make do."

Gage rocked back on his heels, watching Zoe getting strapped in. His mind, though, was securely on how the heck someone had followed them. Gage had watched every move that Titus made. Titus was on point with his counter surveillance maneuvers. Gage's mind went back to Titus's explanation to Zoe of all the ways he could be entangled by his past associations with everyone who had a hand in this game. He considered the possibility that Titus had compromised them. But if he had, wouldn't he have made up some garbage about having cellphone issues in the safe house? Iniquus as a company, and Titus as a commander, were above reproach. Gage sincerely believed that, or he wouldn't have interviewed to be on the teams, and he wouldn't have called Titus to help Zoe. *But you also thought Zoe was just a lab tech.* Yeah. He was definitely questioning his own sense of what was true and what was not. "How do you think they found us, Titus?"

"I don't know, man, we'll work on that later. Right now, the plan is to follow this tunnel. It'll take us to an exfil house about a klick to the north. Once we're topside, there's a landline I can use to send an encrypted message, call in the cavalry. You got a weapon on you?"

"The Glock from earlier."

Titus reached into the front pocket of his tactical jacket. "Here's an extra magazine, sixteen rounds. Zoe? We're going to move forward now. I've got point. Gage's going to bring up the rear. Gage and I have our weapons in hand, and you have the chem-light. If we run into anyone down here, I need you to underhand throw the chem-light toward them, try to get it to roll toward their feet so we can see where to aim, and they can't get a good bead on us. As soon as that light leaves your hand, duck behind us, get flat on the ground up against the wall out of the way of our feet. Do you understand the plan? You don't deviate, no matter what genius idea pops into your head. We're working as a team, and that's your only role. Got it?"

Zoe nodded her head. Her teeth were chattering so loudly that Gage could hear it echoing off the walls of the tunnel.

"Tell me the plan," Titus commanded.

"If someone's there, I throw the light, fall to the ground, and get flat up next to the wall."

Gage had given those same instructions about a dozen times as he moved assets out of harm's way. It sure felt like a different ride when he was in a tunnel under Maryland soil, protecting the

woman he loved. Gage let that last thought filter through his head, and he tucked it away to examine later when his nerves weren't so raw.

“Good.” Titus pulled the go bag over his shoulders, reached for Zoe's hand and planted it on his back. “Don't let go unless you're throwing the light and diving for cover. I need to know I haven't lost you, and I don't want to keep turning around to scan. Got it?”

“Yes,” Zoe whispered.

They moved forward at a slow jog. The floor was muddy and slick. In places, they needed to duck their heads a little to move under the joists that kept the roof from collapsing. The farther into the tunnel they moved, the stronger the smell of rot and decay.

Their footfalls echoed through the space. Zoe's breath came in ragged huffs. Gage was counting paces. He jogged at sixty-six paces per hundred meters, Titus said they should be there in a klick. When they reached around the six-hundred pace mark, Titus had slowed his speed perceptibly. He probably felt Zoe getting tired. She was running with twenty pounds of metal around her chest. At pace six hundred and ten the quality of the air changed. Another fifty paces, and they came to another ladder.

“Hang tight,” Titus whispered as he clambered up the rungs.

Zoe held the chem-light above her head as Titus moved cautiously to the top. He pushed the trap door open about an inch, enough to get eyes on the floorboards and see if there were any enemy boots in sight. They stood as still as statues, ears straining. Finally, Titus pushed the door all the way open, letting natural daylight stream through the hole. Zoe moved to follow, but Gage's hand on her shoulder held her back.

Overhead, they could hear the soft pad of stealthy feet as Titus checked the house. Gage felt like a mouse caught in a trap. Gage had used his elbows to skim the narrow sides of the tunnel the whole way, looking for a possible turnoff. There seemed to be only two ways to get in and out. Gage didn't like this level of vulnerability. He liked options. Sweat dripped from his neck down the back of his cotton shirt. He was antsy to get topside and was about to take action when Titus's head poked down the hole.

“Clear,” he called down.





## GAGE



Gage left Zoe's overnight bag in the tunnel, to be retrieved when things were safer. He zipped the computer into his jacket, shoved his Glock into his waistband, and scrambled up the ladder and out of the hole, relieved to fill his lungs with fresh air.

He scanned the room. They were standing in the corner of a minimally furnished bedroom containing a painted iron bed, a faded quilt, and a cross on the wall. He followed Zoe into the living room where she plopped onto a threadbare recliner, her eyes searching his face for answers.

Titus pointed his finger to the olive-green rotary phone hanging on the kitchen wall. "I sent a distress signal to my team. They're en route. We'll have backup within the half hour. Do you have cell service now?" Titus asked as he pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed a number, said, "Systems check," and moved his phone back to the holster on his belt.

Gage rang Titus's phone. When it rang he swiped the red button and put his phone back in his pocket. "The cell jammers aren't working out here."

"That was a drill," Zoe whispered. "We ran down the tunnel so we could try it out and make sure that the plan worked, right? No one went to the factory to find me, right?"

Gage took up watch at the side window where he had a clear visual of the road that ran along the front of the house. Trees dotted the broad expanse of the front yard. His head was on a swivel.

Titus was the one to answer her. "Zoe, we don't know who wants you or what they're resources are. We need to err on the side of caution. You have some powerful people in play. Powerful resources."

"But how?" Her voice warbled. "No one followed us."

Titus moved from window to window, lifting the curtains a fraction of an inch, checking the perimeter, and letting the fabric fall back into place. "No one followed us on the ground."

Gage pulled a heavy, chest-high bookcase away from the wall.

Zoe sat in the corner of the room looking lost. "What does that mean, Gage?"

"Someone could have had us on satellite and been following us remotely. It's a huge stretch. I didn't tell anyone that I called Titus. We left my car back at the hospital, and when Titus picked me up from Quantico, I left my SUV in a garage near the Metro line. In order to follow us, they would have needed to identify Titus and his Hummer as part of our team. Zoe, come here. I need you to come sit in this corner."

"That all seems very improbable." She moved to the corner and wrestled herself down. It wasn't easy with the bulk and rigidity of the bulletproof vest.

Gage had to grab her hands and lower her into position.

"The probability of all that happening is very low," she said again.

"Very low. Move up against the corner, Zoe. I'm going to push this bookcase across the space."

"But why?" she squeaked as he moved the case into position.

He knew she hated small spaces. Hated the feeling of being confined or trapped. Even clutter around her apartment made her uncomfortable; that's why her place was always minimalist and clean. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know this sucks. But hopefully it won't suck for long."

“Have you got her situated, Gage?”

“Yeah. What have we got for weapons?”

“I’ll give the house a shake. You look in the jump bag and see what you can come up with.”

Gage pulled the hook and loop closure open on the front of the bag to find a loaded revolver. He leaned over the top of the bookcase. “Zoe?”

She stared up at him with wide eyes.

“Have you ever shot a gun before?” Gage couldn’t imagine Zoe with a weapon in her hand, even if she’d grown up in a military household. She was a bookworm, not an adventurer. But over the last few hours, Zoe had been busting his preconceived notions left and right.

She twitched her head to indicate no.

“Okay, this is a revolver. It’s very easy to shoot because it never jams. But the downside is you only have five bullets, and it has a kick.” He reached down and positioned her hands properly around the grip. “If someone is pointing a weapon at you, look at his stomach. Not his face or his eyes, Zoe. Force yourself to look at his stomach, then reach out like you’re pointing your finger at him, and pull the trigger.”

Her knuckles were white as she squeezed the gun between her hands.

“Deep breaths. We don’t know what’s going on right now. We’re just trying to be prepared for anything, right? Panther Force is only a short distance out. We should hear them roaring up the road any minute now. Noise out front can mean good guys. Breathe, Zoe. Are you breathing?”

“Trying to.”

“Good. You’re doing great. I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.”

Titus was coming out of a side room with a shotgun and a box of shells. He hunkered into the corner that had a view of the front door and was shoving the shells into his pockets.

“Do you hear engines approaching?” Titus asked.

Gage stilled. Yeah, he could hear them. He leaned over the top of the case. “I’m here, Zoe. I’ll protect you. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Zoe said nothing in return, just looked up at him with her glittering black eyes.

Titus swung his head, telling Gage to cover the back. Gage moved into position.

The house fell silent. Those engines should have driven by the house by now. Gage’s senses expanded, sucking in information around him. The bird calls, the leaves blowing across the lawn, every small intonation was analyzed. Gage knew this feeling well. His body was primed for battle. He settled down into the steady count of combat breathing, keeping his mind oxygenated, keeping his body relaxed. Time moved forward and nothing changed. He wondered if what he and Titus had heard was a roadway nearby that he couldn’t account for from the small visual field he had in his position. From what he could tell, anyone coming up the back had little cover. The tree line looked a good fifty yards away. A side street was to his right.

Gage glanced at his watch. “If your team didn’t hit traffic, they’re only a couple minutes out,” he whispered in Titus’s direction. Gage turned his head toward Zoe’s hiding spot. “Soon, Zoe, okay?”

Zoe didn’t answer, but he could imagine her nodding her understanding.

The light on the side table went out. Gage took a step back to get Titus in his view. Titus moved to the phone, lifted the receiver, and after holding it to his ear for a moment, he shook his head and put it back in place. They both checked their cell phones again. Nada.

“Jammers. This isn’t your guys, is it?”

“No way,” Titus responded. His gaze shot back to the bedroom with the escape tunnel and he tipped his head. Did Gage think that would be a good option?

"I'd rather not, man," Gage said. "Going down that hole feels like being a fish in a barrel."

"I'm not going back down in the tunnel again," Zoe's voice rose from behind the shelves.

"Titus, man, if they were able to cut the power and the phone lines they must be close." Gage licked his lips. He slid his phone from his belt and pulled up the number for Special Agent Prescott. He followed Zoe's lead from last night and texted, **Zoe SOS**, pressed send, and stuck the phone back in his pocket. Since texts were delivered asynchronously, there was the slight chance that it could slip through, and if not, at least he knew the text would keep trying until it was able to be delivered. These bastards couldn't keep jamming the airwaves forever, eventually Prescott would get the heads up.

"Titus, I've got a black SUV coming up the side road. Could it be one of yours?"

"Black, not grey?"

"Black, Durango."

"Not mine. I have the same coming up the front. Counting two heads. Yup. Here we go. AKs."

"Zoe?" Gage called, his voice gruff. "I need you to lay on your side with your back to the bookcase. I want you to pull your knees to your chest and tuck your head down tight. If there are any bullets, they'll need to get through the books and wood, then they'll hit your vest. Stay tucked tight. Tell me when you're in position." Gage worked to make his voice strong and easy, as if this was no big deal. It was a pretty damned big deal. The SUV had pulled behind a copse of hardwood trees, and Gage counted three heads coming up the back. His pistol and limited ammo would be shit stacked up against MP5 submachine guns that his three had in hand. All three men hid their faces behind black ski masks. They moved in practiced formation, leap frogging each other to get closer to the house.

"How would they know we're here, Titus?"

"I don't know, man. We'll have to drill down on that question after we put these tangos to sleep."

"Where's this cavalry you promised us? Times up. They're supposed to be here by now."

"Focus," Titus growled.

Gage watched as the first guy in full tactical uniform jumped the garden fence and ran for the door. Gage massaged the trigger, waiting for the perfect headshot that would take out this guy's nervous system. He needed to make sure there was no last-minute burst of ammo spraying the clapboard walls that offered almost zero in the way of real protection. Those bullets would strafe the house, taking out everyone inside. Just as Gage was about to squeeze the trigger, pink mist engulfed the man's head. The tango's body slumped to the ground.

One of his teammates turned and fired in the direction of the bullet's origin. Gage knew the first man was downed by a sniper rifle. Some guy in a ghillie suit was probably prone in the field just waiting for someone to run in his direction.

"Heads up, Gage. We've got company. The cavalry you were doubting is here. They're dressed in grey camo, Iniquus uniforms. You touch one hair on one of my guys' chinny-chin-chins with your fucking Lauchheimer Trophy shooting skills, and you'll be facing a wrath worse than hell, my brother."

"Copy that." Gage shook his head at Titus's mention of his elite shooting award. He hoped to hell those skills would serve him now. The two remaining tangos were moving in fast. Gage flung himself behind the window frame, hoping for some modicum of protection. The two men split up. One fired toward the woods, forcing anyone back there to duck and cover, the other was racing toward the kitchen door. The tango's MP5 swept high. These men were too well-trained to be shooting so poorly. Gage thought the guy was probably trying to force their heads down, their bodies behind cover. Keep them from shooting. It didn't seem like he intended to kill everyone in the house. Gage thought back to

the bag brought in by the two Israelis the other night. It was packed to capture. They were coming to take Zoe alive. As for Titus and him, these guys probably didn't care about their health as much.

The tango was on the patio now. He stopped for a nanosecond glancing down at his dead teammate. As he hopped the body and put his foot on the porch stair, a grey-clad hulk swung around the corner and tackled the man to the ground. Gage had a bead on the guy near the field. He pulled the trigger and saw him fall and roll. When he got up, he gripped his shoulder and took off toward the Durango.

Bullets strafed the house from the front. Gage could hear the plinking of metal and exploding glass. From the front room, the sound of Zoe mewling, temporarily dragged his attention away from the fight. When he spun back, he saw the tango slip through the Panther's grasp and leap through the door. Gage brought his fist up and clocked the man with a hard right hook across the jaw. His knuckles slid across the knitted surface of his mask. Gage readied an uppercut, but before he could deliver it, the tango dropped. The Panther shot through the doorway, flinging himself on top of the unconscious man. He cuffed him and gave him a pat down before he unceremoniously hauled the guy the rest of the way into the house and shut the door.

Gage ducked and ran for the front room.

"Clear," Titus yelled, as he popped the front door open for his team members to come in.

Gage dragged the bookcase out of the corner. Zoe was flailing. With practiced hands he checked her for bullet wounds. There on her back, he could see where three rounds had flattened into shiny silver circles against the plates of her protective vest. He yanked the closure until he had her free of her armor. She put her fists to her chest and sucked in air. He pulled her into his arms and buried his nose in the warm silkiness of her hair. "I've got you, Zoe. You're safe now. I've got you," he whispered.

Slowly, Zoe was able to catch her breath. She clung to Gage and every time he said, "I've got you," she seemed to climb a little further out of the place this attack had driven her.

Titus moved to stand next to the two. "Gage, man, we've got to get her moved."



## Zoe

**They are flies that are born of a wasp**  
**~ Indonesian Proverb**

• • • •

**B**efore Titus could hustle them toward the car, Special Agent Prescott arrived on the scene, lights flashing. He stood beside the century-old magnolia tree, where Gage introduced him to Titus Kane. Titus gave a two-sentence overview of the attack.

“You got here fast,” Gage said.

“The SOS text system isn’t the best, but it’s working.” It seemed as though the moment the black SUV took off from the side street with its one occupant, Gage’s text went through. Prescott had traced the number and raced to their location, which fortunately wasn’t that far from where he was working. “Are you okay, Zoe?” Prescott asked.

Zoe felt like she was on some kind of hallucinatory drug. She nodded in reply. She was glad for Gage’s hand resting between her shoulder blades. It was her anchor.

Prescott sent a glance toward the bullet-ridden front of the little white cottage. “How many are in custody? How many killed?”

“Panther Force didn’t sustain any casualties. Zoe took three bullets in her vest. She’ll have bruising tomorrow. Of the tangos, one neutralized, one in custody. Three got away, going opposite directions in two vehicles. We didn’t chase them down. We weren’t going to split our forces if they had a B team heading in. But we got photographs of their license plates.”

“Send those over to my phone, will you?”

“Done,” Titus responded.

“Shit.” Prescott shook his head. “I wish I knew what was going on. DCPD wasn’t able to come up with IDs on the men that broke into Zoe’s apartment. They aren’t in any of our systems. It doesn’t mean we’ll stop working on it though, Zoe.”

“Iniquus has that, sir,” Titus said. “I’ll send their identifications to you as well. Right now, what you need to know is that they were documented as Israeli Armed Services. The two men were listed as being MIA, assumed dead in an explosion.”

“How did Iniquus swing an identification, where the DCPD and FBI couldn’t?”

“Gage took photos of faces and ears, and rolled fingerprints after he neutralized the danger. With those three data points, we’re confident in the IDs churned out by our computer system,” he said obliquely.

Zoe turned her head to catch Gage’s eye. When did he have time to do that? She didn’t remember him doing that. *Thank goodness* he did that.

Gage looked down at her and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

“Israeli?” Prescott shot a glance at the house. “All right.” He took a couple steps away from the men, and posted his hands on his hips while he looked up at the sky, making some decision or other. “This is getting complicated as hell, with a lot of foreign intrigue, and a lot of American interests at play. Let’s start here for now. How did Iniquus get involved?”

“We heard from Gage that a DARPA scientist was in danger, and Iniquus stepped in with pro-bono security when the FBI fell short.” There was no censure in his voice, Titus was merely stating facts.

Prescott chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Is Iniquus willing to continue playing a security role?”

“For the time being,” Titus said. “Of course, if this is going to be long term, you’re going to need to shift this case to the US Marshal Services.”

“But we have some time to try to figure this out?”

“What are you thinking?” Titus asked.

“I’ll call in an FBI cleanup crew to come take care of this. If anyone heard gunshots and called the police, we can wave them off.” Prescott sent a glance up and down the street. “Doesn’t look like that’s going to be a problem though.” He focused back on Titus. “We take the suspect to Iniquus headquarters, put him in one of your interrogation rooms, and see if we can’t convince him to talk. We take Zoe to your headquarters, as well—she’ll be safe and comfortable there for the moment until we can get her rehoused. And we get started piecing the story together. As Zoe names names, I’ll have one of my FBI team run by and pick them up for a friendly chat, to see if they can add anything to our understanding. All very nice, polite, and civilized. Folks will probably be better about spilling their guts in one of the Iniquus conference rooms than they would if we were asking questions at FBI headquarters, where they’d probably lawyer up. Iniquus has the same ability to record and remote view as we do.”

“How do you think they found us?” Gage asked.

“Had to be trackers,” Prescott said. “Did anyone sweep you?”

“Titus looked at Zoe’s phone, and it was compromised. It’s still at Iniquus,” Gage said. He looked for Titus’s nod that that was the case.

“But not you and your clothes?”

“No. Why would we?” Gage asked.

Titus rubbed a hand over his chin. “You were rubbing shoulders last night and this morning with a bunch of people who seem to have a lot riding on Zoe Kealoha. You brought in a pocketful of high-powered business cards. And most of those people have access to tracking technology.” He looked over at Prescott. “I’ve got equipment in my Hummer. We’ll give them both a check before we move them.”

“Let’s go ahead and take care of that sweep,” Gage said, “and get this show on the road. I don’t want the three that got away to come back with a bigger team and bigger weapons. We don’t need a showdown out here.”

Titus moved to his Hummer, driven over by a Panther, to gather his equipment. Prescott was on his cell, barking orders. Gage stood in place muttering in her ear, “This kind of thing was all so normal when I was in the Middle East. It feels pretty foreign here at home.”

Zoe leaned back into him, and he wrapped his arms around her armor-plated vest. She wondered how in the world they were going to keep her safe without putting themselves in even more danger.





## Zoe

**Anger is as a stone cast into a wasp's nest.**

~ Malabar Proverb



A handful of covert tracking devices lay on the kitchen table. Titus, Zoe, Gage, and Prescott stared down at the collection.

“Unbelievable.” Titus laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “This SNAFU is going to be the subject of a command leader meeting. Obviously, a body sweep needs to be part of our intake protocol.”

“Seems like a one in a million shot that something like this could happen,” Prescott said.

Titus focused on him. “It only takes one.”

“Now we know why we had time for Panther Force to get in place. They tracked the safe house but couldn't follow us when we were in the tunnel, no radio signal that deep down.”

One of the Panthers, a guy they called Thorn, tall and lanky like a basketball player, knocked on the doorframe leading from the dining room to the kitchen, and caught Titus's eye. “Sir, I'm back from the safe house.”

“Find anything?”

“Yes, sir, everything was intact at the original site. But they were about to make their play.”

“Signs?” Prescott asked.

“Det cord and C-4 on the factory door. Not the side entrance we use for in and out, the main door that was soldered shut. Boot prints in strategically triangulated observation points. Tire tracks to two SUVs parked on the far side from where you drove your Hummer, Commander. From the rutting, it looks like they took off in a hurry.”

“You were on foot when you escaped. How did you beat them here?” Prescott asked.

“We were only a klick by tunnel, which was dug as the crow flies, but it's a seven-mile detour by car. They had to gather the team, find our location, develop a new plan, and execute. The SOS Gage sent to you slipped through almost immediately, so it looks like the fates were shining a little luck in our direction.”

“What are you thinking, Gage?” Prescott asked.

Zoe turned to Gage to see his fierce as hell combat face.

“I don't like how close we came to not having the present outcome. I'm used to close shaves. But in the rubble of Kabul that was the expectation. On American soil, I didn't anticipate a foreign enemy to be gunning for us. And I didn't expect to be protecting precious cargo.”

“Precious cargo,” Zoe repeated, trying out the words.

“Zoe, you're classified as precious cargo,” Titus said. “It means we're tasked with keeping you safe. Okay?”

Zoe gave a quick nod, not sure how to respond. Was she okay with that? Well, she'd rather be someone's precious cargo than a hunting trophy someone bagged. But who? Who wanted her enough to chance gunfire in the middle of the day? And C-4, for heaven's sake. She looked down at the trackers on the table. “And each of these devices were placed by different people?” Zoe asked.

“No, these two are the same. One planted in your jacket and one in Gage’s. So it’s probably the same person who planted these,” Prescott answered.

“Well, one of these is obvious.” Gage picked up Christopher Bilik’s business card. “Can anyone explain how this is a tracker?”

The four of them stared at the card. Gage turned it over and held it up to the light. He examined the thickness. It looked and felt like every other card in the pile.

Prescott turned to Zoe. “Ideas?”

Zoe took the card from Gage and ran her thumb over the print and graphic. She was alone in her mind, where she was comfortably free of others’ intrusions, though she knew that the men sat still and silent, waiting for her to come back into the room with them and offer up an explanation.

She waved the card in the air. “An EMF detector would be needed to confirm.” She let her gaze circle the table, taking in the men who sat with her. “Have any of you heard about smart dust?”

Three heads shook in reply.

“Hmmm. Well it’s the only thing I can think of right now.”

The men waited patiently.

“I thought smart dust was still conceptual in its communication’s application.” Zoe laid the card back on the table. “There was a grad student at the University of California. I think her name was Janice Link...Jamie Link. She was working on a silicon chip, which she exploded by accident, destroying it. But through that accident she realized that the individual pieces could work as sensors. Those sensors have real-world applications now in many scientific ways, such as detecting tumors.” She fell silent.

The men watched her as she ran the pads of her fingertips over the card like she was reading braille. She pursed her lips in concentration.

“Zoe,” Gage reached for her hand. “You’re going to have to make a connection for us between Jamie Link’s discovery and this card.”

She looked up. “It would just be speculation.” Zoe didn’t like theory and speculation; they could throw thoughts in incorrect directions. She liked facts and clear data. Sitting at this kitchen table, without scientific equipment, she had a hypothesis and that was about it.

“That’s okay,” Gage said.

Zoe put the card back on the table. “A collection of microelectromechanical systems can form a simple computer.”

Prescott reached for the card and ran his thumb over the print like Zoe had. “Small enough that it could be embedded in this card or even the ink on this card?”

“They are light enough that they can remain suspended in air,” Zoe replied. “The concept is used to gather information in environments that are hostile to life.”

“How small would this be?” Titus reached for the card so he could feel the print as well.

“I’m just *speculating*.” Zoe needed them to hear the word again. They needed to understand that she didn’t have the answers. Shifting her weight from one thigh to another, she said, “That’s not good science.”

Prescott leaned forward. “We’re throwing ideas on the table. No one’s going to call these actual facts. Why do you want this card to be EMF detector? What do you think we might find?”

“It could be that the foil on the “M” is an antenna to augment the capacity of a tracking system built on smart dust research.”

Prescott reached to take the card from Titus and stared at the logo. “It would need a power source.”

“If it were me? I’d go for kinetic energy or possible light power. No, not light. The card will be in a place that gets little to no light, in someone’s pocket or wallet. Kinetic energy. That’s what I’d develop.”

Prescott lay the Montrim card on the table. Gage pulled out the other business cards that he had in his pocket. “Let’s see if we can figure out where the other trackers came from.” He laid the cards in a straight line down the middle of the table. “Zoe sent me a text, I came to visit her. There were two attackers. Neither would have been able to plant a tracker on me. The next people I encountered were the DCPD.” Gage moved the detective’s card to the front of the line. “Detective Adamson and I had a close encounter in the kitchen. I have no idea why he would plant a tracker on me.”

“He wouldn’t,” Prescott said. “Let’s take him off the table.”

Gage scooped the card up and put it in his pocket. “And you were there too, Prescott. Later on, I met you for our field trip.”

Zoe wondered what kind of field trip Gage had taken in the middle of the night with the FBI special agent.

“None of these are mine.” Prescott flicked his finger at the tracking devices. “I had zero reason to track you. I know Zoe from her work with the blood biomarker field analysis. I went to her condo following her SOS text. I met you later because you had a weird correlation between—” Prescott cut himself short when Gage glared in his direction. “I’m involved now because you sent a second SOS text. And frankly, I’m looking forward to getting caught up on what this is all about. Why is there Israeli interest in Zoe?”

“I think we’re all are looking forward to understanding this better.” Gage picked up Prescott’s card. “That takes you off the table too.” Gage moved that card to his pocket. “Leaving Zoe’s place, my first stop was Colonel Guthrie’s house.”

“Why did you go there?” Titus asked.

Zoe turned interested eyes on Gage. “How did you know I know the Colonel?”

“I called the hospital to see if they would give me an update on you. They were able to tell me what was going on because I was listed on your advanced medical directive.”

“That’s right, I filled that out as a requirement when I set up a lab at Montrim. I also listed Colonel Guthrie,” Zoe said as the light went on in her head.

“I found his address in your phone and went to tell him what had happened in person.” Gage moved the colonel’s card forward. “While I was there, Senator Billings showed up drunk on the colonel’s lawn. I removed myself to the kitchen while the colonel sent his friend upstairs. I found the senator’s wallet on the grass as I left and took a card. It wasn’t offered to me. I was never in the same room as the senator.” Gage pulled Charles Billings’s card off the table and put it in his pocket.

“Next, I went to the hospital. First Parker, then Grossman came to visit. They both came right into the room. Grossman mostly stood by the sink except when he shook my hand. I don’t see how he could have planted a tracker on me. But I’m going to leave him in play.” Gage pulled that card to the side. “Parker, on the other hand, made himself at home. The next person to visit the hospital was the colonel.” Gage tapped the card. “Then Bilik from Montrim. We know he handed me his tracker, embedded somehow in this card.”

“The CIA were the only ones who walked into the hospital room?” Prescott asked, pulling Parker’s card to the center.

“That’s right, I spoke with everyone else at her door.”

“Then the CIA would have had the opportunity to plant the pair of trackers in the coats, one for Zoe and one for Gage.” Prescott put the matching trackers on that card.

“Which leaves two more trackers and one card,” Titus said.

Prescott moved the tracker that was found in Zoe’s watch to the side. “This was done in the past. Not last night.” He put the last tracker they’d found on Gage onto Colonel Guthrie’s business card. “Now isn’t that interesting. Why did he go by the hospital in the early hours of the morning? Didn’t you already tell him she was fine?”

“He brought me some coffee and a sandwich. He came to check up on her.”

Titus leaned forward. “So he expected you to be there. He knew what had happened. He knew you were going to be protecting her. Did he know you contacted me?”

“I didn’t mention you, no.”

“He wanted to know where you were taking her,” Titus said. “Still, why would he plant a tracker? I’m not so sure about this one.”

“I’m more confident in the ones planted by the CIA. They definitely wanted to know where she went.” Prescott sent a speculative look Zoe’s way.

“But there’s also the tracker that was in my phone, that Titus found, and now the one in my watch.” She pointed to where her watch lay on the table with its back removed. “People could have been tracking me for a very long time.”

“Lots of interest in your whereabouts, Zoe. We need to know why.”

This tracker information was a lot to take in. Why did people feel a need to follow her? She felt gray, as if all the color had been wrung from her body. Gage reached out to run a calming hand down her arm and lace his fingers with hers. She squeezed his hand between both of hers as she looked at the Panther Force men, posted at the doors and windows. “This is an inappropriate location for that discussion.”

“Understood,” Titus said. “We’ll have you in a secured location soon. Now that we have a good idea how they found you at the safe house, we can do a better job of keeping you protected.”

“Sir, an FBI panel van just pulled up,” a Panther called from the front room.

“That’s our cleanup crew,” Prescott said.

Titus picked up a box that would thwart the tracking signals, placed the devices inside, and shut the lid. “Now everyone will know we’ve found the trackers. Whoever sent the teams in knows they blew their best chance at their grab, not once but twice.” He glanced around the table. “They know if they’re going to get to Zoe, the time between our leaving this house and getting her squirrelled away is probably their only window of opportunity. I imagine they’re scrambling to find a way to snatch her from us. Time to head out.”



## Zoe

**Where the wasp has passed the fly sticks fast.**

**~ French proverb**



The FBI panel van sat to the side of the circular driveway. Prescott went out to talk to them and two of the Panthers had gone to bring their vehicles around. Gage and Zoe waited off to the side.

Prescott jogged back to the front door. “Okay, we’re set,” he called loudly enough for the entire team to hear. “The clean-up crew will take care of the body.”

“*Body?* What body?” Zoe spun around, searching for an answer.

“Let’s get saddled up and head out,” Prescott finished without answering Zoe.

“Roger that.” Titus moved through the door as two charcoal grey SUVs pulled in. “Prescott, you got restraining systems? We don’t have paperwork to carry the prisoner with us.”

“Yeah, let’s get him strapped into my vehicle.”

Titus turned back to the house. “Okay, bring him out.”

Gage maneuvered Zoe out the door and toward the car that would take the middle spot in the convoy. It sat center stage on the sparsely graveled drive.

Zoe turned to watch as one of the Panthers led a man out the front and down the cracked cement walkway. Prescott reached out and plucked the ski mask from his head, exposing the beginnings of one hell of a bruise, a split lip and a swollen jaw that hung at an improbable angle.

“Zoe, do you recognize this guy?”

With Gage pinned to her side, Zoe moved closer to scrutinize the man’s face.

“No. I don’t know him,” Zoe said as the man licked his lips suggestively. When his leer became a wink, Zoe had the urge to slap the smirk off the man’s face. Gage beat her to it with a straight punch that crushed the man’s nose. Zoe jumped back out of the way of the spurt of blood that shot from his nostrils and dripped down the front of his shirt. The man would have gone down except for the Panther’s tight grip.

“Goddamnit, Gage. You broke his goddamned nose.” Prescott threw his hands in the air. “Now he’s going to bleed all over my goddamned car.”

“Sorry about that,” Gage growled. He was eye to eye with the man who tried to shoot his way into the house to get to her. Gage was palpably seething with violence, and Zoe thought he was having a hard time stoppering it.

Titus patted him on the shoulder. “Stand down, Marine. Get Zoe into the car.”

Gage turned. “Fucker,” he said and spat on the ground. He reached for Zoe’s hand. Gage stalked down the sidewalk, and she two-stepped to keep up.

A Panther opened the SUV’s door and pulled the center bench seat down. “You’ll be in this one, ma’am.” He extended his hand to shake with her. “My name’s Thaddeus Crushed, I go by Nutsbe.”

“Nutsbe?” Zoe said wonderingly, then she put two and two together. “Oh!” She grimaced.

He crawled into the far back with a chuckle and pulled the seat into place.

“Go ahead, Zoe.” Gage held out his hand, gesturing her in.

She moved to the far side of the center bench. Gage folded himself in beside her.

A second Panther came over. “Hey, man.” He reached out and fist bumped Gage. “I heard you might be joining our team, dude. Did you think you’d get better cred if we saw you in action?”

“How am I doing?” Gage asked.

“So far, alive and kicking, and that’s about all anyone can ask. Ma’am, I’m Brian Ackerman.” He reached past Gage to shake her hand. “They call me Brainiack.” Brian, like the other Panthers, looked like he spent a good deal of time keeping his body finely tuned. His tactical jacket was unzipped, revealing how his uniform compression shirt showed off his pecs and washboard abs. His eyes were sharp and he wore an air of competence like a second skin. Gage would fit right in with these warriors. But she couldn’t imagine Gage ever leaving the Marines. She wondered why he even went for the interview. Maybe it was curiosity.

“Zoe,” she said in a near whisper.

Brainiack nodded, slammed Gage’s door shut, and jumped in the front seat as Titus jogged over and flung himself behind the wheel.

Titus cranked the engine and pulled out behind Prescott. “Forty minutes, so settle in,” he said as gravel crunched under their tires.

Prescott held the lead as they pulled away from the little house. The special agent had another Panther sitting shotgun. Zoe hadn’t seen the team all in one place. She turned and scanned the car behind them. There were two more heads. So six Panthers, one FBI agent, and one marine. She should feel safe. *Should.*

“Gage, are you sure the prisoner is secure? Could he get over the seat and out the back door?”

Nutsbe answered from the back. “The tango is shackled to the floorboard, his hands are cuffed to the rod above his head, and he’s safety-belted for good measure in the far back seat.”

“Okay. Thank you, Nuts—um, Thaddeus.”

“Tad will do, ma’am, if you don’t like my call name,” he said with a grin.

All of the men seemed vigilant. Competent. Ready. She was the only one who was shaking. Gage sent her a searching look, obviously trying to see how she was handling things. Zoe didn’t have it in her to lie, to let him think she was a brave little soldier. She was nothing of the kind. She didn’t inherit any of her father’s military blood. She turned her face to look out the window and wished for the sanctuary of her laboratory.

As they drove, Zoe’s limbic system was lit up. Sweat dampened her underarms and thighs and the small of her back. She licked her lips; her mouth had gone oddly dry. She felt like a woman crawling through the desert desperately hoping to get to water. As they merged onto the highway, Zoe realized that she was having a lot of desert thoughts. The stories her subconscious had pushed forward last night had helped her immensely in her condo when her body went stiff and all she had by way of defense were memories. With them, she had evaded capture or injury.

She would have survived on her own had she not sent that “come and get me” text to Gage earlier that evening. Had he not shown up, the would-be kidnappers might have headed on to plan B. But before they got the chance, Gage killed them. Gage *killed* them. She closed her eyes. They were Israeli soldiers. They had been assumed dead. Now they really were dead. And who knew why?

Zoe hated the tortured loops her brain was making. She wanted to be back in her life from twenty-four hours ago. Twenty-four hours, could that be right? She lifted her wrist to check the time and remembered that Titus had taken her watch and its tracker away from her. She pushed back her hair, now damp and stringy, getting it out of her face. She’d really like a shower. And some water. That thought brought her right back to deserts.



Travelling in a convoy reminded Zoe of the photos her dad sent to her and her mom from Iraq and stories she had heard on painful anniversaries when her dad drank too much. Her dad had been on a detail that ran VIPs down the hellish twelve-kilometer road that stretched between the heavy fortifications of the Green Zone and Baghdad International Airport. It was extremely dangerous. Getting from the airport to the Green Zone safely was not a given. Insurgents targeted the area because of the military convoys and the high-profile visitors. Suicide bombers, roadside bombs, even random shooters were the norm, not the exception. Her dad drove a hillbilly armored car. That was when a normal military vehicle was retrofitted with anything the soldiers could find in the scrap pile to give themselves a chance at survival.

She turned toward Gage. He was leaning forward, scanning to the right. Zoe looked back at Tad, his eyes were busy looking everywhere around them. “Tad, is this a normal SUV or is it tricked out with bullet proof panels?”

He maintained his focus on his surroundings but said, “Not armored. No, ma’am, But it’s got bullet resistant glass and run flat tires.”

“Thank you.” Zoe turned to look out her window again. They were side by side with an eighteen-wheeler, so she didn’t have much of a view. A soundtrack played in her mind, Tim McGraw’s *I’m Already Home*. Such a sad song. Zoe wasn’t a big country music fan, but this was the tearjerker that her dad played on endless loop every painful February 26<sup>th</sup>. It was the only night of the year when he became an angry drunk. Mean. The only night when her mom would slip out to call some of Dad’s buddies to come talk him down, while she came into Zoe’s room, locked the door and climbed in bed with her.

“This isn’t your father,” she’d whisper into Zoe’s ear. “This is the anger.”

In 1991, when Zoe was three years old, Dad’s twin was stationed in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia when a missile destroyed the barracks, killing twenty-seven and wounding another ninety-eight Americans. Zoe hated this song. It reminded her of vulnerability and craziness. Well, she guessed that was fitting, since she did feel vulnerable and crazy. As they drove forward, Zoe’s mind insisted on thoughts of Iraq. Why?

Zoe scanned her memory. She knew that Operation Desert Storm was over two days after the barracks attack, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1991. Her teachers on base had made sure that date was drilled into her head. After the Iraqis announced they were withdrawing from Kuwait, they fled down Highway 80.

It was a huge Iraqi convoy of tanks and armored vehicles, fleeing troops, and trucks. Allied forces bombed them from the air. It became known as the “Highway of Death.” The PR was a nightmare, because the airmen bombed the front of the convoy, blocking forward movement, and then bombed the rear, stopping the Iraqis from turning around. For two days, they bombed everything in between. Most of the Iraqis fled into the desert on foot. But there were miles of destruction. It looked like the Americans were having a turkey shoot. That wasn’t the truth of it. But that wasn’t really the point here.

Zoe cleared her throat and once again wished for some water. “Could someone please explain to me how this works? How does the convoy stay safe if someone were to try to attack us?”

Tad was the one who answered. “Prescott’s the only vehicle with lights and sirens. The plan is to only use them in a tight space. We’re doing our best to keep a low profile, which is one of the reasons we left the Hummer back at the house. Our goal is to never come to a complete stop. Our route keeps us to the highways as much as possible, but highways can’t get us entirely from point A to point B.

There are two times when we'll have to deal with stop signs and traffic lights. No matter what, we'll stay bumper to bumper in those spots to avoid the risk of the team getting divided."

"Thank you," Zoe replied. He didn't add, "And possibly conquered," but Zoe heard it in her head.

It really was a complicated time of day to not get cut off from one another, Zoe mused. People were pouring into the city, looking forward to a Friday night of restaurants and entertainment, while others were trying to leave work early for their weekend away from the congestion of the city. Brainiack had told her that Iniquus was positioned on a green space along the Virginia side of the Potomac. That seemed like where the congestion would be concentrated.

Gage reached back behind him, and she slid her hand into his. She knew that his right hand held the Glock just beneath the window line, out of sight but at the ready. They were moving off the highway to the first of the small towns they needed to traverse. They flew through the stop signs and traffic signals with the help of Prescott's blue lights. They travelled in tight formation. In and out. Zoe had held her breath the whole way. As soon as their tires hit the highway and their speed was up to seventy, she breathed again.

They drove on for another twenty minutes before the blinker click-clacked, signaling their move up the ramp.

"Your heel jackhammering the floorboard is shaking the whole SUV, Gage. What you got going through your head?" Titus asked.

"This is too easy, man. We haven't seen hide nor hair of these guys. This is their last shot at Zoe, and their last shot at getting their guy back before we interrogate him and make him spill. They should have been all over us by now. What have we got? Crickets. The hair on the back of my neck is standing up." He scanned the roadway. "Let's not get comfortable. If I were a betting man, I'd say it's going to be when we go through this last town."

"Well, let's hope you're wrong about that. Why don't you lay Zoe down?" Titus said. "Nutsbe told you we've got bullet resistant glass, but its effectiveness depends on what kind of bullets they're shooting. You feel me?"

"I feel you." Gage pulled her hand toward him. "Zoe, put your head in my lap, sweetheart."



## Zoe

**Anger is a stone cast into a wasp's nest.**

~ Malabar Proverb

• • • •

Zoe's brow furrowed. Somehow, she was just now realizing that there were eight men putting themselves in danger for her.

That was ridiculous.

She resisted his tug. She wasn't worth anyone's life. Not these Panthers, not Damion Prescott, and certainly not Gage.

Gage pulled her hand harder until she fell into his lap.

This is what people meant when they wrote "her heart was in her throat." It always seemed like such metaphorical phrase, but this felt literal. Zoe's head rested on Gage's muscular thigh, the seat belt bit into her hip, and she had no good place to put her long legs. Gage ran his fingers through her hair, leaving his hand on her back. She tucked her head down and covered her face with her hands, hating the fact that he knew she was crying.

The convoy slowed. "Not too close, Titus," Brian's low voice wafted back from the front. "Let's leave a little get out of Dodge room if it comes to that."

"Yeah, I hate to say it, but back in the sandbox the hair on the back of Gage's neck was a damned good barometer on what was coming our way. I'd get my barrel up a little higher."

The exchange was so low; she knew they didn't want her to hear. But adrenaline, she'd found, had wild amplification qualities.

"Yellow light. Keep the gas pedal down, man," Brainiack muttered.

They powered through, with horns honking on either side.

"One down. One to go. Then we should be home free," Titus called back, then mumbled under his breath, "Come on, baby, stay green for me."

Zoe turned her head in time to see Titus pull the cord running from inside his jacket up the side of his neck. His comms popped out of his ear. He tapped a button on his dash. "Panther actual, Beta team. Control, what are you seeing?"

A woman's voice came over the radio. "Titus, you've got a cement mixer perpendicular, running south two blocks forward and an RV heading north directly behind car three. If they're working together they can box you in at the next light."

"Alpha, copy," Prescott's voice came over the radio.

"Charlie, copy."

That must be the car behind ours, Zoe thought.

The woman's voice came back. "That scenario is a go. The cement truck is picking up speed for an intercept."

"Beta, going left."

Zoe popped up out of Gage's reach when he let go of her to double-fist his gun. Titus peeled the car around, with a solid bump to the back fender of someone's BMW. The sudden squeal of tires and squawk of a car alarm had Zoe's blood pumping. She sat rigidly in her seat.

“Charlie, right behind you.”

Zoe turned to see the third car rounding the curve with better precision.

“Alpha, backing to follow. Lights and sirens.”

Moments later, though Zoe couldn't see the car, she could hear the sirens behind them as they rocketed down the curving side streets of the town. What town? She had no clue where she was.

“Control. Beta, be advised, the cement truck is in pursuit. The RV is in advance of your position. Your road curves eastward, and they have the ability to cut off your present direction of travel. The cement truck is pushing Alpha from the rear. You are in danger of being boxed in.”

*Boxed in. The Highway of Death.*

“Alternate route?” Titus asked.

The men in the car were like the edge of a knife. Sharp. Capable of great harm. They all had a latent deadliness as they seemed to fearlessly face this danger. Focused, yes. Primed, yes. But not afraid. She, on the other hand, had the sudden overwhelming urge to pee. She crossed one knee over the other and squeezed her thighs tightly together.

“Control. Beta, be advised, two-hundred meters ahead there's a break in the tree line. Overland, there's an open space bringing you to a dirt road. It looks tight enough for you to get through, but a tough run for the cement mixer.”

“Roger that. I don't see the break, can you count me in?”

“Control. Beta, you are coming up on the turn in four, three, two, one, hard right.”

Titus spun his wheel, and the car bounced over the ditch in great leaps and bounds that threw Zoe up against the restraint of her seatbelt. Her hands reached out to grab the seat in front of her, and she was able to snatch them back in time. She didn't want to jostle Titus as he navigated the deep furrows of winter wheat.

He was aiming for a narrow break in the trees. Too narrow? It looked too narrow. Zoe scanned left and right. There didn't seem to be any other options. Their wheels were severely hampered on this terrain. Even though this was a SUV with high, wide tires, it seemed to her that the cement truck would have an easier time. She could hear the roar of its engine, and she could see how close it was pulling to Prescott at the back of their convoy.

Titus bounced and bumped into the trees. The saplings in front of them were felled and crushed. The paint scraped from the sides of the vehicle with shrill resentment as Titus gunned the engine and squeezed through. Charlie and Alpha held tight behind them, bumper to bumper.

The woman reported. “The cement truck was unable to navigate the trees, it has returned to the road and is backtracking. It's a long shot, but if he follows along that road, he could possibly take you where the dirt road meets the public roadway. Keep your speed up as much as possible.”

“Where's the RV gone?” Titus asked. His voice perfectly steady.

Glancing into the rearview mirror, Zoe could see his expression was the exact same look of underlying power that it always held. Should that reassure her? She didn't feel reassured.

“Control. The RV is heading north.”

“Any other cars raising a red flag?”

“I'll keep looking. I have an option for you, Beta,” she said.

“Listening.”

“If you go left instead of right on the farm road and cross over a field, you will come to a barn. It looks like there's a church bus parked alongside. You could exchange vehicles.”

“How far out?”

“Five minutes, at your current rate of travel.”

“Prescott?”

“Alpha. Ditching these vehicles sounds like a plan to me.”

“Beta. Copy that. Control can you try to make contact with that house? See if they won’t lend us their bus for the afternoon?”

“Roger. Wilco.” Then communications went silent. The men were silent. The only noise was the thunk of the Tahoe’s overtaxed suspension system.

• • • •

THE FARMER STOOD IN front of the gaping maw of the old barn, signaling them forward. They pulled into the darkness and tumbled out of their car doors.

Prescott and his Panther were busy unhooking the prisoner.

The old farmer had a rotund body and a rosy face. He looked tickled pink to be on this adventure.

“Sir, Titus Kane from Iniquus. That’s Special Agent Prescott, FBI. We very much appreciate your help. But, sir, there are dangerous people involved. Iniquus Control says that you insist on driving. How can I convince you to simply rent your bus to us? If there’s any damage, we’re well-covered by insurance.”

Zoe didn’t hear the rest of the conversation as Gage hustled her onto the bus and sat her in an orange vinyl seat.

Titus must have lost the argument, because the gentleman, with keys in hand, was hot-footing it toward the bus. The Panthers had piled in and sat strategically, with their weapons ready.

The gentleman cranked the engine. He tipped his head up to see everyone in his mirror as he pulled the handle to shut the bus doors. “You’ll see. It’s for the best I drive. This old girl can be a might ornery. And besides, if anyone looks in the window, they’ll see it’s me and not one of y’all driving. If you keep your heads down, we’ll trick ‘em for sure. Hee-hee.”

Zoe bent down in compliance, confused by this man’s obvious glee. An unexpected adventure on a Friday afternoon. Gage had her in the seat next to the window and his gun was pointed out the glass over her back. Zoe whispered up to him, “Gage, is there any way they could have tracked us making the switch?”

“Probably. But there’s nothing we can do about it. We have to play the hand we’ve been dealt.”

Out they rumbled. The only voice on the bus was the soft-spoken directions that Titus gave to their driver. For a good twenty minutes, Zoe stayed bent over, keeping her head down, praying under her breath for safety.



## GAGE



“Let’s move,” Titus ordered. He patted the driver’s back and thanked him again as their group disembarked. The bus had let them off at the front guard post at Iniquus headquarters. There was a changing of manpower. Three vehicles sat just inside of the gate. Six men exited and moved toward the bus. “That’s Tidal Force. They’re going back with the bus to bring in our vehicles,” Brainiack said.

Zoe nodded. She didn’t look good. She hadn’t said a word since she asked about convoy strategy. They moved as a group to the new set of SUVs, drove a short distance to a building that looked like a country club with colonnaded porticos. If you didn’t know its true function, you’d swear it was a place for fine dining, wedding ceremonies, and charity golf weekends. That image changed the moment they powered into the underground garage.

They took an elevator up to an atrium that was coldly modern in its décor. It reminded Gage of streamlined efficiency. Everything was gunmetal gray, chrome and black. The men were in Iniquus battle dress uniforms. The women wore civilian clothes in black and grey. Gage felt right at home here. He looked at Zoe, with her shoulders nearly to her ears, and her stiff-legged gait, and thought she didn’t get the same sense of relief from this environment.

Titus moved Gage and Zoe along the right-hand corridor. The rest of the Panthers and Prescott moved down the center corridor.

Titus slowed his step and turned until he caught sight of Zoe. “How are you doing, ma’am?”

“I could use something to eat and a nap, to be perfectly honest.” Her voice was just above a whisper.

“We can take care of both. Here we go.” He opened his palm as a woman rounded the corner, her face brightened with a wide smile. “You’ll have time for a meal. We also have a nap pod available. It’s the adrenaline spiking in your system and dropping out that makes you feel so tired. Some sleep should help. My associate can accommodate you while the team comes up with the next step.”

Zoe stopped walking. “Have you any idea what that might be?”

“We need to hear what you have to say about this situation. And we need to see if there’s any kind of correlate between your experiences and Lily Winters’s death. You were about to tell us about a connection between you, Lily, and Montrim that went beyond school. You said it had something to do with wasps.”

Zoe nodded.

Titus’s colleague arrived at their side. “Commander.” She beamed at Titus.

“Margot, this is Dr. Kealoha. If you could see that she has an opportunity to eat and recuperate from this morning, I’d appreciate it. Tidal Force will be back within the hour with her luggage.”

“Certainly, sir. Doctor, if you’ll follow me?” Margot lifted her arm to point down the hall.

Zoe searched Gage’s face, clearly asking if she should go. He didn’t like to be separated from her, but Zoe needed to eat and sleep. He was worried about her after her hospital stint. She hadn’t fully recovered before her discharge; she was simply stable enough to be sent home. Then they lumped on more anxiety, physical action, and lack of food, and she was bound to relapse. He could do more



good for her in the meetings, sharing what he learned while Zoe was in the hospital, than by holding her hand. They needed to go in different directions for now.

He dropped a kiss onto her head. "I'll see you in a little while."

She took a hesitant step forward, then followed Margot onto the elevator, and she was gone.

Titus started them back toward where the rest of the team had headed. "I had a colleague pull security footage from the scene of Lily's death. And we'd like to hear what Prescott has to say about the autopsy. We need a copy of the death investigator's report. We need to know whether there is a correlation between the two incidents or not. That's key."

"Prescott agreed to this?" Gage asked, stretching his legs so he and Titus maintained the same gait.

"He's reporting in to his office and getting the files sent over now. The autopsy and cause of death is a big question and the other one is what the heck the wasps Zoe mentioned are. Any clue?"

"None. Zoe doesn't talk about her work with me."

"You and the Zoe seem tight. How long have you known her?" Titus asked.

"We've been seeing each other for about six months."

They stopped in front of an elevator bank and Titus pressed the up button. "Last I knew, you were stationed at Camp Lejeune."

"Yes, sir, my unit's still down in Carolina." Now that Gage was back in a military setting, his protocols snapped back into place. "I'm in and out of Quantico right now, helping to develop some new training procedures. Still feeling my way, trying to figure out whether I want to re-up or not."

"And?"

"I haven't made up my mind. I appreciate Iniquus's understanding."

"We only invite the best of the best, Marine. We aren't taking in strays off the street. Command knows how to be patient." Titus nodded at a passing colleague who'd lifted his hand in greeting. "I guess your continued work at Quantico has something to do with Zoe being in Virginia?"

"It does."

"How'd you meet Zoe? I can't imagine that you'd land in the same social circles."

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing to say, sir."

The elevator door slid open and the men climbed in. Titus pushed the button. As they moved upward Titus said, "Go on."

Gage looked down as a little smile played across his lips. "Me and some of the guys were at the grocery store and my buddy, Scab, couldn't get his engine to turn over. I was under the hood with another Marine, but we couldn't find the problem. So here comes this beautiful Hawaiian girl in her little sundress. As she slid between our truck and her car, she kind of mumbled, "You shouldn't do that," as my buddy was poking around. She opened her door to climb into her Prius, and I asked her in all seriousness why he shouldn't. She had an air of competency. She wasn't flirting. She probably didn't even mean to say that out loud. She spouted out some technical reason." They stepped off the elevator and walked off side by side.

"The guys said she didn't know what the hell she was talking about. She sighs, takes the wrench from my hand and crawls under the hood. A couple minutes later, she comes back out, flicks a finger at Scab and says, "Now try it." It started up like it was new off the showroom floor. I waved the guys on and stayed back to convince her to let me buy her an ice cream in thanks. We've been together ever since." Gage stopped walking. He wanted Titus to absorb this piece of information. "You should know that Zoe's very happy living in her own head. There's a lot's going on in there, and when she lets any of it spill out, it's always interesting and thoughtful. But if you push her, she gets uncomfortable."

Titus leaned a shoulder into the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you don't push."

"Not if I can help it. I want her in my life. I'm telling you this about her because it's going to come into play. We get a room full of people picking at her, and she's going to slide into her shell. The more we can protect her from feeling overwhelmed, the better. She's an introvert from head to toe."

"You're right. That is going to make a difference." Titus went silent for a moment. "As introverted as you say she is, her circle must be very tight."

Gage didn't know where Titus was heading with this. "Yes, I'd say that's correct."

"And of the people she knows, they're probably all intellectual relationships."

"No. I don't think that's right. She has some good friends, girls she's known since she was a kid—Sydney, Jurnee, and Holland. They Skype, and she's a different person with them, open, goofy, chatty."

Titus's scowl seemed more pronounced. "That's not your relationship with her."

"Not at all. It's just something I've observed a few times. I'm explaining this because I'm afraid I've drawn her like a nerdy caricature, and that would be a gross misrepresentation."

"But you're invested."

Gage tipped his head. What was Titus asking him?

"What I need from you here is to tell me your level of investment with her."

"It's a hundred percent."

"Got it. Good. She's going to need someone to run interference for her. Someone that shy—"

"Oh no, she's not at all shy. She's an introvert. She likes to be alone in her head to process things—but she's definitely not timid or shy. She's a strong, intelligent, highly capable person."

"Within the sphere of her understanding. Which means she's going to need to lean on other people's expertise in this."

Gage breathed out. "That might be a stretch."

Titus lifted off the wall and started down the hall again. "Lynx," Titus called out as a young woman with long blonde hair and a bright pink dress rounded the corner. She looked surprisingly out of place.

She scooted over with a wide smile to shake Titus's hand. "I'm told I've been put on loan."

"Thank you, I know your window is a tight one, but we could use some focus. Lynx, this is Gage Harrison."

Lynx held out her hand for a shake as they continued down the hall. "I've heard your name around our halls recently, haven't I?"

"Gage interviewed for a position on Panther Force. He's still deciding whether or not to re-up." Titus pushed a door open with his shoulder. "This is the Panther Force war room," Titus said, holding the door for Lynx, then nodding for Gage to follow her in. "Lynx was snapped up by Strike Force before anyone else got a fair shot at her. Luckily, she's a good sport about being shared around. We're fortunate to have her with us, even if it has to be short-term. She has an amazing ability to solve some confounding puzzles."

"Well, thank you for that, but you're right, I'm pressed for time. Sorry." She walked toward the front of the room. "Now, before we get going, Titus, I should tell you, the good news is that Iniquus signed a contract with the FBI on this case." She focused on Titus. "It's one thing to give safe haven to one of our military scientists. It's quite another for our team to take bullets." She turned her head to include Gage in the conversation. "I'm so glad everyone came out of that okay. As far as our capabilities go, that contract means we're a go with all of our resources." She smiled warmly at

Gage. “Now we can put all of our wheels in gear.” She switched her focus between Titus and Gage. “I’ll stay in play as long as I can. Got anything we can start with?”

Titus held up the container with the trackers. “Are you ready for a wild story?”



## GAGE

••••

They turned on a jammer so they could safely open the box. Gage and Titus discussed what they had come up with at the kitchen table of the exfil house. Lynx bit her lip, picked up the Montrim card and moved over to a machine on the back table. She brought it back and lay it in the box. “The tech guys are going to have an early Christmas present when you hand that to them. Wouldn’t we just love to have that technology if Zoe’s right? Okay, so far I’m with you. If I were taking a stab at it, I’d line this up the same way: two CIA, one DARPA, one Montrim, and two question marks from before that day in the form of the phone apps on Zoe’s cell and the tracker in her watch.” A mischievous look crossed her face. “Two things,” she said.

Titus crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall. “I always love what comes out of your mouth when you get that twinkle in your eye.”

“Okay, first, Strike Force pulled our guy out of the yellow house. We can send in a clean-up team, and then you can use it for Gage and Zoe, since it’s our closest long-term secure residence.”

“That’ll work. I’ll call Support and get them on that. Let’s hear number two.”

“I’m leaving here for Miami shortly.” She smiled. “Wouldn’t it be amusing if I had the cobblers put together a Zoe Kealoha packet—passport, driver’s license, a couple of credit cards—and I bought a ticket for some random cruise that’s getting ready to leave the dock? No wait, some of those trackers were planted on Zoe and some on Gage. Make that a pair of tickets. I could get a set for Striker in Gage’s name. We could take the trackers out of the kit just before I get on the plane at Reagan, so no one has a chance to come find them. I fly down, Striker and I can board the ship, place the trackers in the cabin, and slip out before it disembarks. I can let the poor cruise ship off the hook by calling and saying there was a sudden personal emergency—after they’re out in International waters, of course—so there are no false alarms that two passengers were lost at sea. But whoever is trying to keep track of Zoe will have eyes on a southern prize, and it might give Zoe a little wiggle room to figure things out.”

“Do you have the time to do that?”

“My schedule today is dictated by my flight. Once I’m down in Miami, though, I have a little more flexibility. Should we give that a go?”

“Thanks, Lynx, we’d appreciate it,” Titus said.

There was a knock at the door. Prescott and the Panthers filed in as Lynx and Titus made quick calls to follow through with their plan.

“Special Agent Damion Prescott, may I present my colleague, Lynx.” Titus said as he got off the phone.

Prescott gave her a curious look.

“Special Agent, if you would,” she said and gestured to a seat at one of the worktables. “My understanding is that Dr. Kealoha is the developer of a forensic field test that you have on trial.”

“That’s right.” He sat down and tipped his head. Gage hadn’t seen Prescott act like this before. Wary, unsure. It seemed odd. Lynx appeared innocuous to him.

“Is that the only capacity you have known or interacted with Zoe?”

He lowered his brows. "Yes."

"I seem to make you uncomfortable," she said sweetly.

"Maybe you're just not what I expected when Titus told me he was pulling in an expert."

"Yeah." She laughed as she moved to the front of the room. "I get that a lot. Okay, I've already heard about the trackers. That's all very interesting." She bent down and whispered something in Nutsbe's ear. He was sitting at a computer bank and tapped something out on his keyboard. "Titus said there might be a correlation between the death of Lily Winters and the attacks on Zoe Kealoha. To this end, he sent me some data, which included copies of Lily's Google calendar and a few emails. The emails were encrypted, so they're with the communications team for now. Our techs were able to capture images from her death on the security cameras, which I watched, along with the videos that were taken by the witnesses on site and posted online."

Gage sat to the side of the room. He'd crossed his arms over his chest and hunkered down in his chair. He was laser focused on what Lynx was saying.

Nutsbe pressed a button and each of the screens filled with a different image. Lynx lined up remotes in front of each. Gage recognized that the screen on the far left had the image that he had watched from Channel Nine News.

Lynx pressed the arrow. The sound of a reggae band loudly playing the steelpans came to an abrupt halt when a scream went up. "Let's start here. It's quite a crowd for a Thursday night. I checked the normal patterns on this particular track, and they might expect one or two people to get on at this time, but on this particular night, the platform is full. We know it was full that night because a local museum put on a play. I checked with the museum. This is the first time they've tried a weeknight event, and it concluded at twenty three hundred hours. That made me wonder, if the museum doesn't normally have weeknight events, and if this track typically has only one or two riders at this time, why would this reggae band be here?" She put down that remote and picked up the one beside it. "I took a look at the last thirty days of security tapes from this area. There were no other instances of this group or any other street performers in or around this Metro location in the last month. This is a security tape from earlier on Thursday evening." She pressed the button to show the band setting up. "That's twenty two thirty hours on the dot, a half-hour before the play let out. Less than an hour before Lily's death. Let's put that on the back burner for a minute."

Lynx went back to the video that showed Lily laying on the tracks, eyes open, looking like she was unable to move.

"I've seen this video," Gage said. "To me it doesn't look like she's hurt. It looks like something else is going on."

A light knock sounded at the door and Brainiack opened it, accepted some papers and brought them over to Prescott. Prescott peeked at them, and then flipped them over on the table.

Lynx walked over and pointed at the current screen. "The videographer is focused on the band and then a scream sounds, and they turn to show Lily on the track. The person filming is perfectly positioned to show Lily laying there. Notice that the videographer doesn't respond. There's no gasp of surprise. No bobble of the image. No scream or move to help. In today's society, we often see a bystander record instead of intervening, but typically you see or hear the human reaction. Not so here. Later, as we go through these tapes, you'll see that in this crowd, there are no other phones in hands at this point. Everyone else in the crowd is focused on the horror that's unfolding in front of them." She paused. "Did you receive some information you'd like to share, Special Agent?"

"This can wait. Thank you."

“Moving on, then. Gage, you mentioned her lying there. Initial thoughts might be that she lost her balance because of drugs or alcohol, but I bet when Special Agent Prescott shares his new data, it will indicate that she was substance free, or perhaps had enough alcohol in her system to account for a glass of wine. Another explanation might be an adrenaline reaction called freeze. Everyone in this room has been trained to overcome freeze and every one of us hopes that training works, because in the field, freezing can mean death. Now, if you look at Lily in this still, you see her muscles aren’t rigid, they’re lax. Not adrenaline freeze. Something else is impeding her ability to stand and get to those oh-so helpful arms that are reaching out to her.”

“That was said with a heavy dose of sarcasm,” Nutsbe said, turning to look up at the screen.

“Yup, I’ll get to that in a second.” She started the News Nine video. “This is what the videographer wanted you to see next. The light of the approaching subway train. Everyone was trying their best to bring attention to the crisis. Again, no other phones are out. Flailing arms. You can make out the shock on the engineer’s face. Boom. He’s doing everything he can to stop the forward movement of the train. But look, Lily got to her feet. She sees hands that can drag her out of the way and she reaches for them. The video bounces up, and then back down, taking in the horrified crowd. We all know she’s been hit. Lily was killed. That’s the story we’re supposed to understand. A tragic accident.”

“You don’t think it is, though. You think someone killed her.”

“I do. Let’s look back at the Metro security footage. Remember, I started trying to figure out when the band had arrived because it was odd. Look who’s arriving at the same time. A group of men, nicely dressed. They’re all wearing similar clothes. They aren’t talking, but they all arrive within fifteen minutes of each other. All in bulky clothes, gloves, hats, scarves. It’s cold. It’s December. No worries. But see how they’re standing out of the view of the security camera? They don’t get on the first subway.” She scrolled forward. “They don’t get on the next. But then two move to the area where Lily will eventually die and three go back near the stairs. Here comes the crowd from the theater, they seem to be gravitating left, away from the men who are already there waiting. See these three men near the stairs? They move in such a way that Lily is herded to the right side of the platform, away from the others.”

She played the rest of the security footage. They could see Lily fall. They could see hands reaching for her. It was hard to see anything else.

“Tech was able to work some of their magic for me,” she said as she moved to the third screen. “This is a close up of that group of men surrounding Lily.” They watched as Lily fell. The men worked to block others from getting near her. Then, when she was reaching for their arms, they pulled just out of her reach and she was hit. “You can’t see that in the normal view of the accident. Now here’s something I want you to hear. I had tech remove the sounds of the reggae band and the milling crowd. Play that track please, Nutsbe.”

*ZzzzzzzZzzz ZzzzzzzZzzzz...*

“What the heck is that?” Brainiack asked.

“Have a guess? Play it again, please.”

*ZzzzzzzZzzz ZzzzzzzZzzzz...*

“A stun gun?” Nutsbe offered.

“That’s what I think. It lasts three seconds. Three seconds and a push would land her on the tracks, still conscious. But it can take up to fifteen minutes, depending on various circumstances, to pull oneself back together after being stunned. The reggae band, by the way, left before any emergency personnel arrived on scene. So let’s try a hypothetical. Someone pays a band to play at this time.

They're there to make enough noise that no one standing around would hear a stun gun. They also had someone in place to film their desired narrative and make sure these five men are never focused on."

"Why is that important?" Gage asked.

"The metro's security footage is kind of meh. And they have clear bystander video that tells the story. Lily's body will be crushed, so hopefully if all goes to plan, everyone will get lazy and assume it was a freak accident. The guys position her where they want her. They stun her, push her onto the track, block anyone else from helping, then they leave. From the police report, I can put a name and face to everyone else there, but not these five, and not the band." Lynx turned a sweet smile on Prescott. "I'll bet your report says they found two very small burns below her waist about two inches apart. Is that right?"

Prescott turned the photo over and slid it across the table. It showed two burn marks on Lily's skin. "I'm impressed."

Lynx smiled. "Looks can be deceiving, Special Agent." She seemed to find great amusement in that phrase. Gage thought there was probably a pretty good story behind it.

Lynx walked to the last screen and picked up the remote. "Now, it seems clear that Lily Winters was killed intentionally. But the reason you wanted to know the cause of her death was that you think there may be a link between Lily's death and Zoe's attack. Commander Kane asked me to find that link."

Every man in the room pulled themselves up straight and leaned forward.

"The last thing I wanted to show you is this." There was a close up of a man's left wrist. Right where a man's watch would go, and about the size of a watch face, was a geometric tattoo.

Titus walked over to the screen. "Is this the best that tech could do with clarity?"

"I'm sorry, it is. But we can see it well enough to make a comparison."

Titus turned abruptly. "To what?"

Lynx clicked forward and there were four images dividing the screen. The top two were pictures that Gage took in Zoe's condo. One of the other images was a black silhouette. Those three each had a red X marking them as deceased. The remaining image was the man they had in custody.

Titus's phone buzzed, and he glanced at the screen.

"Two from Zoe's place, one killed at the exfil house, one in custody. All four have the exact same tattoo in the exact same place." She clicked one more time, and there was a close up of the tattoo. "At least one man involved in Lily's murder has this symbol in common with the four men who have made attempts on Zoe. It's also possible that one of these four men is also the man in the picture from the Metro station. And that, gentlemen, makes me believe that yes, these crimes are connected."

Titus pushed his phone into its holster. He stood, planting his fists on the table top. "Lynx, amazing as always. If Strike Force ever forgets how special you are, you've got a place on my team."

"Ha! Well, thank you. Glad I could help."

"Yes, thank you so much," Gage said.

"That call was telling me that the cobblers have the new papers ready, and they've purchased cruise tickets for Zoe and Gage through the Panama Canal."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. Maybe I won't ditch the trackers and run. I could use a bit of a vacation."

"Nope, we need you in action," Titus said. "Speaking of action, we sent a car to ask Senator Billings to come in and answer a few questions for us. He agreed and is in the interview room waiting on us."

"How'd you get him to do that?" Lynx asked.



“We insinuated that we had information about Lily’s death. I’m glad we actually do. Do you have time to at least get us started with some questions?”

Instead of answering Titus, Lynx turned to Gage. “Gage, it looks like you have a thought.”

“Last night I had the chance to look in Billings’s wallet. I saw a card with that symbol on it. I’d love to know whose business card that is.”

“Me too,” Lynx replied. “And, Commander, if the guy’s already in house, I can get things rolling.”

• • • •

TITUS LED PRESCOTT and Gage to the elevator. When they exited onto the executive floor, the vibe was completely different from the one they just left. Downstairs contained the fine-tuned, well-oiled mechanics of the Iniquus security machine. This, Gage thought, must be the floor where they collected the money to make the place hum. More in keeping with the country club façade, there were conversation areas with deep leather chairs that called for comfortable chats about where the kids went to college and upcoming vacation plans. Gage could imagine the movers and shakers enjoying a brandy and an imported cigar, before real points of interest were hashed through, deals made, and contracts signed.

Gage looked down at his clothes, currently covered in mud and blood. He’d be more at home after a shower and a change. He hoped he didn’t run into any of the executives. They had offered him a contract, an extremely generous contract, and he was tempted for a number of reasons to take it. They had been understanding about his being on the fence concerning his next step. They left the contract on the table until his re-up yea or nay with the Marines. Gage wanted to keep that contract open, and his present state seemed disrespectful. Titus was equally dirty, though minus the blood, and he didn’t seem to care about muddy boots on the thick pile carpet, so Gage let his concerns go as they turned into a room.

The lights went on automatically as they sidled down the long, narrow gallery. Captain’s chairs with writing desks stood in a nice neat row in front of a wall of darkened windows. Behind the chairs was a buffet holding sandwiches, water bottles and fruit. All three men loaded up their plates then sat down and ate. Just like with sleep, Gage had learned many years ago that in his line of work, grub didn’t come on a schedule. If you had access, avail yourself. It could be a long damned time before you saw food again.



## GAGE



As Gage finished his second sandwich, the lights in the room in front of the observation windows flicked on. Lynx came through the door with Senator Charles Billings. She waved her hand to indicate a chair to the right. This put Billings face to face with the men. Lynx sat kitty-corner at the head of the table.

Lynx struck Gage as very young, much younger than his twenty-eight years. And very innocent, especially when she smiled. She was a trap. A good one. After seeing her in action figuring out Lily's murder, he thought the whole cheerleader, girl-next-door routine was a power tool in her arsenal. Lynx wore her hair down, while other women wore upswept military styles. She had on a full-skirted, bright-pink dress, while others wore black and grey. It all seemed carefully engineered to confuse, distract, and disarm people. He hoped Zoe would get a chance to meet Lynx. He bet they'd get along very well.

"Senator, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your coming in this evening. How are you holding up?" Lynx leaned forward and her voice conveyed genuine sympathy and concern.

"This has been a very difficult day."

"I can't even imagine. I saw your news conference this morning. I know you've been in senate hearings all day. Did you have time to eat? Can I call for some food? Something to drink?"

"No, no, thank you. I had my driver go through a drive-thru on the way over here." The senator glanced at the door, then his watch. "Will they be here soon?"

"I'm sorry. Will who be here soon?"

"I was told that Iniquus had information about Lily, and they thought that it was important that I hear it privately. That's why I'm here. Where is Mr. Spencer and the others?"

"I'm afraid they are otherwise occupied. I'll be helping you today."

"*You?*" It was almost insulting how dismissive this guy acted toward Lynx, and Gage was offended on her behalf. Titus, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying this immensely. Titus looked the way he always did, stoic and hard-assed, but having fought enough fights next to him, Gage knew the man was highly amused.

"I wanted to begin by telling you how sorry I am for your loss."

Billings turned his head away, tilting his face down.

"I heard you're staying with your friend Colonel Guthrie. I'm pretty sure I've met him before—kind of a pronounced nose, scar on the chin, a bit of an ass?"

Lynx's pretty mouth saying "ass" had Billings turning toward her with the hint of a smile. "Yeah, that's him."

"You're going after Montrim Industries, that's a big get. A sixty billion dollar a year get. Thank you for your courage. Did the secret service give you someone to help protect you during the hearings?"

"No, why would they?"

"Sixty billion a year in military contracts...that's big. If Montrim Industries was to collapse because of the hearings..."

“No one can touch me. I’m too high profile.”

Lynx tilted her head, considering him. “I can see that. But others involved with this don’t enjoy such an advantage. Lily Winters, for example.”

His lips quivered. “Her suicide is a great tragedy. I don’t think I can ever forgive myself for the role I played in her death. I had no idea that she was depressed. That she was suicidal.”

“Suicide? No, no, no. I heard the speculation on the news too. The pundits all think she took her life because you refused to leave your wife for her. But we both know how they blow hot air to fill the news cycle. No, Lily was killed.”

Lynx let that last sentence settle in. They had been going along conversationally then, boom, she dropped the bomb. She slipped it right in, and Gage knew why. She wanted to gauge his reaction, just like he had wanted to see Colonel Guthrie’s when he said Zoe was in the hospital. What Lynx got from Billings was complete bafflement. It was like watching the senator take a blow to the sternum. He actually recoiled. “What?” he choked out.

“You didn’t know? Surely when you opened her video message on Thursday morning, you would have seen how happy she was. If anyone saw that, they’d know for sure that Lily wasn’t suicidal.”

Senator Billings seemed to realize that Lynx was much more than he’d thought she was. He seemed to be scrambling, trying to figure out the situation. His brows drew together, and he shook his head, as if he were warding away her words.

Lynx pushed on with her sweet smile and conversational tone. “You didn’t get her video message? She sent it first by accident to a friend of hers. Whoops! So embarrassing. But surely she sent it on to you after?”

“I didn’t get a video from Lily on Thursday,” he insisted.

“Oh.” Lynx picked up a remote and pushed the button. “Well, let me show it to you so you can tell me what you think.”

There was a still shot of Lily the way Gage remembered her, with big, black smiling eyes. As the video began though, Gage became instantly uncomfortable. This was definitely *not* a side of Lily that he’d ever seen.

“Charlie,” she crooned as she batted her lashes. “I miss you.” She gathered her long brown curls and moved them off her shoulders. Lily reached down and pulled off her sweater. She slid her hands under her breasts, covered by the turquoise stretch lace of her bra, and lifted them up, pushing them together to create even more cleavage. “The girls miss you too.” She pouted, then slid one bra strap from her shoulder, then the other. She reached around to unhook her bra. Holding it in place with one hand, she smiled again. “They can’t wait to see you tomorrow. They want to be somewhere where they can be free and available to your hungry mouth all weekend.” She flung the bra to the side and was soon pinching and pulling at her nipples. “And that’s not the only part of me that wants your full attention.” She rubbed the flat of her hand down her stomach to her crotch and left it there. She tilted her chin coyly. “Which parts of you would like *my* full attention? Will you send me a picture?” She blew a kiss to the screen, and it went black.

Gage had twisted to the side and was watching out of half-shut eyes. He both needed to see and definitely did not want to see that. He felt his face relax again when it turned off.

“So, no dick pic in return?” Lynx asked with not a bit of audacity that she would serve up such a question to the senior senator from Wisconsin.

The senator cleared his throat. “No. Who else has this video? Is this going to be on the news? That’s not how Lily should be remembered.”

“We’ll do everything we can to keep it in-house,” Lynx said.

Prescott chuckled under his breath. “God, she’s good.”

Gage had picked up on it too. The ever so slight undercurrent of threat. *You answer my questions or this might get into the public’s hands.*

“You said this didn’t arrive on your phone.” Lynx put his card down in front of him. “This phone.” She put her finger on the number printed on the front. “But what about your secondary phone?”

“I don’t have a secondary phone. All of my calls go through—”

“No?” Lynx cut him off. “Not even this one?” She turned the card over and pointed to where the senator had written his private cellphone number.

The senator turned pink with embarrassment, then red with anger. He went to grab the card, but Lynx was lightning fast. Her hand covered the card and slid it back in front of her.

“Senator, would you do me a great big favor in exchange for my returning this card to you?”

The senator’s face twitched and he looked like he desperately wanted to let a slew of curse words fly behind firmly cemented lips.

Lynx offered him her innocent smile, as if the only thoughts in her head were about hot chocolate and puppies. “Can I look in your wallet for a sec?”

Thoroughly perplexed, Billings reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He slid it over to her. Lynx opened it, reached right in and pulled out the card with the symbol from the tattoos. She replaced that card with the senator’s own card and handed it back to him.

As Billings put his wallet back in his pocket, Lynx positioned the card on the table, a red x showed up on the card, and there was a flash of light that dragged the senator’s attention back to her. “Hey, what’s going on here? Is this some kind of interrogation? Are there people watching me on the other side of those mirrors?”

Lynx surreptitiously slid the card off the table and put it in her lap. “Oh, sorry. Did you get that impression? No, I’m tasked with trying to run down some information. You know, here at Iniquus, we work to bridge the chasms between the different alphabet agencies. Right now, it’s like alphabet soup.” She stopped and grinned like she’d made a great joke. “We have interest from the CIA, the FBI, the DCPD, the DOD... Gosh, lots of interest. Anything you can tell me that might help clear this up quickly and neatly would be great. Let’s start with this. How did you meet Lily?”



## GAGE



Senator Billings fumbled around in his seat. He didn't seem sure if he should lean back or forward, if he should cross his knees or ankles or leave his feet side by side. He tried three or four different positions for his hands before he folded them on the table in front of him, like a schoolboy who was in trouble with his teacher.

"You met Lily..." Lynx encouraged.

"I met Lily at a party that I attended with some friends of mine. The Leibowitz's, Ruby and Sal. All right?"

"What do they do for a living?"

"Ruby is a forensic auditor, and Sal is a lobbyist for USIPAC—the United States Pro-Israel lobby."

"Oh yes, I've heard of them. They're working to strengthen relations between the United States and Israel. Did Sal introduce you to Lily?"

"No, Ruby did. They knew each other from college. They were both studying accounting."

"As part of that introduction, Ruby told you that Lily was a CPA over at Montrim, right? I bet that made your ears perk right up. Montrim was in your crosshairs and this woman might, through her accounting duties, be able to get some data for you. Tell me what happened after that introduction was made."

"I brought her a drink. We had polite conversation, where I looked for points of commonality. You're right, I wanted to woo her so that I could access more data."

"Woo her. So your intentions were personal? Sexual?"

"No," he mumbled. "Political."

"But you said 'woo'. Wooing implies flirtation and sexuality. Did you find Lily sexually attractive or politically expedient?"

"I, um..."

"Were you wooing her because you wanted to spend time in her company, or did you want to convince her that was true so you could get your hands on her...books?"

"Ah..."

"Okay, let's try it this way. At what point in your relationship did you find yourself physically attracted to Lily Winters? Did you ever find yourself physically attracted to her? Or were you simply having sex to gain the power to manipulate her?"

"No, it wasn't like that. I found myself attracted to her as we spent time together, and that led to expanding the scope of our relationship."

"Before you 'expanded your scope', you made a flirtatious play for Lily. You wanted to see if she could help you with your fact gathering on Montrim."

"Montrim is a—"

Lynx held up her hand. "Let's stay on the subject of Lily for right now. You were at a Jewish event to raise support for Israel. So you knew Lily Winters was Jewish from the beginning?"

"Yes."

“And did you use this to help convince Lily that she should help you over her own self-interests of keeping her job, and despite the potential of being labelled as a whistle-blower, which would preclude many companies from hiring her?”

The senator said nothing but looked thoroughly ashamed.

“Didn’t you think her loyalty should lie with her company since they paid her salary? Not to mention, much of the information she disclosed to you was classified.”

Billings dropped his hands between his thighs and rubbed them together as if they were cold and he was trying to warm himself. “You’re right, at first I played on Lily’s loyalty to Israel. She knew things were being developed at Montrim that would be a disaster to Israel. Later, I discovered that Lily had three brothers in the military. She grew up as a navy brat. When she went to work for Montrim, she thought she was helping keep her brothers safe by supporting the scientific work that gave the US military its edge. As she rose in the hierarchy and was given higher security access, she realized some of the projects Montrim was developing were genocidal. She was sure the American people would think Montrim’s developments were horrific. But she couldn’t tell anyone. When we spent time together, and I explained the thrust of my concerns, we were already on the same page. I simply gave her an avenue to help make things right.”

“What did this have to do with accounting discrepancies?”

“Do you know that Montrim is working on soundwave technology that destroys animal cells? That’s you and me. *We’re* animals. Lily had major moral issues with the projects she was assigned to. She was happy to help me bring it to the world’s attention. If she left, someone else would just take her place. If she stayed, she could keep an eye on things.”

“You said that Lily was a military brat. She had this in common with Dr. Zoe Kealoha. Do you know that name?”

“Yes.”

“In what context?”

“Lily was roommates with Zoe until she was able to move into a place on her own.”

“Lily moved into a townhouse in central DC—that’s big bucks. Not really possible on a CPA’s salary. But there’s a parking garage right next door. Would you say that you helped Lily find that place so you could make your way into her house without detection?”

“I needed a safe place for us to meet.”

“Who paid for this safe place?”

“USIPAC did after I told them that Lily was helping me with Montrim.”

“Why would USIPAC be concerned with Montrim?”

“I’m not going to comment any further on USIPAC.”

“We have a witness who says that you were over at Colonel Guthrie’s house drunk Thursday night, and that Colonel Guthrie knew about your affair with Lily.”

“Stan is an old buddy of mine. We were out drinking one night. Our wives were at some female doings. Art center show, maybe. I got soft on scotch and told Stan that I had fallen in love with Lily. I was considering leaving my wife to be with her. I deserve happiness too.”

“The colonel tried to dissuade you?”

“He thought it was political suicide. But I won my election last November. I’ve got six years for my constituency to forgive and forget. There’s a template for true love making an affair okay. They had that going on in Carolina with their governor, after all. He told everyone he was incommunicado because he was hiking the Appalachian Trail, for gosh sakes. Turns out he’s down in Buenos Aires having a lovefest with his mistress. He comes back, does some *mea culpas*, and is elected to the



House of Representatives. He's doing fine. I never lied to my state. I lied to my wife, but everyone understands that goes with the territory."

"The colonel thought this sounded wrong though, you and Lily?"

"A man of my age, and let's be honest, my shape, with a pretty young twenty-something? It's a stretch, even for my imagination."

"What direction did his lack of trust lead you?"

"Stan suggested that I get the whole picture on Lily before I left my marriage. That was sound advice from a good friend looking out for my best interests. I appreciated his concern, even if I didn't believe they were founded."

"Still, you acted on his advice?"

"I hired a private investigator to follow her. See who she was interacting with, see if she was someone's asset."

"That seems like a smart move. The PIs, how did you come to hire them?"

"PI. Just one. He likes to work alone. I got his name from Stan."

"What did the investigator find? Was Lily true to you?"

"Yes. And she was providing me with a great deal of information."

"PIs, especially good ones, are expensive. How did you pay for this and not have it discoverable if you came under scrutiny?"

"USIPAC."

"Again? They've been very generous to you and Lily."

"I've always been pro-Israel. Always gone out of my way to help them in the Senate. I told a contact there, a higher-up, about the soundwave program. In my estimation, it's meant to take out the whole Middle Eastern Peninsula. If no one knows about that technology, it can be deployed without ramifications. There would be no way to trace it back to the United States. With everyone removed, the United States could easily go in and control the oil. They would control the world."

"Ah, so you *do* know why USIPAC was interested in helping Lily help you." Lynx picked up the remote control. "I'm going to put three photos up on the screen. Would you please tell me if you recognize any of the men pictured?"

Lynx clicked to show the first man Gage killed, then the second, then a picture of their prisoner.

"No, I don't recognize any of them."

"Did you think it was a conflict of interest that Colonel Guthrie is involved with Montrim, and you are fighting against Montrim?"

"He's not with Montrim. He's with DARPA. DARPA has contracts that involve Montrim, but he's an army man through and through. Look, he's a good guy, but he ultimately acts like a politician looking out for his own rear end."

"The irony of you saying that is spectacular. Let's go through this again, shall we? I need to drill down on this PI a bit more. I promise we're nearly through here."

"You said this had to do with Lily's death."

"Exactly. This PI concerns me. He wasn't simply following along with Lily's day so you knew she bought orange juice at Giant supermarket before her yoga class. Your friend Stan had specific reservations that needed to be assuaged and certain shadows that needed to be searched."

"Stan thought it odd that Lily and I would get so hot and heavy so quickly. He suggested that the CIA might have planted her as a honey trap. He said they had a name for assets who slept with men to get information and blackmail power over them. They call them swallows. A swallow, for damned

sake. Lily! Stan thought the soundwave technology and other Montrim projects were important to the CIA, so they'd try to stop me from shutting them down."

"The CIA would stop you?"

"That's what Stan suggested."

"Were you sharing any information with Lily?"

"Well sure. We shared data back and forth. She knew what I had found out, and tried to corroborate it with internal evidence. Stan said it was possible that she was actually using black propaganda, seeding my research with fake information so I would be completely discredited and become a laughingstock while Montrim sailed off into the sunset."

"But you never believed it. You just went through the motions to reassure your friend. Do you think that Montrim found out that there was a whistleblower, and decided to take her out of the equation?"

Billing put his head in his hands. "God."

"Let's go back to Zoe Kealoha. You said you recognized that name as Lily's old roommate, yes? But that was only a small portion of that story. I'd like you to finish it. How do you know Dr. Zoe Kealoha from Montrim Industries and how is she tied to your friend Colonel Guthrie?"

"Now that, I have no idea about. I know that Zoe and Lily were roommates, college friends."

"Okay. What did your PI tell you about Lily's death? If he was following her, he should have details."

"All of this happened before. I didn't need any more proof. I trusted Lily. I asked him to stop."

"So he took his last paycheck and left."

Attention moved to the door when a knock preceded the entrance of the woman Titus had called Margot. "Forgive me, Lynx, it's time."

Lynx checked her watch. "Senator, thank you so much for speaking with me. I have a plane I need to catch. Someone will be in to attend to you in a moment." She leaned over and shook his hand.

The senator was obviously confused with this sudden shift. "Wait. You were going to—"

But Lynx was already out the door.



## GAGE

• • • •

Prescott made a sucking sound with his teeth. “Oh, the tangled webs we weave. Are you all following this? Do you get what’s going on?”

“The window is getting a little cleaner,” Titus said.

The door popped open and Margot beamed her smile on Titus. Gage tipped his head to see Titus’s reaction to Margot. Titus looked the way Titus always looked. Like you’d better get the heck out of his way.

“Sir, Lynx asked me to give you this card. It’s the man who did the PI work. She said that according to the senator’s facial tells that it’s the name of the man who was captured by the Panthers today. She’s going to call you as soon as she gets in her car with more information.”

“Okay, thank you. Margot, would you see that the senator is shown to the atrium to meet up with his driver? Tell him that we’ll contact him on his private line if we have any further questions. And suggest that at some point that we will release the video we have back to him. But make it subtle. It’s a reminder for him to behave.”

“Yes, sir.” Margot was out the door.

Titus stood. “Let’s head back to the war room, and get Nutsbe going on a computer search.”

• • • •

THEY HAD JUST PUSHED through the Panther room door when Titus’s phone buzzed on his hip. “Titus here.”

“Lynx.” Gage heard her answer.

“I’m putting you on speakerphone. The Panthers, Gage Harrison, and Damion Prescott are in the room.”

“Hey, sorry about leaving so abruptly. I got caught up and forgot about the time. What did you do with the senator?”

“Margot shooed him out the door. I’m just now bringing the search to Nutsbe’s attention. Did you pick up anything else?”

“Some leads to run down. The senator definitely knows who your prisoner is, and he felt shamed by the association. I’m saying that’s your guy, Levi Schultz, or an alias. You may want to drill that one deeper. Did you get his phone when you made the capture?”

“We did. It’s on airplane mode until forensics can make sure it’s not got a failsafe to wipe it.”

“I’d say his contact numbers are going to be gold. I’d check for any photos of Lily, who she was with, and video or audio files. Forensics should be able to track them down if they were taken with that phone.”

“Nutsbe’s giving you the thumbs up,” Titus said.

“Here’s another thing Nutsbe should check—no, actually, two things, no, three things. Gosh, I wish I wasn’t heading out of town. This is such a good puzzle.”

“I’m taking notes,” Titus said. What he really meant was that with Lynx on speakerphone, Brainiack was at the whiteboard taking notes.

“One. The senator said that he met Lily at a party with the Leibowitz’s. I remember seeing that on the calendar pages that you sent over. It had little hearts all over the place. Before that party, I only saw Ruby or the Leibowitz’s name one, maybe two other times. After that party, skip ahead a month, and you start seeing Ruby’s name listed two or three times a week. The senator said that Ruby was a forensic auditor. I may be going out on a limb here, but it might be a good idea to have Ruby Leibowitz in for a little chat to see what she has to say about Lily. My bet is that Lily needed to know how to look for the information that the senator needed to make his case.”

“Got it. We’ll make contact,” Titus said.

“Number two. Thursday morning, Lily had an appointment that was just indicated as *10 a.m. Victoria Park*. It’s odd that Lily left work for an appointment in a park on a Thursday morning. And Thursday was bitter cold. My thought is to check with the DMV for Levi and get his plates. Then Nutsbe can run Levi’s plates through the ALPR scanning system and see his route through the city that day. Do the same for Lily and see if those routes overlap.”

“The senator said he called off his wolves. Levi shouldn’t have been in the picture at that point,” Titus said.

“Well, since we have him cuffed in our holding tank, I’d say he didn’t understand that directive. Actually, I’d say he’s probably playing double agent, and Levi was still handing information to someone.”

“Nutsbe’s holding up a sign that says that Lily didn’t have a car.”

“If you have her phone number, check her GPS routing. Maybe Special Agent Prescott can help you with that.”

“Why do you think she was in the gardens?” Prescott called out from his seat across the way.

“I have a guess. But it might be one hell of a stretch.”

“Okay, we’ll take that under advisement,” Prescott said.

“Did any of you see the Washington Post this morning?”

Titus looked around at the shaking heads. “That’s a negative.”

“One of their reporters was found dead in that park. A heart attack. The front page is dedicated to his twenty years of reporting. I’m not sure if there’s any way to find out why he was in that park around the time Lily was there, but he was a government corruption specialist, and Lily was acting as a whistleblower, according to Senator Billings.”

“Hell of a coincidence,” Gage muttered.

“I’d check out that story, and if by any chance he’s connected to Lily, see if anyone has notes on what he was working on,” Lynx continued.

“You think he was murdered?” Prescott asked.

“I’m not willing to speculate. I already feel like that’s thin ice.”

“Okay, you’ve got one more point,” Titus said. They were all huddled around the phone like it was a camp fire on a winter’s night.

“I do?”

“You said three.”

“Huh, hang on, let me think—oh, before we leave the topic of the reporter in the park, another way you can trace that down are the recent calls that Gage took from Lily’s phone at the morgue. See if any of those numbers go to WaPo or this guy.”

They could hear tire squeals and horns honking in the background.

“His name is Colin Bunsinger,” Lynx said, her voice fading and then growing louder. “Ah, yes, the third thing. I can’t remember where I’ve seen the symbol that was on the business card and the tangos’

tattooed wrists, but I've seen it somewhere. Not recently, but probably something I studied as a child. I remember looking at it in a book with my mother, so that tells me it's old, maybe ancient, and probably has something to do with art. Sorry, I can't tune that note for you, but it might give Nutsbe some parameters for his search. Okay, I'm going to be battling traffic from here to the airport. I need to focus. Margot gave me the trackers so that ploy's a go. Good luck, everyone."

The men each called out their thanks and goodbyes to Lynx before the line went dead.

Damion Prescott sat back on the table. "She got all that from her session with Billings? I didn't get any of those connections."

Nutsbe laughed. "Yeah, she's kind of like the Iniquus magician, pulling rabbits from thin air." Nutsbe typed on his keyboard. "I sent a message for forensics to check the guy's phone to see if there was any audio or video recorded on Thursday morning. Shall we lay bets on who's on the tape if it's there?" He tapped a button. "Are you ready for some follow up with what Lynx suggested?"

"Yeah." Prescott moved to the computer station. "What've you got?"

"Here you go." Up on the screen came side by side pictures of their prisoner and a professional photo of the same man in a suit and tie. "This is off his PI webpage."

"He looks better without the scruffy beard and broken jaw and nose," Brainiack remarked.

"I'm pulling up his DMV records. Okay, I have his license plate...and the parameters of Thursday, zero hundred hours to Friday, zero hundred hours, so we'll see where his car went in the city."

"How does Iniquus have this information?" Prescott flared his nostrils. "My understanding is that this data is under government control."

"That's right, and we contract with the government to do this kind of legwork and free up their staff. Right now, this is an FBI contracted job. Obviously, this series of events and crimes has national security ramifications. I'm sure the FBI will be appreciative of all of our efforts to keep America safe," Titus remarked.

"I'm sure they will," Prescott responded dryly.

Titus picked up his phone and pressed a number. "Margot? I need you to go by Ruby and Sal Leibowitz's house and pick up Ruby. She may need a little convincing to come along for the ride... I don't know, you're going to have to go with your gut. Tell her something about her friend, Lily Winters, leaving a package for her or something. Something plausible that Ruby would want to get her hands on... Yeah, well, if she's not there, you'll need to track her down. I need her here ASAP."



## GAGE

••••

“Sir, I have more information.” Nutsbe changed the pictures on the screen. On the top were the two men, whom Gage killed, wearing uniforms, sans black face paint. On the bottom were the man they held prisoner and another man no one recognized. Three of the men had red Xs on their faces. “Honey took ear photos and fingerprints of the target he neutralized at the safe house. This is his picture, bottom right, when he still had a face. Our forensics department was able to get his identification pretty quickly, because they all have an association.”

“Let me guess,” Gage said. “They were all in the same Israeli unit, and they were all MIA, presumed dead.”

“Bingo. And what’s more, Levi Schulz is not the PI’s real name. His birth name is actually Ido Mandel. Here’s a picture of their unit shortly before the bombing that forensics just sent over.” Nutsbe put up a photo on another screen.

Gage moved over to look at it. His brow drew together. “Huh, interesting.”

Titus moved stand next to him. “What are you seeing, Gage?”

“No tattoos on the left wrists.”

Prescott pinched at his lower lip. “Son of a gun. You’re right. So the team goes MIA and at least four members show up years later on American soil with affiliation tattoos. And what’s more, this guy’s services were suggested to the senator by a DARPA director.”

“It’s possible Colonel Guthrie could only be aware of his work as a PI under the name Levi Schultz. He’s well-established here in the DC area if you look at his website. There are court cases listed in which he gave testimony. They aren’t small potatoes hearings either,” Nutsbe added.

“Who does that?” Brainiack asked. “Gets a tattoo of their group’s icon? Besides military, of course.”

“I once saw a guy with a tat of a barcode on his wrist. He worked at a grocery store.” Nutsbe kept typing as he spoke.

“And what was the barcode for?”

Nutsbe glanced up from his keyboard to catch Brainiack’s gaze. “Doritos.”

“Ha.” Brainiack laughed.

“I’m wondering if the CIA has any intel on this symbol.” Prescott hiked his thumb at the photo. “If Lynx remembers it from a book she saw in her childhood, it’s obviously not a corporate logo.”

“Perhaps it was once something else and some group jacked it for their own reasons.”

“True.” Prescott let his hands rest on the back of his head. “You have two CIA business cards. We could reach out to them. Keep this in the family, so to speak.”

“I’d rather not,” Gage said. “I didn’t get a good vibe from these guys, and I don’t want them involved until we know what role they’re playing in all of this. Zoe can probably answer some of our questions about that role. Where is Zoe, by the way?”

“Margot said she ate, took a shower, and as soon as she laid her head down, she was passed out,” Brainiack said. “We all know how that feels. Adrenaline can kick the shit out of you.”



“I’ll send someone to wake her up in a little bit, if she doesn’t get up on her own,” Titus said, moving back to the table. “Then we can have a chat with her about why she thinks she’s being hunted internationally.”

“You mean besides the biomarker research?” Gage asked.

“Sir,” Nutsbe called. “Forensics sent me an audio file off of the PIs phone. They said that the phone was equipped with an app that allows for sound amplification. They’ve put the audio file through a scrubber to take out the ambient noise. Shall I play it?”

“Go ahead.”

The room grew still.

A nervous girl’s voice said, “Hi,” from the speaker system.

“I’m Colin Bunsinger.”

“Yes, I recognize you from your picture in the paper.”

“And your name is?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“I protect all of my sources. I would never share your name with anyone. But for the sake of our conversation, what shall I call you?”

“Nothing. You will call me nothing.” The tension in the woman’s voice ramped up.

“Does that sound like Lily to you?” Prescott asked Gage.

“Yeah, it sounds just like her.”

“I usually don’t meet with folks when they call and say they have a story for me. I’m not in the gossip business. I wouldn’t be here except that I got a call right before you rang from Senator Billings saying that he was sending someone my way. I’m assuming that’s you, since no one else contacted me. How do you know Senator Billings?”

“I don’t know him. Well, I know he’s working on a Senate hearing about Montrim Industries, and I have information from Montrim to share with you.”

“How did you get it? Are you a Montrim employee?”

Silence followed and Gage imagined Lily nodding.

“What’s in this envelope? It feels pretty thin. Is this all of your evidence?”

“Three pieces of correspondence. The first one is about an apocalyptic weapons system currently being developed. It’s based on a DARPA funded study into the use of soundwaves to destroy animal cells. DARPA was interested in developing a way to kill humans in a conflict area without incurring the expense of rebuilding infrastructure and not contaminating the land with toxins.”

“So the technology could be implemented one day and the invaders could move in the very next?”

“That’s my understanding”

The reporter let out a long low whistle. “The letter contains proof of your allegations?”

“The letter talks about the technology and how we’re in a race with China to develop the system. As a matter of fact, one of Montrim’s employees, George Matthews, was implicated in sharing data with China. George disappeared a couple of months ago. I have no idea where he went. I wasn’t able to find any information about him, and his house is empty and listed for sale.”

“Billings knows all this?”

“I’ve provided the same emails to his office I’m sharing with you.”

“The sound technology is mind-blowing.” There was a string of coughs. “You said two other items?”

“Yes, the next is a letter from a man with the Mossad. I think the Mossad is Israel’s version of our CIA?”

“That’s right,” the reporter confirmed.

“The Mossad sought to purchase a copy of BIOMIST. BIOMIST is an *above* top-secret initiative. I don’t have access to what it is. But I can tell you that it’s a DARPA project that’s been implemented since 2010, and is similar to the FBI’s CODIS system.”

“And the Mossad want a copy. Was this a letter written to DARPA?”

“Nutsbe,” Titus whispered. “Is that MIA Israeli unit Mossad?”

“No sir, *Sayeret Matkal*, Special Forces,” he replied.

“No, you can read it for yourself,” Lily was saying. “Apparently, a Montrim board member brought the project to Mossad’s attention and offered to sell them a copy of our data for forty-million dollars. They will update the data bi-monthly for an additional million dollars per update.”

“Montrim initiated the sale of DARPA project data to Israel?”

“That’s what it says,” the woman whispered.

“And the last piece of information?”

“The CIA offered Montrim a contract to get data on a DARPA project and have a team of MONTRIM microrobotic engineers reengineer the project for immediate field use by the CIA.”

“How would Montrim get ahold of DARPA project plans?”

“The scientist working on the project rents laboratory space at Montrim and uses the encrypted computer systems there. Much of the information there is top secret and above. The computer system passes DARPA security standards. Montrim is not supposed to have access, but when they built their computer system, they built a back door so the board could access all of the scientists’ information, whether they worked for Montrim or DARPA. I have that information there for you too.”

“What is the project that the CIA wants to take over?”

“RoboSphecus. The documents are in this folder. I’m not a scientist. These things don’t make sense to me. But the letters should give you the information you need.”

“You have no idea what the RoboSphecus project is about?”

“WASPs,” she said.

“Wasps?”

“I’m really uncomfortable talking to you about this in public. I need to go. The documents are in the envelope.”

“Look, I just—”

“Sorry,” her voice called out. “I can’t do any more.”

The room sat quietly.

“I think we need to have a conversation with this PI guy,” Prescott said. “Where is he right now?”

Nutsbe punched a button and brought up the image of the prisoner sitting in a well-lit white room complete with a white table and white chairs. The man sat with his cuffs attached to the table top. His feet were visibly shackled to the floor. “We put him on ice for a while, sir. It seems to help to give them some time to reevaluate their life choices. Makes them more talkative.”

Gage looked over at the whiteboard that listed the name of the top-secret project that the CIA wanted to get their hands on. BIOMIST. That sounded ominous as hell. “Titus, Lily said her project was similar to the FBI’s CODIS.”

“CODIS stands for Combined DNA Index System. BIOMIST could be Blood Marker Indexing System or Biomedical Indexing System.”

Gage nodded. “Makes sense to me.”

“And wasps?” Titus tapped the board beside the word. “We’ve heard that one before.”

There was a ping at Nutsbe’s computer. “Sir, Zoe’s on her way in.”

Titus turned toward the door. “Good. Now maybe we can get some context for all of this.”



## Zoe

**From the same flower the bee extracts honey and the wasp**

**~ Italian proverb**



Zoe followed her guide to the Panther war room. She still felt a little bit like she had been sucked into a virtual reality game and was looking for the eject button. The meal had helped. There had been a nap room with sleeping pods. She felt human again—even though she felt like she was plopped into some weird new dimension. She gave the men a wave as she entered the room.

Gage moved toward her, his eyes a turbulent blue with only a few specks of green. “We were hoping you’d come.”

She let her gaze move around the room, taking it in. This was obviously a space where strategizing was done. There were three screens along a focal wall. One contained the faces of four men, three with Xs on their faces, and one displayed a photo that looked like a military unit in the desert. A photo like those her dad used to send home to her and her mom. Nutsb—er—Tad was sitting at the computer console. Titus was glowering, as usual. Prescott looked at her like she was some kind of bacterium on a petri dish.

“Are you doing okay?” Gage put his hand on her arm, pulling her attention back to him.

Zoe gave him a little smile and a slight nod.

“Why don’t you come and sit down. We’re making some strides in figuring things out. Is it okay if I ask you some questions? We’re to the point where we need more information from you. Then I can catch you up on what we’ve learned.”

“Sure, that’s fine.” She moved to a seat and laced her fingers and crossed her ankles, compressing her body into a tight package.

“Do you know the term BIOMIST?”

“Yes, that’s the name of the indexing system I was telling you and Titus about.”

“Who owns BIOMIST?” Prescott asked.

Zoe pulled at her fingers nervously. “I own the intellectual property of how the biomarkers work to create unique profiles. I also own the software that analyzes the data. DARPA owns the software that stores the data and makes it searchable, since this application was their brainchild. Montrim is the collection and housing unit for the data.”

“We know how DARPA became involved. How did Montrim get on board?” Gage asked.

“My understanding is that the United States military didn’t think it would be successful getting foreign citizens to cooperate with the project. The best way to do that was to go in as a charitable medical group. The goal was to include every human in a particular area. They dipped each person’s finger in dye to indicate that they had gone through the process and gave them gifts at the end.”

“Gifts?”

“I heard something in passing. I was told that it depended on the village. In some cases, for example, if the chieftain was over forty and had several wives, they would offer him Viagra in return for his people’s participation. Sometimes they rewarded participation with things like chocolate bars or small solar lanterns.”

“But despite their active participation, Montrim doesn’t own and cannot, therefore, sell BIOMIST data to a foreign entity.”

“No, absolutely not. Nor can I. The data was bought by the US government and is regulated through the DoD. Almost no one knows about its existence. Just the CIA, mainly.”

“Sir, excuse me,” Tad interrupted. “I have that information about travel routes that you asked me for. Also, I’ve received a file on the reporter.”

“Let’s have that,” Titus said.

Brian moved toward the whiteboard and snapped up a marker. Zoe wondered if this information would give her a better handle on what she’d missed while she was in the sleep pod.

Tad put up an image of the DC area with a red line. “All right. We have him starting at the address that’s listed on his driver’s license.”

Zoe shot a questioning glance at Gage. He turned toward her and leaned in to whisper in her ear, “We’re talking about the prisoner we took from the exfil house this afternoon.”

“He travelled to Lily’s work just as she would typically be arriving there,” Tad said.

“We don’t have information from Lily’s GPS yet?” Titus asked.

Prescott leaned forward. “I haven’t heard back from my office yet.”

Lily. How did Lily figure in to the attack on the little house? Zoe wondered, feeling completely lost.

“He’s taking his car and not following her on foot. I imagine that he had a tracker in her phone, to keep him safer from detection if he’s working as a one-man team.”

Tad put up another picture.

Gage tapped his fingers on the tabletop. “I’m wondering about the possibility of a tracker, not only on Lily’s phone and possibly in her other effects, as well. For example, her watch. And if they are, are they similar to those found on Zoe’s phone and watch?”

“Can you get hold of that for us?” Titus asked Prescott.

Prescott pulled out his phone. “I’ll text my colleague to jump on it.”

“In the next photo I put up, we can tell from this street shot,” Tad used a laser to indicate the Mercedes, “that the guy sat outside of the office park until zero nine forty hours. At that point, he went to the gardens and parked at the far north corner.”

As Prescott slid his phone back in his pocket, he asked, “How many entrances are there to the garden?”

“Four,” Tad replied. “Two on the east side, one on the south, and the one on the north. I would guess that Lily entered the garden at the northeastern corner, because that’s where the Metro line lets out. There’s a large fountain toward the center that would be a good landmark for a meeting place of two strangers.”

“Schultz got there at what time?” Gage asked.

“Zero nine fifty hours. Now, the audio tape between Lily and Bunsinger only lasted four and a half minutes. Schultz didn’t follow Lily as she left. He stayed in place for another half-hour. When he left, he didn’t go back to following Lily either. He went home, where he landed for ten minutes, then he went to his office, where he stayed for fifteen minutes. He left town, and we had to switch to satellite imagery, which indicated his next location was here.” The red point of his laser wand circled a barn. “That’s a farm in Maryland, and his car hasn’t left since.”

“What do you think he was doing hanging out in the park for so long when it’s twenty degrees outside?” Prescott asked. “I’m thinking he put his sights on that envelope in the reporter’s hands. Lynx

said the reporter died of a heart attack. The guy could have had the attack after Lily left, and Schultz walked right up and took the envelope.”

“Or he could have confronted the reporter, and the sheer threat might have put Bunsinger into cardiac arrest,” Tad offered. “I’m opening the file on his death now. Give me a second to scan it.”

Prescott tossed his pen in the air and caught it. “That time frame makes me believe the PI took the envelope. What he did with it is going to be the real question.”

“Run with that thought,” Titus said.

“He’s not on Billings’ payroll anymore. Is he working the case for his own benefit? Is he trying to blackmail the senator? I doubt it. His unit attacked Zoe and killed Lily just hours later. One would assume that the affair would be revealed through her death. Is Schultz totally loyal to his unit? With something that big in hand, why didn’t he drive straight to his commander? Why did he make a pit stop at his apartment and his office before heading to the farm? That’s where I’m assuming they were meeting up for the later events of the night.”

“He could have faxed them. Scanned them into a computer,” Tad offered.

“Is that how you’d handle this kind of sensitive material? What would you do, Gage?”

“Head straight to my commander and put the envelope in his hand. I wouldn’t have opened it or looked at it.”

“Thorn?”

“Ditto.”

“Brainiack?”

“Same.”

“There you have it,” Prescott concluded. “My guess is this guy thought about the dollar amounts involved and started salivating. Developed an appetite for his own fat bank account. He didn’t have to know exactly what he was going to do, he only needed to be tempted to keep those documents for himself. Blackmail? Extortion? He may need time to process, form a plan. But I’d bet my badge they’re in his possession.”

Titus held up his hand. “Agreed. We need to get our hands on that envelope.” He pulled out his phone and dialed. “Titus here, wake up, sleeping beauty. Brainiack is going to text you some information—there’s an apartment address I need you to shake, and if that’s not successful, an office.”

“Are we going in quiet?” came a crisp, male military voice that didn’t sound to Zoe at all like someone who was just dragged from his bunk.

“I don’t care if either space looks like it went through an earthquake when you’re done. Walls, floors, ceilings, I want it thorough. I need you and the rest of the team to put the pedal down and bring us back a large manila envelope. The contents will have to do with Montrim Industries, Israel, and the CIA. This is a time-sensitive, code orange piece of intel. We’ll send search warrants to the car fax as soon as they’re signed.”

“Roger. We’re on it.”

Titus ended the call. “Brainiack, send Honey and Dagger the addresses and get legal moving on the warrants. You done scanning, Nutsbe?”

“Yes, sir. Colin Bunsinger has had known heart issues for the last six years. Recently, his doctors recommended bypass surgery. He put surgery on hold because he had a cold. Bunsinger was on medical leave from his position at the Washington Post. His family had no idea why he was at that park at that time of day.”

“I bet no one thought to be at the park in that kind of cold,” Zoe said quietly.

“Did they give time of death?” Prescott asked.

“A jogger running in the park over her lunch break found his body around thirteen hundred hours and called the paramedics. Bunsinger was pronounced dead on the scene. They can’t specify the time of death at this point because of the temperature.”

“They called the M.E. in?” Gage asked.

“The medical examiner took him back to the morgue where he was identified by family members. Since he wore a medical alert bracelet, after speaking to the family, the family doctor signed off on the death certificate as natural causes. No autopsy.”

“Prescott, can you find out if amongst the personal effects there happened to be a manila envelope?”

“Yep, I’ll call from the hallway. Take notes if anything interesting comes up while I’m out there. I’ll check on the GPS update too.”

Zoe leaned over and asked Gage what this was about.

“Lily was passing information about BIOMIST, sound technology, and wasps to a reporter on the morning of her death. Subsequent to the meeting, the reporter died. They were being followed by Senator Billings’s private investigator, though Billings wasn’t working with him at that point.”

Zoe’s stomach dropped. “He got information about wasps and then just so happened to drop dead of a heart attack?”

“Zoe? Are you okay? What’s going on?”

Gage’s voice came from a long way away. The whole room was swimming in front of her. Her system was simply not equipped for this level of intrigue. How did Gage do this day in and day out?

“Okay, you’re looking a little better, you went gray on me all of a sudden. What gives?”

“I’m not sure that this man’s death was natural. But there’s no way to prove otherwise. It just is what it is,” Zoe responded.

Titus’s face loomed in front of hers. “I think we need to hear more about this.”





## Zoe

**The fangs of the green snake and the sting of a wasp don't really make poison  
~ Chinese proverb**

• • • •

Gage turned to Zoe and held her gaze for a long moment. He believed in her. He stood with her. And his belief in her reminded Zoe that normally, on most days, she believed in herself too.

“Let’s start here. Zoe, why were you admitted to the hospital for exhaustion?” he asked quietly.

“I was working long days and nights on a problem that I couldn’t solve, and I guess it snowballed. I didn’t realize how taxing this all was on my health.”

“This was the last month or so, right?” Gage was talking to her like she was the only person in the room. She was speaking just to him. No judgement.

“Yes. The DoD needed Sphecious to be operable in four months’ time. They had a high-priority project underway. They said it meant the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of people. It’s a lot of pressure, you know?” Zoe’s eyes were glazed with tears. “I felt personally responsible for the outcome. If I could just get my WASP operable, people would live. Families would stay whole.”

“Were you a big part of that program?” Gage asked. “Do you know what the project is all about?”

“No, I only know that there was a push to get it done.”

“Who was pushing you?”

“The messages were being sent through Colonel Guthrie, he’s the director of my project and liaisons with the Pentagon.”

“Okay, good. Let’s start with DARPA—what role do you play there?”

“DARPA is headquartered in Arlington, VA. It’s located near the Montrim industrial park. While I do my work *at* Montrim, I’m paid by DARPA. It’s a little complicated. DARPA pays me for the use of BIOMIST, and that covers my research expenses and affords me my living wages. I’m working on a project that DARPA is interested in using. But while I lease them the use of the end mechanism, the intellectual property remains mine—the robotics and the software.

“DARPA was put into place so that the American government, with an eye to military applications, could address challenges spanning the scientific spectrum. Colonel Guthrie is a program director. Normally, I would have a program manager I would be accountable to. But because of Colonel Guthrie’s and my longstanding relationship, and his particular interest in supporting my scientific discoveries, he was allowed to serve both as my manager and my director.”

“And this is outside his normal purview?”

Zoe wondered why Gage’s brows knit together when he asked that. “Right. Normally his responsibilities are developing the technical direction of study, hiring program managers, overseeing the execution of various programs, things like that. Colonel Guthrie is with the Biological Technologies Office, which is the office that started BIOMIST and with whom I later developed the applications for both the military and the FBI to field test the biomarkers.” Zoe’s gaze travelled the room where the men sat perfectly still and completely quiet.

Gage’s steady gaze pulled her back to focus on him alone. “But that’s not the project you’re working on now. The project with the deadline.”

“Yes and no. I’m sorry but none of this is straightforward. You’re going to have to bear with me while I go through it. DARPA asked for my biomarker field test to be extended. They’re afraid that if these machines get into the hands of law enforcement, even though that was the reason for my developing them in the first place, others would reverse engineer them and figure out what was being measured. Or if it went to court, I would be forced to reveal the biomarkers that were being measured. As my machines became public, the rest of the world would be closer to having the same technology.”

The door opened and Zoe jerked her head around to see who was coming in. Prescott moved into the room and slid into a nearby chair. He gave her a nod.

Gage touched her knee to get Zoe’s attention. “And we would lose our ability to gather the blood census that we’re accumulating. So what is this new project about? You mentioned wasps.”

“Okay, so in undergrad, I developed the idea of blood biomarker applications. In grad school I also studied biomedical engineering. That’s when I developed the field test. *Then* I went on to get my PhD in microrobotics.”

“And you developed a wasp robot?”

“Its name is WASP, which stands for Winged Analytical Surveillance Project.”

“That’s quite a leap from biomarkers to robotic wasps.”

“It is and it isn’t. I was driven by the ethics of innocence. My original projects were meant to help keep people out of prison who didn’t commit a crime, so that the police were freed up to find the people who actually did break the law. A societal win-win. When I was in grad school, I saw news article after news article about how drones were being used to stalk terrorists and that whole compounds were being exploded, only to find out that the intel was old or faulty. Women, children, the elderly, and men who weren’t involved with terrorism were being killed.”

“And you wanted to stop that from happening.”

“Of course I did. But that’s naïve, isn’t it? I can’t stop all of it. But if I stopped just one mistake? If I saved even one life? Then I’m protecting innocents.”

“You thought that you could do this with wasps? I’m going to need you to lead me through this. My mind isn’t coming up with any way for you to save innocent people with a robotic wasp.”

“I took a class for fun in microrobotics before I decided to continue my studies with a PhD in the subject. I absolutely loved it. It was in that class that I developed a very crude wasp-like structure. My goal was to develop ocular enhancements, so that a tiny lens could send pictures to a computer that could identify and augment what it was seeing, thereby becoming a means of intelligence gathering. It was my goal to develop the eyes. My plan was to develop it to send visual data to someone watching a long way away. I wasn’t able to do that. But as I made progress, I was able to get this robot to send enough information to an external human, functioning as a pilot, to be able to navigate a room, and see basic human shapes.”

“It needs an operator, like a drone does?”

“Most of the time. I was worried about the WASP being seen and swatted. Then people would discover that these types of micro robots exist. Colonel Guthrie and DARPA taught me about paranoia and secrecy. I have an override in the computer system. If the WASP believes it is going to be captured or destroyed, it will override the pilot and fly away like an actual wasp. Once it’s safe, it hands the controls back to the pilot.”

“That’s pretty cool. How would the robot know it was in danger?”

“Analyzing shadows and detecting speed of movement, and since that’s harder to do at night, in a worst case scenario, if the pilot lost control, the robot’s head contains acid that will melt the WASP

into what looks like black, chewed-up gum. No way to tell what it was or how its systems functioned.”

“All right, you got to a point where your optics could detect structure and basic human form. But you were after a different result.”

“I couldn’t get my optics to be adequate enough for identification. One day, I had one of those smack myself in the head moments. What was I doing trying to develop these ocular definitions? I was on a fool’s journey. You know, I got caught up in an idea, and it was like I couldn’t see the nose in front of my face. The reason I developed biomarkers was because of the Innocence Project. If you’ll remember, about seventy-five percent of the people that the program proved to be innocent were convicted because of faulty human memory and an inability to discriminate human faces. And DARPA wanted to develop BIOMIST because it was having trouble identifying terrorists because of similar cultural dress and facial hair. So why in blazes was I trying to develop a WASP that depended on visual discrimination? Stupid.”

“But you didn’t tank the project. You came up with a better identification system.”

“Right, I decided to put the two projects together. A WASP is piloted via ocular apparatus to the possible target. At that point in the project, the pilot could see if the person were male or female. If they were old or young. Basic, basic. Imagine rubbing a thin layer of Vaseline on the inside of your glasses and being sent into a room to find your suspect. That’s what the pilot has to contend with. The goal is to pilot the WASP to whoever they believe is the mark. The WASP lands on the suspect and by inserting a proboscis that punctures the skin, it sucks up a blood sample. At the same time, a second proboscis is inserted into the skin to plant a tiny beacon. The beacon is about half the length of a piece of rice and about that diameter. The weight of the beacon is replaced with the weight of the blood. To the person, it feels like a sting. The WASP must be able to function very quickly and maneuver away. So once the pilot finds the mark, the computer takes over.”

“What’s the purpose of the beacon?” Prescott asked. His sudden introduction into the conversation made Zoe jump. He put up his hands up in a “sorry” gesture and leaned back.

“Say the WASP took a blood sample. It flies back to the pilot who takes the blood and applies it to the test strip in the field analyzer. The pilot gets a plus sign. There’s a good chance that they’ve got their terrorist in house. Then they send that info to the Air Force, or whoever wants this guy, and they move in with a bomb, or boots. Preferably boots that can be more surgical about the outcome. How would I be sure that my intel is not already old? It was true in that moment, but the terrorist could leave. Then, not only would I have not helped to get the bad guy, but lots of people might be bombed on my faulty data. And we may think the guy is in there, see the rubble, declare him dead, and yet, he’s still operational. There are still lots of opportunities for bad outcomes.”

Gage tipped his head, his eyes far away as if he were imagining this in the field. “The beacon is something that the pilots can track?”

“No, it’s too small, it can’t put out enough power. But once the airstrike, or other means of interception begins, the pilot can send the wasp to find its egg. That’s what I call the beacon. And the pilot can verify the location. The wasp can travel up to two miles on each flight. It gets juiced up while the biomarkers are being run, and then can fly another two miles.”

“Then what happens? It just stops?” Gage asked.

“It uses the acid to self-destruct with its last burst of energy. I can’t let them fall into anyone else’s hands.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt. This is an absolutely mind-boggling concept, and I can think of hundreds of times when it would have made all the difference in the field,” Brian said. “Do you have to destroy

it? For example, if we had eyes three-sixty and no way for this guy to escape, would you have to destroy the WASP? Or could you use it again?"

"Each WASP can obtain only one blood sample, and then it can't be used again. The biomarker test is highly sensitive, and the WASP would be contaminated. A micro drop could change the outcome on subsequent blood samples. If, however, we were dealing with a known mark and a biomarker test wasn't required, then the WASP could be used to mark the subject with an egg and track that person. It would still need to be called back by the pilot to recharge."

"I'm sure they cost a freaking fortune. You'd better be right when you're piloting to the mark. I don't know that I could do that." Brian said.

"Agreed. I developed software that's supposed to help. When Gage killed the men in my apartment..." Zoe instantly regretted recalling that scene. Her body went right back into panic mode. Gage reached over and drew a steady hand from her elbow to her palm then laced their fingers together.

"You're doing fine," he encouraged. "Take your time."

"If a photo was taken with ears or with faces, those data points could be put into the system. Height really helps. Gender, of course. The wasp tries to help the pilot. There's a scale that shows up on the screen to facilitate pilot decision making. It runs red to blue. Hot to cold, like the children's game."

Titus slid forward in his seat. "Okay, I have a question for you. I'm going to leap in a different direction. How did the CIA know that you were in the hospital? How do they play into this WASP story?"

Zoe's gaze searched over the floor. If anything made her feel vulnerable, it was explaining what the CIA, she, and WASPs had in common.



## Zoe

*Do not kill a single wasp; for then a hundred will come to its funeral.*

*~ Russian Proverb*



“How did the CIA know about me being in the hospital? I don’t know.” Zoe’s nose tingled, and she squeezed it to stop the distraction.

“Do you know Grossman and Parker?”

Now her lips were going numb. Brian moved over and set a bottle in front of her. It was a chocolate protein shake. Zoe thought he’d probably hit on something, her system was burning through energy, like she’d been running a marathon. “Thank you,” she said as she twisted off the top and took a sip. “Parker and Grossman? Yes. I know them.”

“How do you know them? Were you doing something for the CIA?”

“Yes, the CIA activated the BIOMIST data. But Grossman and Parker weren’t part of that. I refused to work for them.”

“They were in your hospital room the other night, and said they were on a time crunch,” Gage said.

“They are, but that’s not my worry.”

“Can you tell us what they were asking you to work on?”

Zoe filled her cheeks with air and blew it out. “If this goes outside of these walls, I could go to prison. I’m probably breaking a bunch of espionage laws. My contracts all have non-disclosure statements and stuff about treason. Now I’m caught between giving you the information to save lives, including my own, or shutting up. I’m not a hero. I don’t want to be shot full of drugs and dragged somewhere to do things against my will.”

“Zoe, we deal in State secrets every day,” Titus said. “Our job is America first. None of us is going to take this beyond the tightest possible circles. But you’re right. There are choices to be made. And lives on the line. Yours, others. Innocent others, like Lily.”

“Lily.” Zoe still couldn’t believe her friend was dead. Murdered. Yeah, she’d have to keep telling them about her work. She didn’t really have a choice. “Parker and Grossman want my help getting to a guy in Pakistan. It’s high stakes, the next Osama Bin Laden, they said. I’m okay with them using my identification processes—that could save innocent lives. That’s been my goal all along. Keep innocent people out of jail, keep innocent people off death row, keep innocent civilians from being targeted by drones.”

Gage’s eyes darkened.

“They approached me about building a RoboSphecius because they wanted me to extend my research.” Zoe took a big glug of her protein shake. She could feel the sugar working in her system.

“In which direction? Zoe. Are you okay?” Gage asked.

“I think I’ve used up most of my word quotient for the week.” Zoe forced a little laugh.

“A little bit more, okay?” Gage’s eyes were green now, soft and comforting.

“Yes, that’s fine.” She paused, wondering how to explain this to those outside of the scientific community. “Science is accumulative. There are no new ideas. Any idea that is sparked by anyone

else's is simply a next step." She grimaced and tried to come up with an example. "Do you know how Post-it Notes came to be?" She looked around at the shaking heads. "Back in the late sixties, Spencer Silver was a 3M chemist. He developed a "low-tack" adhesive. It was strong enough to hold paper to a surface, but the genius of it was that it was also weak enough that it wouldn't tear the paper when it was removed. Silver worked for a good long time trying to figure out how to make this adhesive marketable and he wasn't able to. One day, Silver's colleague, Art Fry, uses it in his choir book because he thought it would make a great book marker. Ta-da. Post-it Notes were born. Having something already, and changing it slightly to meet a need, that's the basic story of Parker and Grossman and me."

Gage said nothing. Waited.

Zoe considered how every word out of her mouth made the circle of people who had the information wider, and she felt that the mere concepts were potentially lethal. Already had been lethal. Lily, three men that the Panthers called "tangos", and maybe, possibly, the reporter. She pulled her hand away from Gage's. She wished she had time to consider her actions further. But inaction at this point seemed dangerous too. "Parker and Grossman were on the trail of Osama Bin Laden. They were accessing BIOMIST to try to track down Bin Laden's children. Recently they discovered my WASP project. They never told me how that got leaked to them."

"Who knows about it besides Montrim?" Titus asked.

"Montrim doesn't know what I'm working on. They just rent my lab space to DARPA."

"Weird," Brian said.

Zoe saw the men passing looks around and wondered what they were telegraphing to each other.

"As for who knows at DARPA? I'm not sure. Colonel Guthrie is my contact," Zoe finished.

"No one else? No bookkeepers or another staff at Montrim?"

"This is supposed to be above top secret—I don't know how they deal with that in terms of their accounting."

"Lily wouldn't know?"

Zoe searched the men's faces again. They were focused hard on her. This point meant something to them. "I don't know how Lily would come across the scope of my work."

"But somehow the CIA did. Did you tell Guthrie the CIA knew?"

"Yes, I told him right away that they wanted me to change the trajectory of my research. I was worried that they'd pile that on my lap too, because I was already on the tight deadline Guthrie had set for me. And I wasn't willing to do what they wanted anyway. Colonel Guthrie seemed pretty pissed about it. He told them to stand down, that I was working on a military contract. I was there and heard his side of the phone conversation."

"But Parker and Grossman pushed you anyway. What were they pushing you to do?" Gage asked.

"Back in the 1970s, the CIA had a secret weapon used for assassinations. A dart was used to shoot a small amount of poison into their target. The dart would dissolve almost instantly, leaving the tiniest of red dots. The substance would cause a heart attack that, at that time, couldn't be thwarted. I'm not sure how that poison would stand up to modern medical interventions now. But at the time, it was very effective. It also had a short half-life, meaning any traces that might be found in post-mortem exams would come up as naturally causative. Which is why, if this reporter had documentation that brought a CIA SNAFU to light, then I'm not sure, and no one will ever be sure, if Bunsinger's heart attack was a natural event or if it was triggered by the CIA's use of this poison."

"I've seen videos of those old Senate hearings, and everything Zoe's saying is true. But that initiative was nixed. They put that program aside," Prescott said.



Zoe shook her head, and the men turned to look at her. Their concern was growing palpable, and Zoe dearly wanted to leave. “The person who is hit by the dart may not feel anything at all or possibly just a bug bite or sting. Sound familiar? The CIA wanted me to develop a RoboSphecus with the capacity to detect a beacon implant and to, via proboscis, sting the person, administering a lethal dose of poison. The poison from the seventies. They have it in hand. That I can tell you with certitude.”

“Did you take on the project at any point?” Prescott asked.

“No, of course not!”

“Can I ask why not?” he pushed back.

“Imagine the ramifications. Anything we have in terms of science is just leading the race, but eventually all dedicated runners cross the finish line. Everyone would have this technology, especially if it was already functional and the “other” got hold of the wasps or my designs and software. They could reverse engineer the thing, send the poison to their chemists. Can you imagine the ease with which our government could be taken down? How could anyone prevent senators from being stung as they exited the Capitol? I’m not having any part of that. I’m okay with identifying the players so that we can separate the innocent from the culpable, to the extent that it’s possible. But my science will not be used to actually kill people.”

“But the CIA won’t take no for an answer.” Titus’s voice was a low growl.

“No. They won’t leave me alone.”

Prescott held up his finger. “I just got a text from the morgue. Colin Bunsinger had a phone, a wallet, and a set of car keys in his pocket, but there was no envelope on his person when his body was transported. They still have Lily Winters. They’re expecting the funeral home to transport her body later today. My team has signed chain of custody paperwork and is bringing her purse and her watch here to Iniquus. I hope that’s okay.” He turned to Titus. “We didn’t discuss it, but I think this will be the most efficient route. Of course, they’ll need to maintain that chain of custody, so they’ll need to remain in your forensics department with the potential evidence.”

To Zoe it seemed not quite a challenge. It was almost like Prescott wanted eyes on the inner sanctum, and this was his play. Iniquus was Zoe’s protector, and she didn’t like that the FBI was snooping around. Zoe thought that her aversion was probably do to her interaction with the CIA. She didn’t dislike Prescott. But in this moment, she didn’t like him either.

“That happens all the time. We’re set up to accommodate you,” Titus said evenly. He wasn’t ruffled. Probably Zoe shouldn’t be either.

Prescott tapped a response into his phone.

“Zoe.” Brian moved to sit next to Gage. “Your work on the WASPs is amazing. I love sci-fi. It’s all I read and most of what I watch on screen. I see how these things are possible in the future. But right here and now, you’re describing things that can be of so much help and you’re right, they have so much potential for harm. I like hearing you talking about the ethics of your research. It never occurred to me that scientists would be put in such difficult places. In the military, Gage and I make decisions like that on a minor scale. You’re making them with a wider scope. Do you have someone you can talk to, to debate these issues as you make your decisions? Is there someone’s advice you seek out? Perhaps that’s how this information is getting out.”

“The only person I’m allowed to discuss this with is Colonel Guthrie. None of this can get out to the wider scientific world. Mostly I try to be true to my own inner voice. Sometimes I follow through with the colonel, sometimes not. Colonel Guthrie told me to keep my head down and get the WASPs ready for intelligence, and then we’d talk about what happens next with RoboSphecus. On this, though, I’m not swayable. I could see our president being stung. I won’t have any hand in that.”

“But have you seen some good in your work? Do you feel uplifted by what you’ve accomplished?” Gage asked.

“I don’t often get to know how my work is being used. I told you about the failed attempt to use it to find Osama Bin Laden. I was able to help with the Paris attacks though, and yeah, that felt good. A few stories have siphoned back to me and really touched me, gave me courage, kept me working toward future advancements.”

Brian asked, “Was this with your WASPs?”

“No, BIOMIST.”

Brian went quiet, and Zoe could see him thinking hard. He shook his head. “I can’t put it together. Can you explain how BIOMIST helped in the Paris attacks? Would it breach security to share?”

Zoe opened her arms wide. “Everything I’ve said to you has breached security. I can’t see how one more item will make that much difference. After the Paris attacks, President Obama told the CIA that they were to do everything in their power to help Interpol. There was a short list of people the CIA thought might be involved. They ran the blood samples found on scene through BIOMIST.”

“What? But you said they were gathering the census markers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.”

“Montrim, under CIA direction, expanded its humanitarian efforts when Europe started to be overwhelmed by refugees fleeing the war zone. Montrim’s humanitarian arm set up medical stations at refugee centers to try to document everyone coming in from the Middle East and Northern Africa. Once Montrim was in the field, gathering data in the Middle East, they thought there was a glitch in my protocol because different names were coming up as matches. It turned out the patients were changing the names they were telling the relief workers. Montrim added a fingerprint identification screen to the intake. When the patients are processed, before the blood sample is taken, the finger is rolled on the digital pad, and it’s stored as a name and a fingerprint with a unique number sequence. That change happened fairly early on.

“Of course, they’re not Montrim in the field. They have several other names they use, like WorldMed International, and WorldCares. In the attempt to get the biomarkers, people are being given basic medical interventions. That’s a wonderful thing. Another good thing is that the software I wrote groups people into families—families in this instance are defined as parents and their children. A grandparent won’t lead to a grandchild. But a brother can lead to a sister. A father can lead to a child. If a child came in without supervision—the adult died in passage, for example—the medical workers would flag it. They’ve told me that dozens of families were reunited this way. I think that’s pretty cool. I had to sign off on that use for a set period of time. Montrim is giving the data to the field workers, who then do the leg work. It’s their charitable outreach, and they receive a great deal of goodwill in the communities for doing this kind of thing. The whole hearts and minds initiative. They say it’s name recognition software, putting people together.”

“Wow.” Brian sat back in his chair. “Wow,” he said again, then scrubbed a hand over his short military cut. “That must be an amazing feeling.”

Zoe offered up what Gage called her Mona Lisa smile. Yeah, it did feel good. It made her proud to know she was helping to make the world a better place. Then she sighed. “And now my science is responsible for four, maybe five deaths. I don’t know if one side of the scale balances the other.” She rubbed her hands together.

“I’m sorry, but I’m still stuck on the Paris attacks. How did your research help?” Gage asked.

“At first, the authorities had a blood sample they found at the scene where one of the terrorists exploded himself, and that’s how they found the name of Brahim Abdeslam in BIOMIST. Then the authorities worked to find his family. They also found a fingerprint that pinpointed Salah. The CIA, of

course, didn't identify the means by which they made the identification. And they even tried to stay off the radar as the entity that identified him."

"But the Abdeslam family was from Brussels," Prescott pointed out.

"In 2015, Brahim Abdeslam travelled to Turkey, intending to go to Syria, but Turkish authorities deported him back to Brussels. That's when the sample was taken. Authorities had him pass through one of the Montrim sites for a health check. I really have very little information on the subject—there was an addendum to the contract I needed to sign so that the CIA could give the information to Interpol, that's the only reason I have this much. I'm sure that their media briefings disguised the true facts, because my index isn't supposed to exist. As soon as it's a known entity, our government will no longer have the freedom it has now to expand the database."

"Have you ever considered selling a copy of BIOMIST to Israel?" Prescott asked.

"No, absolutely not. Once this becomes known, the program is done. It's just now getting populated to the point that it can be helpful."

"Montrim never approached you about doing a sale to Israel?" Titus asked.

"No." Zoe was thoroughly confused. She looked at the men's photos on the screen. The two attackers from her condo had spoken another language. It could have been Hebrew. Was Israel trying to kidnap her?

"Is there any way that Montrim can access your data without your consent?"

"It's protected. I have a hacker friend who helped me write the code for the firewalls. But nothing's foolproof. DARPA has their own firewalls in place. All we can do is hold people off. My best defense for the database is that Montrim likes the money they get for gathering the data. DARPA needs this mission to be a secret. No one should be looking for it."

"Montrim has some of the best minds in the world working for them on their military software applications. They could have put someone on the task of hacking you."

"Why would they? That's cutting off their nose to spite their face, right?"

Silence.

"*Right?*"

Gage had his warrior face on again. "We're trying to figure all of this out."



## Zoe

**If I be waspish, best beware my sting**  
~ William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*



Zoe stood and walked to the corner to get some air. No one stopped her. Twenty-four hours ago, she was eating Chinese take-out and reading a book in peace. In less than a day, someone had tried to kidnap her, she lost a dear friend, she was hidden, tracked, shot at, and chased some more. And now she realized that she was at the center of an international intrigue, playing with people who didn't have any rules. She pressed her forehead against the polished wood wall and tried to be still.

"Zoe." Gage's warm voice came from a good distance away. He sounded like he wanted permission to approach, and she very much appreciated that he was trying to honor her space.

When she turned, he took two steps forward. "We'll figure this out. Okay?"

"In the wrong hands...the wrong mindset... Just think. Can you imagine what would happen if I developed a RoboSphecious to kill? When the CIA brought the project to me, I could see how simple it would be to make the change. It's simply a matter of up-taking poison instead of blood and secreting poison into the skin instead of onto a test strip. Depending on the weight and viscosity of the poison, it's probably just a matter of making a few changes to the software and bam, it's a killing machine. I could probably rig something together in less than a day. And what if this went open source? Or there was a mole? Our enemies could kill any leader not liked by someone with a RoboSphecious. Imagine if they could build as many RoboSphecious as they wanted? Soldiers could send the micro-robots into the camps. Sting. Pilot them back, refill, sting again, and again. They could sting an entire army, and they'd all drop dead in the blink of an eye. Marines like you." A picture of Gage laying in the desert, clutching at his chest, gasping for his last breath, with no way to protect himself against this assault came vividly to mind, and it felt like she was being stabbed.

"Hey." Gage reached out and covered her hand with his. "I agree with you. I think you made the right choice."

"Zoe and Gage, sorry to interrupt." Tad walked toward them. "Forensics called to let me know that they've been monitoring your phones. Colonel Guthrie made three calls to Zoe and two calls to you, Gage. The timing is getting closer and closer, so we can assume he's agitated. Zoe, your phone needs to be tossed in the trash. It's too corrupted for forensics to guarantee they got it completely clean. Yours passed their tests, Gage, and you can use that one to make the call. They're bringing it down now. Be careful, though, don't reveal any new information since you last saw him, including your present location, or any of the intelligence we've compiled."

"Roger that."

Tad went to answer a knock at the Panther War Room door. Zoe assumed it was the forensics guy bringing down Gage's phone.

Gage turned to Zoe. "Do you want to call or should I?"

"I really don't want to talk to him. I'm not good at subterfuge, and he knows me too well. I think he'd press less with you."

“Agreed.” Gage took the phone from Tad. He pulled up recent missed calls and pressed the number for Colonel Guthrie. As it rang, Gage laced his fingers with hers and leaned in so she could hear.

“Gage? Thank you so much for calling,” the colonel said. “My blood pressure’s been inching up all day. I called the hospital. They said Zoe was discharged. I tried her number. I hope I’m not bothering you, but it worries me that I’m going right to voicemail.”

“She’s fine. She just woke up from a long nap. We’ll be headed out to dinner here in a couple of minutes.”

“Good, good. Is she with you? Can I chat with her for a second?”

“Sorry, no. Zoe’s not available at the moment. Is there a message I can pass along?”

“Yeah, sure. Great. Let her know that Maeve and I’d like her to come stay at our house until this is all settled. The more I think about the break in, the more concerned I’m becoming. I should also tell you that I didn’t call Zoe’s parents. I thought she should be the one who decides what, if anything, she wants to say to them. She is an adult, after all.”

“She’ll appreciate that, sir. I’ll pass the invitation on to her. I’m sure she’ll want to talk to you tomorrow.”

“But tonight, Gage? Does she have someplace to stay? I want her to be safe. I couldn’t forgive myself if something were to happen.”

“She’s fine right now. We’re with friends.”

“She’s fine,” the colonel repeated. There was a long pause. “You’ve been great through all of this, Major. Thanks for being there for her. I’ll check in tomorrow.”

“Good night, Colonel.”

“Incoming,” Tad called and put a new image up on the screen.

“Hey, that’s Ruby Goldstein.” Zoe walked over to stand in front of the live picture. “She and Lily were friends in undergrad. Where is this?”

“An interview room here at Iniquus,” Brian told her.

“Is she here because of Lily’s death?”

“Ruby’s married name is Leibowitz. Do you know her husband, Sal Leibowitz?” Titus asked.

“No. I haven’t seen Ruby since...well, it’s been years.”

“Lily left her husband and was living with you when she went to a party for the USIPAC as a guest of the Leibowitz’s. She didn’t mention that to you?”

“I wasn’t Lily’s keeper. We didn’t run our schedules by each other. We got along because we both like our boundaries.”

“When did she tell you that she started dating Charlie?”

“I don’t know, months ago. I never met him. He was someone I knew about peripherally. His name. That he was older. That he made her happy. It was nice to see her bloom again after that disaster of a relationship with her ex. That is seriously all I can tell you. I had my mind occupied with the DARPA push to get the WASPs actionable and,” she caught Gage’s eye, “I had my own social life. I wasn’t really involved in Lily’s.”

“We need to figure out who’s the best person to talk to Mrs. Leibowitz,” Titus said.

“How did Margot get her here?” Prescott asked.

Tad smiled. “She said that they had spoken with the senator earlier about Lily, and Ruby’s name had come up. Margot thought she’d like to have the information so she was well-armed if any reporters came knocking on her door.”

“Smart move.” Titus folded his arms over his chest and scanned the room. “Okay, I think we send Zoe in, since Ruby and she know each other, but we also send Gage in to do the questioning, because he’s been in the room through all stages of information gathering. He’ll know best how to get to the needed intel. Thoughts?” He looked at Prescott.

“Agreed. Gage has enough field experience, he knows what he’s doing,” Prescott said.

“Zoe?” Gage asked.

“I’m just there to greet her and make her feel safe? I don’t have to talk to her?”

“That’s right,” Titus said.

Zoe didn’t dislike Titus, but his hard face always made her feel like she had been caught doing something wrong. She felt unsettled and apprehensive around him, though his words and actions had done nothing but support and protect her. So why did she feel like he was sending her into the lion’s den?





## Zoe

**Don't pick a wasp out of a cream-jug**  
~ Jewish Proverb

Gage put his hand on the small of her back and the roomful of people filed out the door and moved up the hallway.

In a completely different part of the building, where things looked less like a military complex and more like a resort hotel, Titus opened a door, and Zoe started to walk in.

“That’s the observation room,” Gage said, and pointed to the door next to it. “We go in here. Ready?”

“Yup.” Not really. But they said all she had to do was sit there. She could do that.

As they moved through the door, Margot stood, shook hands with Ruby, and slid past them.

“Hi, Ruby,” Zoe said.

“Zoe, oh goodness, Lily is *dead*, can you imagine?”

Ruby stood and wrapped Zoe in an embrace. Lily was dead. Why did Zoe have so much trouble grasping that? She pulled back and shook her head. No, she couldn’t imagine Lily dead, despite all of the evidence, all the things people had been telling her. It seemed more nightmare than real.

Ruby’s gaze travelled between her and Gage and back to her.

“This is Gage Harrison. He knew Lily too.”

“Why do they have us here? What do they need us to know? The woman who brought me in said that they had information they wanted to share with me in case the media came around asking questions. Does this have to do with Lily’s affair with Senator Billings, do you think?”

“Why don’t we sit down?” Zoe pulled out a chair and slid into the seat.

Gage followed suit. “I’m trying to understand what brought us together too. We were told that you introduced Lily to the senator?”

“That’s right. I did. Do you think people are trying to hold me accountable for their affair? That would be...I don’t want to be embroiled in this.”

“None of us do. Let’s see if we can’t help each other figure this out,” Gage said. “You and Lily weren’t close friends, were you?”

“No.” Ruby shook her head. “In college, yes, but she married outside of the Jewish faith, and my husband didn’t like that. It caused tension. Lily and I were estranged until I learned that Lily divorced her husband. Sal thought it would be okay for us to bring her back into our lives, that maybe we could get her involved in our work with the USIPAC, and she would meet a nice man she could settle down with.”

“Yet Senator Billings is a Christian,” Gage said.

“That introduction was happenstance. I never thought that Lily would have an affair with the man. He was married. He was twice her age.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “He’s not exactly in the best shape.” She sat up again. “My mind never went in that direction.”

“Recently, you and Lily were getting together frequently, several times a week.” Gage tried to lead her in the direction they needed her to go.

Ruby's brows knit, she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back. "Now how exactly would you know that?"

"Did you know that Lily and I were roommates?" Zoe inquired.

"No." Ruby seemed to relax. "She didn't tell me that."

"Did Lily talk about me with you?" Zoe watched Ruby quickly look up to the right, then she shook her head. "No. No, you didn't come up."

"What *did* come up in your time with Lily? You were helping her help your friend, Senator Billings, weren't you?"

"How do you know all this?"

"Lily and I were roommates." Zoe was offering a false door for Ruby to walk through. True, Lily and Zoe had been roommates, but Lily had never mentioned anything about Ruby. By juxtaposing the statement with Ruby's question, Ruby would assume it was the answer to her question, and Zoe wouldn't need to lie. She hated to lie.

"Did Lily seek out your expertise in forensic auditing to help her find information for the senator?" Gage asked.

"Yes, she did. And I was helping. Of course, I was."

"And you talked to someone else about this, didn't you?" he asked.

Ruby went pink. Her hand slid to her throat. "What is this?" she whispered. "Why are we really here?"

Zoe reached out and took Ruby's hand. "I'm here because I'm scared, to be honest. Lily told someone something, and it's putting lives at risk. The people here are telling me that Lily was murdered. That it wasn't an accident at all."

Ruby's eyebrows stretched toward her hairline. "The news said she committed suicide."

Zoe looked her in the eye and thought she saw fear but also guilt. "What did you do, Ruby? You told someone something. And you told them my name."

Ruby just stared at her, dumbfounded.

"People came to my condo to kidnap me." Gage gave her knee a warning squeeze. She must be disclosing too much. She was supposed to leave it to him and his field interrogation skills. But she couldn't seem to sit back and let him take over. "I can't go home. I'm terrified. Ruby, help me. Tell me what you did so I know how to be safe."

Ruby opened her mouth and shut it again. She pulled her hand from Zoe's and clutched it to her chest. "Lily was *killed*?" Her hands came up to cover her face. "You were attacked?"

Zoe reached out and pulled Ruby's hands away so she could look Ruby in the eye. "You made a mistake. You can help to correct it. Please, tell me."

"I'm sure that's not right. I didn't speak to anyone in the United States. I only spoke to my cousin because he's studying the same thing you are."

"What am I studying?" Zoe asked. "What did you tell him?"

"That you developed a means of identification through blood that's more useful than DNA because it's a quick and dirty, yes or no kind of test, and that you had developed a system like CODIS to index your findings. He's trying to do this—has been working on this for decades. I thought he could come and speak to you and get a direction for his work. Maybe you could collaborate."

"Lily told you that's what I do?"

"Your name is on the files that she was able to find to give to the senator."

"You said you spoke to no one in the United States. Where does your cousin live?" Gage asked.

"Jerusalem."

Zoe could feel his tension rising. “And when was this phone call?”

“This past Wednesday, late afternoon, is when I spoke with him.”

“Wednesday, you’re sure? Not earlier than that?”

“I promise you that’s when I called. See?” She pulled her phone from her purse and showed Gage the number. She’d called at 16:39, almost midnight in Israel.

“Thank you, Ruby. This is helpful to our timeline. Is there anything else you told your cousin besides the information about the biomarkers?”

“He asked if the program was already being implemented, and I said yes, for years now, and he wondered what new project Zoe was working on.”

“And what did you tell him?” Gage asked.

Zoe was astonished that Gage had kept his face so placid, like he didn’t really know what was going on. He, like Zoe, was a friend of Lily’s who’d got caught up in something scary. She needed to think later about the ease with which he slid into this role and how simple he seemed to find it to maintain. But not now. Now she needed to know how her secrets were being shared.

Ruby’s voice was so low that both she and Gage had to lean in until they were almost head to head to hear her. “I told him you were working on a new program for the CIA. With your new weapon, you can remotely pinpoint people for assassination. I told him that was the technology that he should be developing.”

“Wait.” Zoe sat straight up. “That’s not true. That’s not what I do. Why would you tell him that?”

“It *is* what you do. It was in one of the files that Lily shared with me when we were trying to follow the money trail for the Senate hearings. The CIA had come to an agreement on the price they would pay Montrim to have you develop your microrobotics in this direction.”

Zoe felt a noose tightening around her neck. Her voice could hardly squeak through. “And you told all this to your cousin?”

“Yes, but Zoe...” This time it was Ruby who was reaching out with placating hands, petting arms, clutching at her fingers. “He is very circumspect. He would never tell anyone. I just thought it might be interesting for him to come and see what you were doing, I thought Lily wouldn’t mind introducing you two and that it might be a good project for him to be involved with. We are, after all, allies. Friends. But then Lily...” Her voice drifted off and her eyes filled with tears.

“The Israelis think that I’m building a remote killing machine?”

Ruby swiped her wrist across her eyelids and sniffed loudly. “Aren’t you?”

“No. I am most certainly *not*. I’m not developing anything with the CIA.”

“Well, what are you working on?” Ruby looked thoroughly confused.

“Field forensics analysis of blood stains.”

“Oh. Well, that is very different.” Ruby glanced around, tears streaming down her face. Her gaze landed on a box of tissues.

Gage followed her line of sight and went to retrieve the box for her. “Why did you think that Zoe would share a project like that with the Israeli government?”

“Not the government. I was only thinking of my cousin, the researcher.”

“Still.”

“Well, the Israelis are furious with the Americans over the new Iran agreement, and of course, the billion and a half dollars given to the Iranian government.”

“It’s Iranian money, not American money,” Gage said.

“That’s completely irrelevant. Now the Iranians have over a billion dollars to use against Israel, and a goodwill gesture from the US might help. Who knows? I put a toe in the water to see.”

Zoe looked at Gage who had the same incredulous look on his face as what she felt. This was a stunning revelation. Were the Israeli's responsible for killing Lily and trying to kidnap her? Were they going to take her out of the United States to Israel? Away from any kind of support or help? How could Zoe stuff that cat back in the bag and convince people that she wasn't making a remote killing machine?



## GAGE



The more Gage heard, the deeper he saw the hole that Zoe had fallen into. Releasing her name, releasing her research, of course she was going to be the focus of international intrigue. He was only glad that they were dealing with the possibility of an ally being embroiled in all this. What if a different government figured out Zoe's ability with possibly lethal microrobots? A country where they had little leverage, like Iran or Russia?

Gage's mind flashed back to Thursday evening as he was getting in from field training. It had been a shit kind of day. The team he was working to build wasn't gelling. They were nowhere near ready to be sent out on missions, but their training was coming to an end. Stressed out, the text from Zoe had instantly brightened his day. Sure, he could provide her with "a little stress relief." He'd enjoy some of that too. He had been grinning broadly when he used the key Zoe had offered him once Lily moved out. It felt like coming home, to slide *his* key into the lock, to hear the click, to know there was a beautiful woman in her bed waiting for him.

Then the scream. He'd been stumbling around mostly blind ever since. Learning things about Zoe, learning things about himself and how deeply he was aligned with her. How much he needed to keep her safe. How *personally* threatening this all seemed. To know someone was training their sights on Zoe gave him the same feeling he had on the battlefield when he knew he was caught in someone's crosshairs.

"Do you have any copies of what Lily found at Montrim?" Gage pulled himself together enough to ask Ruby the question.

"No. Nothing. She showed me and took it all away with her when she left. It was mostly us trying to follow the money trails. Accounting ledgers. The information I shared with my cousin is a tiny portion of a much bigger picture."

"Speaking of pictures, I have one I'd like you to look at." Gage reached over to the seat beside him and pulled out an eight by ten color photo of a tattoo. Gage watched Ruby's face carefully as he placed the image in front of her.

She pulled it over and frowned, wiping away the last of her tears, the clutching at her Kleenex. "Someone tattooed that on themselves?"

"You recognize it then?" Gage asked.

"This is based on a form of the Sephirot. It comes from the divine tradition of the Kabbalah that is associated with an esoteric group back around the time of the Crusades. It has to do with the Knights Templar, which some say was a group actually formed by Jews to protect priceless treasures."

Gage lifted a brow, silently asking for more information.

"Some historians believe that there was a group of European royalty who were descendants of Jewish Elders who had fled the Holy Land before the first century of the Common Era, when the area was invaded by the Romans."

"What kinds of treasure?" Zoe asked.

"Oh, not what you'd think. Not chests of gold and jewels. They were priceless Kabbalistic and Essene scrolls that had been secretly stored around various regions of the Holy Land to guard them

from being plundered as spoils of war by the Roman invader Titus.”

“Titus?” Zoe glanced toward the wall of two-way mirrors where Titus was listening.

“Yes, that’s right. When the Elders fled Titus, they married into the European continents noble families. According to lore, twenty-four men would eventually become the leaders known as the *Rex Deus* or sometimes called the Star families.” She tapped the picture where the design had a definite star shape. “They formed into the Knights Templar, not to be crusaders in the common sense of the word, but to retrieve the treasures. The legend says that those who survived through the crusades continued using the name *Rex Deus*, becoming the Jewish Illuminati, and their descendants secretly rule the world.”

“Does this group really exist? The *Rex Deus*?” Gage asked.

“No. It’s the stuff of conspiracy theories and wild imaginations. It’s a way to tell people that the Jews have a secret international banking system that rules the world and all kinds of other scary things that make people suspect Jewish people of great malevolence. With Sal’s and my work with USIPAC, we’re trying to fight stereotypes.” She tapped the photo again. “This upsets me. I don’t like to think that there are people playing with the concept of *Rex Deus*.” She stopped and looked from him to Zoe. “Now that I’ve told you what I know, what do you know? Who has this tattoo? How did you get this picture?”

Ruby was looking at Zoe, but of course, Zoe had no clue. She batted her long eyelashes at Ruby, looking like a doe in the headlights.

“It was on a man’s arm who was recently taken prisoner,” Gage said. “It ties back to Lily, and we’d like to know how. Could your cousin have anything to do with this group?” He pushed the photo closer to her.

“Isaac? Oh no, he isn’t involved in anything but his laboratory. His head in a book. His eye to a microscope. Nothing else exists for him.”

They all stared at each other. Zoe looked like she was in shock. Gage didn’t know what else to wring out of this woman. The silence was becoming embarrassing when a knock sounded on the door.

“Hello,” Margot said with her big smile. “I have word that your car has been driven around by the valet. It’s outside the atrium.” She held out her hand toward Ruby.

“Aren’t they coming?” Ruby stood and gathered her purse.

“They’ll be done soon,” Margot said, holding the door and gesturing Ruby out.

As Ruby moved into the hallway, she glanced over her shoulder with deep concern in her eyes.

Zoe didn’t move as Margot shut the door. She didn’t say anything. She sat staring at the wall. Gage knew that she’d gone inside her head, wrestling with this new information. But the thought that Ruby’s cousin was out there with high-level, beyond top secret information, possibly putting the BIOMIST program at risk, spiked adrenaline through his system. They needed to jump on that and jump on it now.

Gage moved to the door and opened it a crack to peek into the hallway. “Okay, Zoe.” He held out his hand. “Let’s go next door and see what they think.”

In the observation room, the men stood in a loose circle. Titus was on the phone in the corner.

“The *Rex Deus*? Descendants of the Knights *freaking* Templar? Is this going to get any more nuts?” Brainiack asked.

“Who’s he on the phone with?” Gage lifted his chin toward Titus.

“The CIA,” Prescott said in a voice that said what they all knew. This had started out bad and kept getting worse. “Titus needs to give them a heads up to go sit on this cousin. We can’t have Zoe’s name out there, and we can’t let him spread the word about BIOMIST or the RoboSphecius.”

“Right. But this cousin...” Gage scrubbed a hand over his forehead. “Shit! I didn’t get his name.”

“Yeah, you did.” Brainiack leaned back in the captain’s chair. “You held the phone under our optics, and we got a screen shot of the number. Nutsbe traced it. We’ve got all his vital stats, and they’re being passed to the right people. Things’ll be fine.”

“You guys sure do work fast,” Zoe said.

Brainiack turned to her. “We don’t have the luxury of slow, ma’am.”

“The cousin isn’t responsible for the ops group coming after Zoe.” Gage paced the small confines of the room. “He didn’t have time to find the right contact, bring it to their attention.”

Titus tucked his phone back in its holster and joined them. “Agreed,” he said to Gage before he turned to Zoe. “The CIA is going to squash that bug, Zoe. They’ll keep this quiet.”

She nodded her head vigorously.

“We need to look elsewhere for the group that came after Lily and Zoe. Who needed Lily dead? And who needs Zoe off-grid?”

“Montrim is under fire from the Senate committee. They could lose their federal paycheck. That would basically put them out of business,” Prescott said. “It’s not a stretch to think they’d kill Lily. It certainly doesn’t explain Zoe.”

“Zoe, do you remember earlier you were telling us a story about Lily and you having dinner when she was in DC to interview for a job.” Titus had added a worry line to his scowl. “And you also mentioned WASPs.”

“Lily asked for an update over dinner. I started on the WASPs in grad school. They had no military tie at the time, so I wasn’t keeping my research on them secret.”

Titus pressed her, “But they became secret. They became above top secret, right?”

“Where are you going with this?” she asked.

“What was your answer to her about the WASPs.”

“That I was under DARPA contract and couldn’t discuss it.”

Titus put his knuckles on the table and leaned in. “And you were working on that at Montrim, in rented research space, but Montrim had no connection to your research, so they had no idea what you were working on.”

“That’s right.” Zoe looked at him, baffled.

Gage saw where Titus was going. “Did you eat dinner with Lily before her job interview or after?”

“Before.” She scrunched her brows together. “Do you think Lily used her connection with me to land her job?”

“What if she knew the secret of what was behind door number one, and she shared it with Montrim? They had to learn about what you were doing somehow.”

“Why do you think they know about the WASPs?” Zoe asked.

“They were negotiating with the CIA. They were supposed to gain access to your work, and then the Montrim microroboticists would rework your designs to meet the CIA parameters of use,” Gage told her.

Zoe looked like she might puke. Gage pulled a chair around and pressed her into it.

“Wait. Do we know which direction that came from?” Brainiack asked. “Did the CIA approach Montrim? Or did Montrim approach the CIA? I’d love to have been a fly on the wall for that discussion.” Brainiack turned red around the ears and turned to Zoe. “Sorry, ma’am, I didn’t mean to joke. It was a figure of speech.”



Zoe sent him a smile, but her face was still pale. Brainiack noticed too, because he turned and poured a glass of water from one of the bottles on the buffet and pressed it into her hand.

“Lily told the reporter that Billings had copies of what she was handing to the reporter.” Brainiack said. “Maybe we can find out more in that direction.”

“Asked and answered,” Titus told them. “Margot tried to get him to share the information Lily gathered when she was taking him down to his car. Billings is claiming they can’t release copies to us because we aren’t officially read into the CIA program, and we shouldn’t know anything that’s going on in a sealed Senate chamber.”

“And yet he wanted Lily to hand the evidence to a reporter and made the call to facilitate that.” Gage wished he was back in a room alone with the senator. He’d help the guy see reason.

“It makes sense,” Prescott said. “Billings couldn’t release this himself, so he needed a whistleblower to do it in order to keep his hands clean from any sign of sharing State secrets.”

Everyone stilled as Titus’s phone buzzed. “Titus here. What have you got, Honey? I’m putting you on speakerphone.” He held the phone in the flat of his palm.

“We had *carte blanche* with our search warrants.” There was a decided grin in the man’s resonant voice. His team had obviously had fun with the shake. “You asked us to put the apartment on the Richter scale, sir. If we shook it any harder, the whole building would have collapsed.”

“You cover your tracks?”

“We went in as a renovation team. If you can believe renovators would be pulling down drywall this time on a Friday evening, then we’re covered.” His booming laugh filled the room.

“And?” Titus cut him off.

“Negative, sir,” Honey snapped back to military precision. “There was no manila envelope of any kind in either location. As a matter of fact, there wasn’t even much in the way of paper in either locale. The apartment looked like it was all window dressing. He kept it as depersonalized as a motel room. His office is paper free. There’s not even a computer system in there. He must carry a laptop with him. We’re guessing the envelope is in his car.”

“Nutsbe.” Titus raised his voice. “The guy went home, to his office and then directly to the farm?”

Nutsbe responded over a speaker system. “Yes, sir.”

“Let’s pull that farm up on satellite and see what we’ve got going there. All right, I need Panther Force in battle rattle, pronto. We can’t leave that envelope in the wind. It’s fucking dangerous.”

“I’m in,” Gage said, knowing it was a long shot that he’d be allowed.

“You haven’t signed the contract, Gage. You’re a liability. You stay here with Zoe. Have some dinner, try to relax.”

The thought of relaxing while that envelope was in Israeli hands didn’t sit well. Not being part of the team didn’t either. “What if I signed?”

“It’s bad to make life choices based on adrenaline and momentary goals,” Titus said.

Gage knew Titus was right, was giving him good counsel. But Gage had been on the fence for weeks. And now, seeing Iniquus in operation, seeing the team in play? Yeah. He was in. “I’ve been making up my mind ever since you showed up at the hospital. If this is what you do, I’m your man.”

Titus considered him, then with a nod said, “Margot, facilitate Major Harrison’s Iniquus contracts and get him fitted out in tactical gear. Double time.”

“Sir.” She caught Gage’s eye and headed toward the door. Gage gave Zoe’s shoulder a squeeze, dropped a kiss into her hair, and whispered, “I’ll see you in a little bit. Please get some more rest.” Then he followed after Margot, glad to know he’d be boots on the ground.

As he moved toward the door, he heard Titus ask, “Prescott you in or you out?”

“You get warrants in hand, and I’m in.”

“Nutsbe, you on that?” Titus asked.

“On it.” Nutsbe’s disembodied voice came through the speaker.

Prescott was right behind him as Gage moved through the door. “I think I’d like to interrogate Schultz, now.” Prescott said. “Wring out some intel. See what we’re headed into.”



## GAGE

• • • •

“Gage? Hey, man, I’m Honey.” The man to his right stood almost seven feet tall and was built for the gridiron. He held up his fist and Gage tapped it with his. They were doing weapons checks in the Panther war room.

The man next to him raised a fist as well. “Dude, your glow is blinding me. You’ll want to kick some dust on them shiny new boots.”

Gage bumped his fist.

“I’m Thorn,” the man continued. “We’re a man down at the moment, glad to have you mix it up with the team. Give us a chance to see the newbie in action. Welcome aboard.”

“Special Agent Prescott’s going to be riding shotgun tonight, so Sunday manners,” Titus said. “He’s finishing up his intel roundup with our prisoner. Here’s the deal, we aren’t looking for any blood tonight. We just need to get our hands on the Mercedes. That car is the only thing covered in our search warrant. We will not be entering the residence.”

Nutsbe put up a graphic. “We need to go in now rather than later. It’s a matter of satellite coverage with the weather pattern that’s moving in. Besides, no one wants the possibility of a gunfight in a sleet storm. That’s the bad news. The good news is, it’s a new moon, and we have thick cloud cover. It’s going to be as black as ink, boys.”

Titus moved to the graphic. “We’re staging a tow truck down here around this bend. The plan is to roll the car over, hook it up, drive it out. One of our easier nights. But that doesn’t mean complacency. This group is Israeli Special Forces trained. Granted, they’ve been MIA for about a decade. They’ve got some age on their bodies and maybe not the same level of training they had back in their military days. But let’s not think we’re wrestling with Grandpa. We’ve had three bodies to look over, and they’re all hard as rocks. Maybe even put you princesses to shame.”

Titus moved over to the picture of the Israeli unit. “If this team stayed intact, we’ve kicked the hornets’ nest by taking out four members. Gage went hand-to-hand with the first two, and Brainiack sniped the other. Levi Schultz is in our tank on his blind date with Prescott.”

“That leaves possibly eight left,” Brainiack said.

“Seems fair. There are seven of us who’ll be boots on the ground too, counting Prescott and Gage.” Thorn yawned. “I like a little challenge.”

“Let’s not get cocky. They were trained to be some of the most lethal Special Ops in the world. This is their hidey hole. Imagine what we’d do to make our home safe. And gentlemen, we don’t have the luxury of time or intel.” Titus put his knuckles on the table and made sure he caught each and every one of them in his glare.

Panther Force was comprised of elite military operators. He and Titus were trained Marine Raiders. The others were all Special Forces from various branches—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Their Ranger was out on loan to Strike Force, a fraternal Iniquus unit. Hence, one man down. They were the best of the best, and Gage was honored to be invited to join. Gage knew that though they were messing around, keeping things light so they were in good mental shape when they were under the gun, each and every one of them had lost brothers out on the battlefield to hidden

threats. It went part and parcel with the job. But it meant that this easy camaraderie would be swapped for battle faces once they were in place.

Thorn grinned broadly. “One thing we do have, though, is a set of Mercedes GLC SUV keys that the guy kept in his wall safe.” He fished them out of his pocket. “That should take care of the alarm system and shifting it into neutral.”

“Careful, these guys are big into booby traps. It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye,” Nutsbe said.

“Thanks, Mom.” Thorn slapped him on the shoulder and reached for a banana from the buffet filled with food.

The men were wolfing down burgers and power shakes, making sure they had the fuel for whatever lay ahead. Margot had taken Zoe down to the cafeteria. They were going to go back to Margot’s apartment in the women’s dorm and hang out there until the team got back. That was as far as their planning had gone. If nothing else, at least he knew Zoe’d be safe here on the Iniquus campus.

Prescott moved into the room. “Well, the guy’s a brick wall. His SERE training—survival, evasion, resistance, escape—was in full swing. I got his alias repeated back at me about a hundred times. We talked about how he could resist his little heart out, but he was heading down the CIA hole and the only chance for better treatment was timely information.”

“And?” Titus asked.

“I learned he can spit like a camel.”

“Nice. Anything else?”

“We had him hooked up to a polygraph. I concluded that he hasn’t handed over the envelope. We played twenty questions for a while.” Prescott grabbed a burger from the platter and took a bite. “I think the smell of steak on the grill and fresh baked bread you had wafting in was a nice touch. Made me hungry as a horse, and the sound of the guy’s stomach gurgling was echoing off the walls.” Prescott moved to the map. “I’m guessing from the polygraph that we’re facing seven members of his unit.” He stopped and took another bite of his burger. Speaking between chews, he said, “They’re all housed in the same place. Arms? They’re loaded. They’ve got flashbang, grenades, MP5s, AKs, side arms, and dogs.”

The men threw their hands in the air.

Brainiack gave voice to men’s thoughts. “Shit, man, are you kidding me? I hate when they have dogs.”

“Steaks and tranqs,” Nutsbe said.

“And time. All that takes time,” Thorn added.

Gage was focused on Prescott. “Did you ask about booby traps?”

“That one, I couldn’t tell. Either they had them, and he wanted to hide it bad, or they didn’t have them, and he wanted me to think they did. That’s a crap shoot. I’d assume we’ll be tiptoeing through a minefield, ladies.”

• • • •

THE TOW TRUCK WAS ALREADY in place around the bend. Honey got the short straw and was twiddling his thumbs behind the wheel. The rest of the team lay on their bellies in the brittle weeds. The December cold seeped through their battle gear and into their bones. They did a comms check. Gage’s transmitter wrapped around his throat, his receiver was dropped into his ear canal. He was hands free as he whispered, “Gage, check.”

Thorn was apparently the team's dog whisperer. He had laid piles of steak, carefully seasoned with a sedative that would kick in after twenty minutes, and a powder that would disarm their sense of smell immediately and make them dizzy as hell in the process. Now Thorn was off in the trees. The wind carried the slight tinny note of a dog whistle along with the smell of raw beef toward the house.

As a beautiful German shepherd pushed his way past the man holding the door, Gage was glad that their treats were in no way lethal. It would simply buy the team some time and ensure safety for the dogs as well as for the men.

Through the binoculars on his night vision apparatus, Gage watched the man dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt cast his gaze over the field. The guy's arm hugged tightly to his chest in a sling, and Gage could see the corner of a large dressing sticking out of his shirt's neck hole. Gage guessed that this was the man he'd shot earlier. Gage hoped the guy was loopy on pain meds and had lost his observation skills and some of the sixth sense that warriors developed over time in hostile surroundings. Would the guy go in and announce their presence, or were they still under the radar? Thorn was smart to put the meat on the other side of the rise where the man couldn't follow the line of sight.

A second dog pushed past the man, a third, and a fourth. Then he shut the door. Gage watched to see if there was any change to the farmhouse. Lights that suddenly snapped on or off. Movement at the curtains. He thought they'd probably gotten away with the ruse, the guy didn't attempt to call the dogs in. The evening was still but for the last of the brown leaves rustling in the wind.

Thorn, from his location, reported over the comms. "Beta One. The dogs are all high as loons. I put on the harnesses and have them chained in the woods. Even if things take longer than expected, the most they can do is raise hell with their barking. But most likely, they'll just sleep it off."

"Base. Panther Force, be aware cloud cover's giving us satellite problems. I'm getting intermittent visual. I've got your locations from your tracking units on screen. Everyone is in position."

"Panther actual. Copy," Titus whispered over the comms. "Alpha team, go."

Gage was Alpha One and Brainiack was Alpha Two. They had drawn the long straws and got to go after the car. The others were at vantage points with their eyes on the windows and doors. Nutsbe was back in the war room with his bird's eye view up on the screen.

Gage had a Glock in his side holster and another at his ankle. If things got bad, they could and would defend themselves. But Titus and Prescott wanted anyone who got in their way captured, not killed. To that end, he'd been handed a stun rifle. He'd never seen, let alone used one before. He knew that the Marines had asked for the development of this weapon for room-clearing operations, and to be able to take potential threats into custody using non-lethal means. Gage would have liked to have used it at least once on a firing range before trying it in the field. The shell for the twelve-gauge shotgun had a range of only a hundred feet. That was damned close if he was going up against an MP5.

"Alpha team, move."

"Alpha One, moving," Gage whispered back as he belly crawled toward the side of the barn. Brainiack repeated the answer, and they both squirmed from their observation points toward the Mercedes.

Brainiack had the fob and would push and steer from the front as Gage shoved from the rear. The Mercedes was parked at the top of a gravel-lined drive, and while the decline made pushing easier, the gravel was a definite deficit. There was no way to move the car silently. The trees lining the drive

meant there was no space to maneuver the car onto dirt or grass. "Come on, wind. This would be a good time to pick up the noise level," Gage muttered under his breath.

Brainiack hit the key fob, somehow timing it with a flash of lightning, hiding the chirrup behind a boom of thunder. Brainiack quickly popped open the driver's side door and slammed the light switch to off.

The farmhouse door banged open. Gage threw himself flat, squirming under the edge of the fender where the dim house light created a shadow. From his position, he could see the same man who had let the dogs out before. His good hand wrapped around the collar of a massive Rottweiler. The dog was barking and lunging, his fangs gnashing at the air. The man whistled. Waited. Whistled again. Then he let the dog go, and he banged the door shut. They were made.

"Go. Go. Go," he whisper-yelled to Brainiack. Brainiack had one hand on the door frame and the other on the steering wheel. Gage came up into a lunge, pushing with all his weight into the back of the car to get it rolling down the hill, falling forward as he did. Through his night vision goggles, Gage saw the dog at the corner of the barn, staring at him. The Rottweiler's massive muscles vibrated. His mouth frothed with saliva. Gage could feel the growls in his bones as they rumbled through the air, low and threatening. Gage knew he had one shot at not getting mauled. With a twist of his torso, he grabbed for the rifle, pulled it to his shoulder and fired off an electrical shell as the dog leapt toward his throat. The device hit the dog's thigh and was quickly shaken off. The Rottweiler took off in the opposite direction, whimpering his surprise and pain. Gage was relieved that he didn't have to use a bullet to save himself.

The slow crunch of gravel in the distance told Gage that Brainiack was making good progress.

"Beta one. I've got the dog," Thorn's voice came over his comms. "I'm chaining him up with his buddies. He's going to get a steak and sleeping pill reward for coming right over to me when I called."

Relief was short-lived.

Flashbang exploded where the Mercedes had once been. Gage had been scanning the area with his night vision goggles when his optic nerves exploded into an inferno. All he could hear was the squeal of his ears ringing. A thick blanket of smoke choked him. Blindly he rolled toward the barn, hoping for something sturdy at his back while his system fought the overwhelming stimulus.

He was on his knees, gagging up the toxic sludge that he had breathed in, when the sound of firepower seeped through the cacophony. The terse communications of his teammates resonated in his ear, but he couldn't make out the words. He staggered up to crouching position then snaked his way along the length of the old barn. Gage put the stun rifle to his shoulder before rounding the corner, thinking what a piece of shit this damned thing was with its hundred-foot range, when that strafe of bullets being laid down was coming from a submachine gun. Gage yanked the rifle strap so the weapon swung to his back. He pulled his Glock from his side holster.

Gage's aim was the tree line and some concealment while he got himself back to operational. He blew the stress from his lungs, and with his Glock squeezed between his palms, his finger ready to pull the trigger, he rounded the corner to find himself nose to nose with a figure. Gage's momentum was already swinging right, so he extended and continued the gesture, bringing the butt of his Glock into someone's temple. The guy toppled into the barn wall and used it for leverage to spring back at Gage, knocking the gun from his hand.

The night was pitch black and his eyes were still burning. Gage couldn't get a visual of who was on top of him. What weapons were on hand, what was nearby. Someone slammed their fist into his cheek bone. He rolled and could feel the second punch hit the ground where his head had just been.

From the feel of the man's clothing, Gage knew he wasn't going hand to hand with a friendly. This person wasn't wearing the Iniquus uniform. Gage locked his legs around the guy and flipped him over, crawled up his body until he was sitting on the tango's chest. Gage pinned the man's shoulders under his knees. With the advantage of space and height, Gage pummeled the guy until his target stopped writhing beneath him. He rolled the unconscious man onto his stomach and pulled out a pair of flexi-cuffs.

Flexi-cuffs, Gage reasoned, would do little against a seasoned special ops guy. He'd just jump up and run to the nearest sharp object. Gage grabbed the man by the collar and dragged him into the woods. Gage stretched the man's arms over his head with a sizable tree between them and locked him in place lying on his back. Gage scrambled down and did the same with the man's legs. This combatant was trussed and ready for Prescott to pick him up.

"Alpha team, sitrep." Gage heard Titus's voice in his ear, still garbled but at least understandable.

"Alpha One. I've taken custody of one tango. Over."

"Alpha Two. The car is loaded on the flatbed, moving. Over."

"Beta team, sitrep," Titus called.

Prescott answered first. "Beta Two. I have custody of one male with an earlier bullet wound. He's sustained another. Medic required. Over."

"Beta One," Thorn said. "Dogs secured and sleeping. I have a bead on a guy who's sneaking around the right side of the house."

"Nutsbe. Beta Two, be advised that has him rounding on you."

The angry sound of electrical sparks filled the air, along with the garbled screams of a man.

"Beta Two. Taking the guy into custody now. I'm liking these stun rifles," Prescott said.

"Panther actual." Titus came over the comms. "I'm moving toward you to take hold of your captures. Since you have the badge, Prescott, I'm going to let you take lead on the house search. Now that we've been fired upon, I'd say we have probable cause for securing the place. I'll lock the prisoners down, then we'll stack up and finish this mission."





## GAGE

••••

Gage stood in the infirmary while the medic gave him the required onceover. He had a pretty good bruise on his cheekbone, but the tango he'd wrestled had lost four teeth. Gage would take that for an outcome most days of the week. The good news was that they had all three tangos alive and kicking their shackles, each in their own interrogation rooms. Turned out the guy who took his second bullet in less than twenty-four hours was just grazed. The medics stitched him up, gave him some antibiotics, and called it a day. His wound from the exfil house looked like homegrown surgery. If he hadn't chosen to go to the hospital for that, no reason why they should force the guy to go now.

Thorn had crated the dogs, and had them transported to the Iniquus kennels for a vet check and housing. Prescott was elsewhere, applying his interrogation magic. His FBI team was fine-tooth combing the farmhouse. Brainiack and Honey were doing the same with the Mercedes in the Iniquus garage. Hopefully, the teams would have news soon. Solid information about what was going on, and where the five other soldiers from the unit were located now.

Gage and Titus left together and walked to the women's barracks where Zoe was waiting for them. The women's dorm was designed to look like a McMansion on the

"Gage and Titus came to get you," Margot said softly. Potomac River. They took the front steps two at a time and knocked on the door. Margot opened it, and without a word, turned to get Zoe. The men weren't allowed in. Women only. Gage could see Margot shaking Zoe awake where she was curled under a throw blanket at the end of the sofa.

A few moments later, Zoe was at the door. Her eyes widened at the sight of the bruise and scratches on his face. When she locked her eyes on his, she seemed to find the answers to her unspoken questions. She nodded and accepted his wounds. There was none of the hysteria he'd experienced with past women in his life. No babying and sympathy. And Gage appreciated being treated like a man instead of a boy who needed mothering.

Titus left the porch as Zoe and Gage thanked Margot, then they moved as a unit to Titus's Hummer, heading to the new safe house.

••••

"NO FOOD AT THE HOUSE, so we need to run by the grocery store to get something for tonight and breakfast in the morning. We can fill the fridge tomorrow. Zoe, this might end up being your home for a while."

"Thank you," Zoe said, still looking out the side window.

"Did you have dinner? Are you hungry?" Titus asked. "It's late, but I'm sure I can find some fast food if you can't wait for Gage and me to cook."

"I'm not hungry, but thank you." Her voice was too soft.

Gage remembered her trembling under the metallic rescue blanket. He didn't want them to be making another emergency run to the hospital. It was too hard to secure her there.

"When we get to the store, I'll just run in real quick, is that okay, Titus?"

“You can do the shopping.” He pulled into an all-night grocery store. “We all need to get out here, though. We’re changing cars. We’ll go in this door.” He pointed to the far door near where they had parked in the shadows. “And out the pharmacy door on the other side of the building. I’ll escort Zoe. Gage, when you come out, you’ll see a blue Oldsmobile, lots of rust, looks like a piece of shit, but that’s just its cover. It’s a good machine.”

As they walked through the automatic doors, Gage turned to Zoe and asked, “What do you want to eat?”

“Anything is fine.” Zoe’s eyes were scanning the walls.

Gage wanted a straight answer. He was too damned tired to be playing games. “Zoe, I don’t want to go get eggs and bacon and bring it back and have you pout because you didn’t want eggs and bacon. Just answer me.”

The look she sent him showed confusion. “Who are you talking to right now?”

“You!” His voice boomed louder than he’d expected.

“No, you’re not. I’ve never pouted over food you’ve brought me. This isn’t some kind of test. I’m not playing games. If you brought me a jar of pickles, I’d eat them. I. Don’t. Care.”

That was Zoe, clearly and rationally pointing out the facts. Of course, she was right, she didn’t set traps for him to fall into.

“I’m going to the ladies’ room.” She pointed to their left and walked away.

“Gage, you’ve found yourself one hell of a woman,” Titus said as he and Gage followed her. “She doesn’t say much, but what she says is what she means. Who wouldn’t love that?”

Some Neanderthal instinct roused in Gage the need to stake his claim. This was *his* woman. Ha. Zoe was her own woman. He was along for the ride. Gage worked to squash the feelings, knowing that he’d been on his own adrenaline rollercoaster with no sleep, and it was affecting him like it would anyone else on the team. This was not the time to tick off his new boss.

“But take my advice,” Titus was saying. “Get her something other than a jar of pickles.”

Gage loped off.

“Oh, and pick up some beer,” Titus called after him.

• • • •

TITUS TURNED THE PIECE of shit car into the long drive. A little yellow house sat in the middle of a wide field, positioned like a postage stamp on an envelope. On three sides, there was a thick copse of trees, shielding the house from its neighbors. It was the very last house on the street that had a cul-de-sac for people who mistakenly arrived at the dead end. It was a great set up, Gage thought. Easily defended.

The driveway curved around the back of the house, and Titus pressed a button near his mirror to power up the garage door. A gunmetal grey Iniquus SUV was parked inside.

“Gage, why don’t you sit tight? I’m going to go give the house a quick run through, and once I’ve determined it’s safe, you can park next to the Tahoe.” The implication being that if it wasn’t safe, he should take Zoe and get the hell gone.

Gage moved to the driver’s seat and repositioned the car so he had the option of backing into the garage or speeding forward. Zoe was back in Zoe-land, and he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, thinking back to the grocery store conversation.

Zoe? While she was as tantalizing and sexy as the sway of a hula dancer’s hips, she was also self-contained. Yeah, there was something undeniably... He couldn’t pull out the right word. She didn’t fit a form or pattern. He bet that freaked guys out—that they weren’t able to mold and manipulate her

into something more recognizable, something that they had a better handle on. That wasn't Zoe. She didn't need translating into his language, he needed to learn hers, just as she learned his.

He thought about the Skype calls she'd had in her living room while she thought he was asleep—how free she was, gabbing with her friends. How goofy and funny. Laughter in every word. He wanted to have that with her. Sometimes. Not all the time. He liked how she looked up at the ceiling with that little frown between her eyes as she worked out some conundrum. She could sit that way for hours. Now he knew what kinds of thoughts filled her head. When he'd realized what she did for a living, Gage couldn't say he was surprised. It was like a puzzle piece falling into place.

He was proud of how fiercely she defended innocent people. How she put her amazing brain to work every day to keep them safe. Yeah. Zoe being Zoe, in all of her facets, he wanted to be the guy who got to stand next to her and watch her shine. He rubbed his hands over his thighs and looked up to see Titus waving them in. *Shit, I've got it bad.*

After scooping up the grocery bags, Gage followed Zoe through the garage and into a small hallway. Bathroom to the right. Laundry to the left. Then a great room with living, dining, and kitchen.

"I'll cook," he said, moving into the kitchen and putting the ingredients for dinner on the counter and the ingredients for breakfast in the fridge. He found a cutting board and knife and switched on the oven to warm the loaf of bread he'd purchased.

In the living room, Titus moved to the flat screen TV and turned it on. "Let's see what the news is saying about the events of the day." He moved to the couch and sat.

To Gage's surprise, Zoe didn't go up the stairs to look around, but went to sit on the other end of the couch.

The newscaster was concluding his remarks on Senator Billings's very bad day and the Montrim Industries inquiry.

"The senator is going after Montrim. Are you worried about that?" Titus asked Zoe.

Zoe curled herself up with her knees under her chin. "I don't work for Montrim. I work out of their laboratory because it's secure. I think the Senate probably should go after them. Montrim's got some things going on there that are pretty horrific."

"Like what?" Titus asked.

Gage was paying close attention to the conversation while he chopped onions.

"The soundwave technology that takes out entire cities but leaves the infrastructure and flora intact—that you know about now. That, to me, needs to be stopped."

"Were you read into that program?"

"No. I eat in the cafeteria. I can hear people talking around me."

"Are they allowed to do that? Just chat about top secret studies in front of others?"

Zoe tipped her head. "Folks there all have high clearance levels, at least the ones who eat in the same cafeteria I do. Montrim has this social psychology interior design. The public spaces are developed to encourage people to bump into each other and communicate. Montrim wants projects to cross-pollinate. I told you about the Post-it Notes. Someone says something that's an ah-ha moment for someone else."

"And that works?"

Zoe shrugged. "As much as it can in a room full of unsocial science geeks. Synchronicity happens."

"What else have you overheard?"

Gage tried to move around the kitchen as softly as possible so he could hear as he pulled out a skillet and flipped on the burner.

“Have you watched the film *GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra*? That’s what Montrim Labs reminds me of. They’re developing things that can easily be seen as destabilizing in the wrong hands—or even the right hands. It’s scary stuff.” Zoe got up and headed for the stairs.

“I guess she’s done.” Titus moved to the kitchen.

“Yup.” Gage followed her progress with his gaze until she rounded the corner.

Titus opened the fridge, and pulled out two beers, handing one to Gage. “Do you need to go check on her?”

“Are you serious?” Gage accepted it, twisting off the top and taking a swig. “No. She wants her thoughts to herself. And we probably want that to happen too, so she can churn through what’s happening. She’s the genius, after all.”

Titus looked up the staircase where Zoe had disappeared. “I can’t envision a mean thought in her head. Do you think she’ll be able to figure out how criminals think?”

“Nope. That’s why she needs us. She knows it, or she would have walked out the front door and not through the bedroom door.”



## Zoe

**At what point is a wasp ever going to have a chat with a spider?**

~ Karl Pilkington

• • • •

Titus had headed home in the Iniquus SUV, leaving them with the Oldsmobile. That felt okay to Zoe. She felt comfortable being in this little yellow house, especially after the car ruse at the grocery store. She stood at the sink, pouring liquid soap under the hot water faucet so she and Gage could clean up the dishes.

Gage scraped the plates and put the stack next to the sink. “Do you want to wash or dry?”

“Wash,” Zoe said, and watched Gage pull a couple of dish towels from the cupboard. She liked that he was as neat about his environment as she was, and that he pitched in equally to keep things up without being asked. She grabbed the glasses and slid them into the water.

“Today is our half-year anniversary. We started dating on Junefourteenth.”

Zoe pushed a cloth into the glass and swirled it around while sending Gage a smile. “That’s romantic of you to realize.” She rinsed it and handed it over to Gage to dry.

“You know, most girls I’ve gone out with talk about wedding plans and kids’ names by week three. We’re at six months. Obviously, honeymoon destinations aren’t on your list of topics to think about.”

“Nope.” Zoe pulled out another glass and gave it a swish.

“You don’t think I’m a catch?”

Zoe loved it when Gage got that teasing lilt in his voice. She thought it was sexy as all get out. “A *catch*? Oh my God, this is a cheesy conversation.” She handed him the glass. “I’m not sure how you’d define a catch.”

He smiled at her, accepting the glass, but not defining his parameters. Instead he asked, “I’m wondering what you see when you look into the future, Zoe. Are you married to your job? If you are, I get that.” He dipped his head as he studiously dried the glass. “Or maybe you see a husband and children?”

Zoe picked up a plate, confused by the switch in tone. “Sure, I have an idea of what I’d like my life to look like. A husband, yes. Eventually adopting some kids, eight years old or so.”

“I’m sure there’s exhaustive reasoning for that particular age.” Now he was grinning.

She studied his face and decided there was nothing malicious there. Not even amusement, really. It was kind of like joy. Now that was really perplexing. She handed him the clean plate. “Not everyone has to want the same thing. Science is my thing. Alpha-dogging is your thing.”

“Alpha-dogging? That isn’t the title on my contract.”

“Did you know that societies are balanced?” She clattered the silverware into the suds. “China is having a real problem with that right now. Most families get one child, and they thought for a long time that boy babies were more desirable than girl babies, aborting female fetuses, putting girl babies up for adoption. Same thing is happening in India, where they have like forty-three million more men than women. They’ve thrown their culture off balance. Too many males without a similar ratio of females creates disturbing outcomes.”

“Too much testosterone and not enough estrogen? Is this something to do with Alpha dogs?”

“Not really. I was just thinking about the fight you were in tonight.” She focused on the multicolored bruise, stretching across his cheekbone. “You said that you had seven good guys, and you expected about the same number of bad guys. That’s how things work in our populations. One percent of our population is made up of psychopaths—people who can kill with no moral barometer, and one percent are what I’m calling Alpha-dogs—people who can kill *because* of their moral barometer. It’s a balancing act.”

“That’s pretty interesting.” Gage pulled out the cutlery drawer, dropping the knives and forks into place as he dried them. “What else works that way?”

Zoe let the water out and leaned against the counter. “Artistic brains and mathematical brains, extroverts and introverts. I’m oversimplifying to make the point. One of my friends in undergrad said I should find the markers for that in blood. She said that the phrase ‘It runs in my blood’ is true.”

“Do you think that’s right? Do you think that someone’s profession is something that they’re physiologically predestined to do?” Gage placed the dishes up into the cabinets.

“I’m not willing to study it.”

“Because?”

“The ramifications of such a test could be pretty awful.”

“I don’t know,” Gage said, shutting the doors as Zoe cleaned out the sink. “There are a lot of people who search their whole lives to find the thing that’s right for them. And if we blood tested them in third grade—”

Zoe followed Gage out of the kitchen. “And said, you will be a musician whether you like it or not?” she asked.

“It wouldn’t be like that.” Gage caught her around the waist and pulled her hips tight to his.

“It’s been that way. I have an older friend who escaped from Hungary when it was still a communist country. She was designated a musician and was given a flute—Here is your future, they said. What does she do now? She plays the flute.”

“See?” Gage kissed her lightly.

“No. She didn’t want to be told. She wanted free will. Do you see the difference between choice and no choice?”

“Well, maybe it could be a privately-run venture where people who have no idea what they should be doing could go and pay to have the blood test done—sort of a *What Color Is Your Parachute* of biology.”

“Maybe not knowing what to do is exactly what they’re supposed to do. Maybe in this lifetime they were sent here to quest.”

“This lifetime? Do you believe in reincarnation?” he asked.

“I don’t not believe in it. I believe that seekers are an important component in our social chemical solution. All of the substances in that solution are added in the right proportions or our grand human experiment wouldn’t work. That’s my hypothesis, anyway. But it’s an experiment that I think is unethical to undertake.”

“You’d be a millionaire,” he crooned.

Zoe caught the playfulness in his eye. This wasn’t a serious philosophical discussion. She didn’t know what this was. She was grateful, though, that they weren’t rehashing the day. She’d had quite enough of the day. “If I were interested in being a millionaire, I would have asked the government to compensate me correctly for the ongoing use of my intellectual property for the biomarker database.”

Gage’s brow furrowed. “They don’t?”



“No, I only ask them for enough money to run my lab and pay my bills. I don’t need the distractions that come with wealth. I want to focus on my projects.”

“I can understand that.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead and reached down for her hand. She could see the fatigue in his eyes. “Come on, Zoe, I need to take a shower. I want you to shower with me.”



## GAGE



Water sluiced over Gage's skin. Zoe stood back while he gave himself a quick wash. He didn't want her pressed up against the filth he'd been rolling in. As he scrubbed himself down, he was thinking about Zoe and her biomarker tests that she refused to perform to see if certain traits ran in someone's blood. He wondered if Zoe could find the familial biomarkers that would predict the outcome of their relationship. Was serial philandering part of his paternal genetic code? He'd never considered cheating in a relationship before. But it could lie there, latently waiting. What about maternal alcoholism and suicidal tendencies? Was that what he was bringing to a relationship with Zoe? At least he'd found a strong woman, someone who wanted to remain separate and whole. Someone who could leave him and save herself if he turned out anything like his parents. That made him feel safer about broaching the idea of a future, especially one with kids in it.

When Gage was less contaminated, he reached for Zoe's hand and pulled her under the water.

With her round bottom pressed against his abdomen, he reached around, rubbing suds over her belly. He let his finger graze over her ribs so she'd giggle and squirm.

"Stop, Gage, that tickles!" She was laughing, and his cock stood at attention. When she tried to pull away, he held her tight until she stilled.

"Well, at least I got a smile out of you." He poured shampoo onto his palm then rubbed it into her hair. "You know how you laugh and kid with your old dance company friends? I'd like you to feel that comfortable with me," he said as he rubbed bubbles into her scalp and down the long strands. "To feel that level of—"

"Immaturity?" She laughed as she put a hand on the shower wall to steady herself and kept her hips pinned to his, using her other hand to move his hard-on between her warm thighs.

"I was thinking *abandon*." He leaned down and kissed her shoulder. "Where you let yourself be playful without using brakes."

She leaned her head back as he massaged the suds into her hair. He felt her body stiffen under his hands. That was the opposite reaction to what he wanted.

"That's an interesting way of perceiving that relationship. For me, talking with my childhood friends, I have that childlike relationship with them. You know? The jokes we're laughing at are private jokes from many many years ago." She turned her head for a kiss, then put her hands back on the wall, relaxing again.

He massaged the bubbles down her back, being extremely gentle over the three angry looking bruises from the rounds she took to her bulletproof vest.

"I can't have that with you, because even if we have private jokes, I'm not filtering them through a middle school mindset. I have no desire to be that person again." She paused for a second, then asked in a smaller voice, "Is that who you're waiting for in our relationship?"

"Nope." He tilted her head back so he could rinse the shampoo out. "I guess what I'm waiting for is the level of comfort and trust I hear in your voice when you're having fun with them."

Zoe stepped forward, turning and running her hand up and down his dick before she sandwiched it between their bodies. She looked up for a kiss. "I trust you." And another kiss. "And I appreciate

you.” Then she laid her head on his shoulder.

Gage turned so the water would run down her back and keep her warm.

“Because you seem to get me and don’t try to make me something I’m not,” Zoe said. “I didn’t misread that, did I, Gage?” She leaned back so they were eye to eye. “Were you waiting for me to morph into a different person over time?”

Gage could lose himself in Zoe’s eyes. The honesty. The depth. “No, Zoe.” He sent her a smile. “It’s impossible for a flower to change her petals.” He held her chin so she wouldn’t look away when he said, “And you are the most beautiful orchid.”

Zoe’s eyes filled with bashful curiosity.

Gage turned her again so her back was against him, and he reached for the soap to play with her breasts. Her nipples pebbled under his fingers, and she reached between his legs to massage his cock, then guided it inside of her. As she undulated her hips to move up and down his shaft, he drew a long breath between his teeth. After a day like today, his emotions were on edge. His orgasm was right there. A few more strokes and he’d be done. Gage forced the sensations down and pushed his thoughts to his rational mind so he could wait for her to catch up. “Orchids look delicate but they are incredibly hardy,” he whispered into her ear. “The plant blooms for weeks, if not months on end, where other flowers blossom and fade in just days.”

Zoe arched her back with a moan as his hands moved over her breasts, her belly, her ass. He rocked his hips to move in and out of her. He took another breath and tried to focus on words, not sensations. “Where other flowers need to be watered constantly, you are satisfied with very little—in fact, giving you the same amount of water as I would a different flower would be harmful.”

Zoe pushed against him.

“Orchids like diffused light. If the light is too intense they don’t do well. They need just the right touch.” He reached between her legs to drag the rough pad of his thumb over her clitoris. With one arm holding her tight against him, and the other hand rubbing her clit, he stroked gently in and out of her. “Orchids are graceful flowers. Oh-so beautiful to look at. But I’d never pick one and take it home to put in a vase. Orchids have to be left alone.”

She made little mewling noises as she steadied herself on the wall, then pushed her bottom back into him, her signal that she wanted it harder. Deeper.

*Thank God.* Gage wrapped his hands around her hips, happy to comply.

Gage’s legs were rubbery underneath him. He couldn’t remember ever having an orgasm that wild. Every nerve in his body lit up as heat spread through him like wildfire. He wrapped Zoe in his arm and held both of them up with his other hand on the toiletry shelf. She was like a rag doll draped over him, reaching one arm up to hook around his neck.

When he bent to kiss her, her eyes were shut and her mouth was bowed into a perfect pink smile of satisfaction. Gage couldn’t have loved her more than he did in that moment. With that thought, his dick hardened again. Gage wasn’t sure he could survive another orgasm like that. He moved them out of the tub, wrapped Zoe in a towel, and together they made their way to the bedroom to collapse on the king-sized bed.

“I love you, Zoe,” Gage said for the very first time.

She didn’t answer.

He looked down to see her smile fall away and her eyes flash open. Her breath went shallow. What did that mean? Didn’t she feel the same? That would be a hell of a thing. “I’m crazy about you.” He pushed the wet hair from her face.

She shook her head.

Gage flipped onto his side and propped his head on his bent arm, resting his other hand on her stomach. “You don’t feel the same?”

“That’s not what our relationship’s been about.” She pulled the towel tighter. “We agreed that we were going to enjoy each other’s company. Have sex. We talked about no commitments. You were very clear about no commitments. You could be sent off at any time. Attachments could be problematic. Let’s enjoy the here and now. Does this sound familiar?”

“Yes.” That was exactly what he’d said. He’d laid out his parameters from the start. It was his go-to beginning of a relationship discussion. “I’ve moved on from there,” Gage said.

She flipped on her side, mirroring his position. Once again tucking the towel tightly around her like a shield. “What does that look like to you?”

What did that look like to him? If she was this shocked with an ‘I love you,’ he wasn’t willing to test the waters with the rest of it. Gage combed his fingers through the damp ropes of her hair.

“A committed relationship?” she asked, refocusing him on her words.

Gage was silent, trying to weigh what he wanted to say. A life. A family. Those seemed too big of an ask. Too much of a leap. “Yes, actually,” was what he finally offered.

She blinked like he had blown dust into her eyes, and she was trying to clear her vision. “What does committed look like to you?” She put her hand on her chest as if she felt pain. “Moving in together? Marriage?”

“Well, yes. Both,” Gage said softly.

“Gage, no.” She rolled off the bed and moved to her suitcase. “I’m sorry. But no.”

Gage tensed his muscles like she was delivering body blows. *No*. He felt like he’d been kicked in the guts, his lungs deflated. He held perfectly still, praying the feeling would go away.

With the towel as a screen, she pulled on a pair of panties and then the oversized t-shirt she slept in. Dressed, she turned back to look at him. “I grew up as a military brat.” Her voice was whisper-soft, and she looked like a praying angel as she hugged the towel to her chest. “Every time my roots took hold, my parents yanked me up and stuck me in some new plot of earth. I’m over that lifestyle. I’ve established a career and friendships. I learned from my mom’s experience that not only do I need to be able to stand strong on my own, I also have to live my own life, not dictated to by the whims of my husband’s employer. I’m not marrying into the military. I’m not falling in love with a Marine. I won’t let it happen.”

Gage swallowed. “But it has, just a little bit, hasn’t it?” The words caught in his throat and he had to clear them before he could say, “You love me at least a little.” As soon as the words slipped past his lips, Gage knew it was a mistake. Zoe completely slammed the doors down and turned her face to the wall.

“What if I weren’t in the military? Would you feel differently then?”

“I don’t do hypotheticals with relationships,” she told the wall.

“You might have missed it in all of the hullabaloo today, but I signed a contract to work with Iniquus. I won’t be re-upping with the Marines. Iniquus, they’re headquartered right here in Washington DC. I’ll have overseas assignments, but DC would always be my jumping off block.”

She turned turbulent eyes on him and pursed her lips as she studied him. “I hope that that didn’t have anything to do with me. I’m not getting involved in your career. Don’t add me and our relationship to any scale you’re using to weigh your decisions.”

“That’s kinda cold, Zoe.” Gage moved to the top of the bed where he sat completely naked with his back to the headboard.

Zoe came and sat on the corner of the bed, facing him. “You have to be you. You have to be your own tree with your own root system.”

“Hah! I know where you got that from.”

Zoe canted her head.

“Kahlil—”

“Gibran, right. I think it’s one of the wisest things I’ve ever read when it comes to relationships.”

“Agreed. We’re of the same mind on that.” That they both knew the same poem and both used it as a means of defining a perfect relationship only served to deepen Gage’s trust in their connection. They belonged together. “So here are the facts. As soon as my contract is up with Uncle Sam next month, I’ll be the newest member of Panther Force. I’ll be working under Titus Kane. These next few weeks, I’ll still be at Quantico.” He paused. “Now that the military change of address is off the table...”

Zoe pursed her lips and let her breath out slowly.

Gage stopped. She hadn’t said no. She didn’t say yes. But that gave him room to try. “What are you thinking, Zoe?”

She did it again, a deep breath in, then the slow release through her beautiful pink lips. All he wanted to do was grab her up and kiss her. Hard.

She held up her hand. “You threw me off balance with that one, Gage. I need some time to process. Can we please take one crisis at a time?”

“Our relationship is a crisis?” For some reason, that amused him, and he offered up a grin.

“No. No.” She crawled up the bed and scooted under the covers, rolling until she was resting in his arms. “I didn’t mean that. I simply meant that I need brain space to process what you’re saying and right now my brain is busy.”

“Gotcha.” He bent to kiss her and moved Zoe so he could better hold her. “So first we save you and the world as we know it.” He reached back to click off the light. “And once the apocalypse is averted, we can figure out who we are to each other.”



## GAGE

• • • •

The smell of coffee pulled him to a sitting position. Gage rubbed his eyes and reached out to yank open the blackout curtains that hid the morning light. The clock read zero eight hundred hours. He could probably sleep a few more hours and be the better for it.

Zoe, of course, wasn't in bed. He reached over and the warmth was gone from her side. She must have been up for a while. Gage decided to shower and brush his teeth before he went down to see her. The noise would give her time to adjust to someone else being around, interrupting her thoughts. He scratched his hand through his two-day-old beard. He'd probably feel better after a shave too.

Titus had brought in Zoe's overnight bag, and he had a sports bag for Gage. When Gage opened it, he found an Iniquus uniform, a new set of socks and briefs, and a Dopp Kit with all the needed toiletries. That would do. He brought them with him into the bathroom for a quick clean up.

Now revived, he was ready for a cup of joe. He headed down the steps to find Zoe sitting at the breakfast bar with papers spread in front of her and her hands wrapped around an oversized, green coffee mug.

He moved toward her. "Did you sleep at all last night?" He dropped a kiss onto her forehead as he wandered into the kitchen.

"No." She sighed. "My brain was on overdrive."

Gage picked up one of the papers scattered across the counter. One was covered in doodles and had his name framed in squiggly lines. The other looked like a math formula on steroids. At the bottom, it said Colonel Guthrie, and that too was surrounded by squiggly lines. "What's this all about?" He laid the papers back in front of her.

"Two different ways of thinking things through. This is my emotional thought process and nonlinear thinking." She put her finger on the page with his name. "And these are my logic formulas."

"You can take the girl out of the lab," he said, snagging a coffee mug from the shelf. "But you can't take the lab out of the girl." He moved back and pointed to the doodle page. "Obviously, this is the one that interests me the most." He poured the coffee and moved to the stool next to Zoe's. "What do these squiggles around my name represent?"

"Conclusion drawn."

His heart stumbled, then raced forward. He scanned over the page to see if he could pull any information from it. Was this a conclusion that was in his favor or not? "An ice cream cone. That's when we met?"

"Yes." Zoe wasn't giving anything up for free. Her eyes looked troubled, angst-filled.

He looked at the upper right hand corner that took up a sizeable portion of the page. "And this symbol? Is that a bomb going off?"

"It's an explosion."

Gage had felt this way one other time in his life. He'd been doing field training. Coming under simulated firepower, he dove head first into the icy Mississippi river. Pain flooded his system as he immersed himself. He had to battle his inner demons as much as the current to get his boots safely underneath him.



She rolled her lips in and looked into her mug, then her lashes flew up as she caught him with her gaze. “It represents our sex life.”

Maybe that was the solid footing he needed. “That’s good then?”

“It’s excellent. Don’t you think?” Her brows went up.

He held her gaze for a long moment. He saw that really was a question. She wasn’t being flip. She never was. He hadn’t quite gotten used to the fact that Zoe spoke in facts, not sarcasm. He shouldn’t layer in the times from his past when he’d had relationship conversations with other women and had to be wary of all the trip wires laid across the path. Zoe was Zoe, and different. “Yeah, I think.”

He stared at the paper and started recognizing symbols of things they done together, the canoe trip, the book fair, the lecture on Zika, for christsake. Not what he normally thought of as dating scene stuff. Interesting stuff though. He’d liked it, anyway. “And here at the bottom, these leaves?”

“The oak and the cypress.”

“Kahlil Gibran’s poem. What conclusion did you come to, Zoe?”

She pulled the paper in front of her. “That I fell in love with you here.” Zoe put her finger on the ice cream cone. Then she traced her finger over the other images. “And all of these things are reasons that that love became solid.”

“That huge suitcase is baggage though?” Gage asked. “Yours or mine?”

“Not baggage, per se. It’s the reason that I wouldn’t allow myself to do anything but hold you at arm’s-length. To protect my heart, because eventually you’d be at a new base—back at Lejeune, or wherever—and I’d be saying goodbye to you...to us.”

Gage wouldn’t consider that last sentence. That wasn’t something he was prepared to do, say goodbye and never see Zoe again. He turned his attention to something more hopeful. “These, then?” He pointed to the bottom of the page under his name.

“The leaves are the reason I would be willing to dedicate my heart to you. I know you’ll appreciate me for who I am and not try to make me into something I’m not because it suits you better. Not that I’m not willing to bend. If we’re together, the gales that blow against you will be the same winds that buffet me.”

Something inside him grew big and broad. Fierce. Zoe wasn’t playing coy. She was simply unfolding her thought process for him. But he felt like storming the barricade and capturing the flag. He wanted his yes. “I need a clearer answer than that.”

She looked straight into his eyes, then tilted her head. “I think committing myself to our relationship is what I want to do.”

“You think or you *know*?” Gage asked. She still sounded like the answer was a maybe. And that wasn’t good enough. He needed that solid ground under him. He needed to know where he stood. “Because I *know*. If these last few days have taught me anything, it’s how deeply I love you and how much I want you in my life, always.”

“Please don’t say that.” She reached out and wrapped her hands around his forearm, the look in her eyes a little wild. “Crisis emotions are temporary.”

Gage realized he was combat focused, his face and his body had taken on a hard-muscled stance. He was in self-protection mode and that was the wrong place for his head to be right now. He stepped even closer to her and gently lifted her chin to look her in the eye. He kissed her softly and rested his forehead against hers until he felt himself letting down his guard. Only then did he say, “No, Zoe, I thought those thoughts on the drive to your place before any of this started.”

He stood up and reached for her hands and pulled them to his heart. “I got your text after a shit day and everything was suddenly better. I’m happy when I’m with you.” He watched her eyes to gauge her

reaction. “I look forward to your smile. I look forward to you in my arms. I look forward to us talking about life’s complexities and your unique way of seeing simple beauty.” There, that was what he was hoping to see shine back at him. Belief. “You are the bright spot in my life. I’ve loved you since you leaned under the hood of that car. And I want to love you that way for the rest of my life.”

This was the time he wanted to pull a ring from his pocket and take a knee. But the pockets he was wearing belonged to Iniquus. Besides, he wanted to make that moment special for both of them. Not a conversation on the run from the devil, hiding in a safe house.

Zoe heaved a sigh.

He needed to lighten this for her. This shouldn’t feel so heavy. “You know, Zoe, when I look into the depths of your eyes, I can actually see the machinations of your brain, like a giant clock with the gears moving.”

“Robot-like?”

“Mmm. As a member of the US military’s elite forces, I think maybe I’d better give you a thorough once-over to make sure you’re human in nature.”

“Once-over?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“Well, twice might be more fun.”

“I could definitely use that right now.” But he knew this was banter, and they weren’t headed back up the stairs.

As if she could read his thoughts, she said, “This is important. We’re important, and I want to be able to focus on that conversation. Right now, I’m distracted and my thoughts are cluttered. I’m conflicted—not about you. Not about us. About this mess I’m in.” She glanced down at a page of formulas. “I can’t see a way out of it. The “us” discussion needs to wait until there’s some kind of conclusion. If they end up putting me in some kind of protective program, then those life choices may not work for you. And if you say, ‘I don’t care. I’ll follow you anywhere,’ then I know that you’re not an oak, and I’m not a cypress. I’ll know you’ve bent your life to mine. So don’t.”

He shook his head. Of course, he could find a way to make his life work, no matter where she went. But he’d never seen her eyes so fierce. This meant everything to them—that Zoe was Zoe and that he stood strong as an individual too.

He forced his gaze onto the other piece of paper. “Tell me about these formulas.”

She twisted around on her stool until she faced the counter. “Once I realized that I wanted our relationship to evolve into being your life partner—”

“Wife,” Gage corrected with no wiggle room.

“Once I decided that I wanted to be your *wife*, I needed to resolve the problem that is keeping us from moving forward in our lives.”

“And the conclusion was Colonel Guthrie? You think he’s the answer to our problem? That he can do something to help?”

“I think he *is* our problem.”

“What?” Gage sat on the stool beside Zoe.

“I was thinking about what you said. The solution is a formula, the chemicals, and their combination. If I could figure out the formula of how this came to be, then I could reverse engineer the end result, me in a safe house and Lily dead.”

Gage leaned against the backrest and crossed his arms over his chest. His brow knit with concentration. And he waited.

“The colonel is the common denominator. He’s the one who asked me to work for DARPA. He’s the one who suggested that Montrim do the data collection with a humanitarian front. He’s the one who brought BIOMIST to the CIA’s attention to help find Osama. He’s the one who sent me to set up my labs on the Montrim campus after I got my doctorate.”

“He’s the one who knew that Billings was going after Montrim long before it became public,” Gage said. “He’s the one who said Lily might be a spy, either for the CIA or Montrim. He’s the one who suggested she be followed and gave the senator the card for the private investigator, Levi Schultz, who is really an Israeli former special op on the run.”

“Exactly.” Zoe nodded her head vigorously.

“Colonel Guthrie’s the one who we assume planted one of the trackers on me in the hospital. And most likely the one who called Christopher Bilik.”

“There are other ways Bilik could have known.” Zoe tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Maybe. But at the hospital, Bilik said Colonel Guthrie called him,” Gage noted.

“You said there was a deal between Israel and Montrim for forty million. I can see Montrim getting through my computer firewalls. But they couldn’t get through DARPAs.”

Gage picked up the pen and pointed to Guthrie’s name on the paper. “What if this was a private deal between Bilik, Guthrie, and the Mossad? Guthrie had access.”

“Absolutely. And you put my phone on airplane mode in my apartment. Guthrie could have determined that after you left his house. He became worried that the phone was off or lost or—”

“No. This doesn’t fit neatly together. I don’t think Guthrie knew about the break-in at your apartment. He seemed genuinely upset when I went by his house to tell him. And he was also surprised that Lily was dead when Senator Billings showed up at his house drunk.”

“I think that that’s where the chemistry analogy went wrong. I think it’s more like a Venn Diagram. There are some holes. Who needed to stop the hearing? Who would benefit the most?”

“Montrim,” Gage said without any doubt.

“What if Guthrie and Bilik decided to guard Montrim to protect a private deal they were doing with Israel. A forty-million-dollar deal couldn’t be hidden. I don’t know how they could do that as a corporate entity and keep that hidden from the US military.” Zoe paused, thinking. “Say it’s just Bilik and Guthrie in on that deal, they really needed to save Montrim Industries.”

“Save them for two reasons that we know about—there’s an Israeli deal on the table and a CIA deal on the table. If the Federal government severed ties, whoever was orchestrating those deals would lose access to the data for both deals.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Zoe nodded. “Okay, now Guthrie tells Bilik. Bilik, by the way, is a big-time donor to USIPAC, and that would give him the connections to approach Israel with the database information. It could very well have been Bilik who handed over the card for the PI, told Guthrie to convince Billings to have Lily followed, and arranged for USIPAC to both move Lily to her own place and pay for the PIs bill. You said that the PI kept following Lily after Billings said to stop. If the guy was working for USIPAC, he’d still be working the case, right?”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that,” Gage said. “Why would USIPAC do that? Why wouldn’t they put a PI on Lily and not triangulate with Billings? For that matter, why wouldn’t Bilik fire Lily?”

“I wouldn’t fire her,” Zoe said. “It’s like that Montrim scientist, George Matthews, who was spying on the soundwave technology studies and selling the updates to China. What did the investigators do? The scuttlebutt is that Montrim hired agents in to watch him to see who all was involved and how the operation worked. Only when they had all the pieces of the puzzle did the guy disappear. I would guess the FBI is dealing with him.”

“That makes sense,” Gage agreed. Montrim, or maybe Bilik and Guthrie, wanted to learn from Lily what the senator knew and how he was going to go about taking down Montrim. They would have discussed this at Lily’s house, provided by USIPAC, which I’d guess was fully wired for audio visual. Gage pulled a fresh piece of paper over and started scrawling notes. “If nothing else, that would give them blackmail material.” Now he realized why Zoe had filled so many pages. This wasn’t a straight line. This was the convergence of variables. “Prescott needs to go check for bugs, though whoever planted them probably pulled them out again.”

“The PI was associated with this group of Israeli special ops,” Zoe said. “Who else is a player here?”

Gage thought back to his pocket full of business cards and two of them were from “The CIA.”

“Is it possible that the CIA could have rewarded the Israeli special ops guys for some action, some piece of intel, with a viable cover story of their deaths, and then brought the unit to the US under new names? They can do that, can’t they?”

“They can.” Gage dragged out the words, thinking that was more stuff of movies than reality. “They do. But it would be one hell of a reward.”

“If anyone could warrant that reward it would be these guys. Let’s say they had CIA operatives in danger’s way, and these guys had the wherewithal to get them out. That might be an even exchange. Right?”

“Yes.” *Shit, they might have made that kind of deal.*

“The CIA may use these guys from time to time to do things that they couldn’t get away with on US soil. There may be some reason that they got those tattoos and kept up their training. I put the CIA in that loop for keeping Montrim viable, not because they know about the sale of BIOMIST data, but because they really want the killer wasp, RoboSphecus, in play.” Zoe pointed to some of her symbolic math that meant zero to Gage. “What if the CIA ordered Lily to be killed to protect Montrim—she could no longer testify and the affair would discredit Senator Billings. And what if that same night they also send two of their guys to capture me? In that case, the CIA killed Lily to keep Montrim viable because they wanted their RoboSphecus. And they could have tried to kidnap me to force me to make it for them. And as I say it out loud, I find all of this ludicrously outside the realm of actual reality. But if there’s even a hair of truth to that tale, the CIA could only know about the WASP from one direction and that’s—”

“Guthrie,” Gage growled.

“Guthrie may not have known about the hit on Lily or that I was to be captured. He may have thought that I was safe in all of this. He could actually be completely innocent of any wrongdoing, and only passed DARPA intel to the CIA as his position required. I want to believe that. He’s been friends with Senator Billings for a very long time. And he’s been a friend of my dad’s even longer. Colonel Guthrie is like family to me. But his innocence doesn’t mean that he had no hand in this outcome. It seems to me he was the engine that drove this bus. I believe that. I think if we bring this to the attention of Iniquus and the FBI, that they will be able to find the proof that Guthrie inadvertently created this fiasco with Bilik and the CIA. Guthrie was duped. He was a pawn, I’m sure. But he’s the connector. I bet he can help us figure out what’s happening.”

“We need to get back to Iniquus, Zoe. They need to hear this. Now.”



## GAGE

••••

Zoe piled into the car beside Gage, putting her purse on the floor near her feet, and pulling her safety belt into place. The interior of the car was as beat to hell as the exterior, but the engine hummed, the tires were first rate, and it maneuvered like a sports car.

Gage pressed the button on the dash and the garage door closed behind them. He pushed the button to the right.

“Communications,” came the man’s voice.

“Gage Harrison, Panther Force, Zoe Kealoha, and I are heading to Iniquus Headquarters. Our ETA is forty-five minutes.”

“Copy. We have you on satellite. Be advised there is a road crew ahead. Traffic is being detoured, we estimate an additional ten minutes to your drive time.”

“Roger. Out.” He tapped the button again.

“That’s handy,” Zoe said.

They drove in silence down the country road. They were the only ones around. Gage enjoyed the quiet and the stark beauty of the winter landscape. But his head was still on a swivel. It was illegal for the CIA to operate, for the most part, in the United States, but that didn’t mean much, especially in this case. Zoe’s research put her square in the sphere of CIA intelligence gathering. And they were the masters when it came to technology. They could be following their progress down this lonely road the same way Iniquus was. Their only real safety was in the anonymity they gained through the grocery store car switch.

Gage was glad that he had a heads up from Iniquus that there was construction up ahead. He was ready for it when he saw a flagman. Iniquus had said it was a detour, though. That’s not what was happening here. This guy held a stop sign. Gage slowed to a roll. There were ditches on either side, and this Olds had a low-slung body. He pushed the comms button.

“Communications.”

“Gage here. Heads up, we’re at the construction crew. There’s a flagman. I’m inching up on a stop sign.”

“Copy.”

Gage could see men with their backs to him in the road and dirt that looked freshly dug.

“There’s another flagman ahead, holding back two cars,” the comms guy said.

The workers moved out of the road. The flagman spoke into his radio. He spun the sign to “slow” and waved them through.

Gage tapped the gas to pick up speed as he maneuvered left to go around the digger. As they moved over the dirt, four pops sounded like rifle fire. Gage’s right hand shot out and dragged Zoe’s head down to her lap. He stomped the gas pedal to the ground, and the car moved forward on the hard edges of his run flat tires. He’d hit a spike strip.

Two cars, one in the left lane, one in the right, barreled toward them. Gage slammed his foot on the brake until they jerked to a stop. He threw the car in reverse, burning rubber as he tried to

backtrack out of this ambush. All the while Gage was calling the play by play to the communication tech, hoping they had some Iniquus guys somewhere nearby.

The digger moved across the road before Gage could make it past. They were trapped.

“Zoe, sit up and put your hands in the air,” Gage said with as much steadiness as he could muster.

“Communications. Listening in silence. Iniquus support is mobilized to your location. We have you locked on satellite. We can see everything,” the man said.

“Look, Zoe, they’ve pulled ski masks over their faces. That means they don’t want to be identified. They aren’t here to kill you. They’re going to take you prisoner.” They turned to each other.

“Zoe, I need you to be strong. Give them whatever they want. Do whatever they want. We’ll figure out how to undo that later. Don’t try to be a hero.”

Zoe never missed a thing. “You said they’ll take *me* prisoner. What will they do to you?”

The butts of a pair of rifles smashed through their windows, showering them with safety glass. Men dressed in tactical gear stepped up with pistols in their hands.

“Colonel Guthrie,” Zoe’s shocked voice called out as darts pierced their necks.

Gage felt the medication flowing into his artery.

Zoe spun back to look at him with bewilderment and fear, yanking the dart from her skin. “Gage, oh my God. I’m so sorry.”





## Zoe

**Women are like wasps in their anger.**

~ English proverb



**“If you didn’t want to help the CIA and our military, why the hell did you sign a contract with DARPA, Zoe?”**

Zoe swallowed. She was seated on a folding metal chair in the middle of a room painted pink, with circus animals dancing around the border paper. She had pulled herself out of her stupor about an hour ago. But she was still a little wobbly. She stuck her feet out on either side of her like a bicycle kick stand to hold herself upright.

There was a table with a computer, it was pointed at her, and Zoe imagined that this conversation was being recorded.

She had recognized Colonel Guthrie at the side of the car, despite his face mask. Now that they were inside, he’d pulled his disguise off and stood red-faced and seething in front of her. She had never seen him look like this before. Zoe was afraid. Afraid for herself. Afraid for Gage. She wondered if he was still alive.

“How did you find me?” Zoe demanded. Anger boiled under her skin.

“Grossman and Parker need the WASP functioning. They got a heads-up from the CIA that you were at Iniquus. With CIA technology, the rest isn’t rocket science. And speaking of science,” Guthrie kicked the leg of her chair, “why’d you sign a DARPA contract if you didn’t want to help your country?”

Zoe grabbed the seat lest she go flying. “I watched a YouTube video about 9-11. Not about the towers coming down, but about the greatest maritime rescue effort in human history. A half-million people were plucked off Manhattan Island by the men and women who worked on boats in the area. The Coast Guard put out a call, ‘if you can, come help.’ The boats converged. At the beginning of the video they posted the Romain Rolland quote, ‘A hero is a man who does what he can.’”

Colonel Guthrie reached out to swipe a tear that brightened the corner of Zoe’s lashes. “Are you crying?”

She smacked his hand away. She wondered where her glasses were. She’d feel much better if she could see clearly. “I can do biomedical engineering and microrobotics. If my inventions mean saving lives, then that’s what I stepped up to do. And it’s not just for military applications. My inventions, once they’re out of prototype, can have an impact on making our law enforcement more effective.”

“Again, I’m asking you why you signed up. It’s because you want to help your country. You’re a patriot, aren’t you, Zoe?”

“I love my country. I want what’s best for my country.”

“Your country needs you. The CIA needs you. We need, for the best future of America, to have the RoboSpecies in play. The CIA needs them to function in a little over four months. That should be enough time for you to get them flying, so to speak.”

Zoe’s brows came together. “That’s the timeline you gave me for the WASPs to function for military intelligence.”

Colonel Guthrie shook his head with a sigh. “We need both. A WASP to identify and monitor the mark, and a RoboSphecious to find your beacon and sting the target. Once you have one that’s actionable, the second is easy. It’s the same damned mechanism with a different fluid. Getting the WASP to identify the right person. That’s the big deal.”

“All along, I’ve been developing a CIA project.”

“Of course. I can’t understand why this is a problem for you. You want to save lives. This is a no-brainer. When your WASP identifies a subject, instead of bombing the compound, we can take out the single culprit. How many lives could you save, Zoe? How many innocents?”

“Colonel, that argument is myopic, simplistic, illogical, and completely beside the point.”

“Do tell.”

“I will never develop a means of killing. Identification? Yes. Killing? *No*. I will not be responsible for anyone else’s death. Period. My developing a means of identification is meant to prevent bombs from being used in error. I am not responsible for the decisions that come after. For example, the military could choose to track that person until they are in seclusion and then take them out. They can send in a sniper. If others decide to take out a complex, that’s on them. Once my microrobotics and software are functional, they become part of the human experience. That means other scientists can and will do the same. I will not provide the world with a new weapons system by adding to the knowledge scaffolding. Scientific knowledge is accumulative, and we don’t know where this could lead.”

“Enough. You are far too naïve to weigh the ethics of your recalcitrance.” Colonel Guthrie leaned his hips into the table with the laptop. As he bumped it, the screen filled with an image.

Zoe squinted at the screen, not sure what she was seeing. Guthrie pulled her purse toward him and handed her her glasses.

Now the image was crystal clear. Gage sat in a chair. His face was bloody. His clothes were ripped. He looked dazed. His hands were cuffed in place. His feet were shackled.

Zoe jumped from her chair.

“Sit your ass down!” Colonel Guthrie yelled at her. “Gage is our incentive. He’s going to stay with us for a while. Right there in that chair.” He pointed at the video. “You want him to eat? You behave. You want him to drink? You behave. You want him to get up and use the bathroom instead of pissing down his leg and sitting in his own filth? You behave.”

Zoe gasped. “Are you going to kill me? Kill Gage?”

“With a brain like yours? Why would I do that? You’re an asset. Kill Gage? That depends. You will do whatever I tell you to do. Sign whatever I tell you to sign.”

“Of course,” she said. She looked around the child’s room again. “How am I to work here?”

“Not here. You need your laboratory, obviously. You will go home. You will go to work. You will make progress. You won’t try any cute tricks to make things self-destruct or tell me that you need more time. Gage Harrison’s life is on a time clock. March fifteenth—three months from today—if we don’t have the *two* kinds of wasps operationally ready, I will personally electrocute Gage in front of you with a low enough voltage that it will be an excruciatingly slow and painful death.”

Zoe started vibrating. She shook so hard; she could hardly keep herself planted on the seat.

“And that’s when I call your parents. I’ll tell them you’ve gone missing, and they need to come to DC right away, stay at my house. And we will start again. And if they die, then we will go after your friends. I will be relentless. I will be heartless. I will be the devil himself. I will have these wasps.” Colonel Guthrie moved over and leaned in until their noses touched. “Do I make myself clear?” he spat out, his eyes demonic. Everything about this man made Zoe recoil.

“And if you think you can find a way to get a message to Iniquus or your buddy Damion Prescott, be aware that you will have a shadow six inches from your elbow until I am satisfied. You won’t eat alone. You won’t sleep alone. You won’t bathe or pee alone. There will always be one of my men six inches away. And let me tell you, they have lost seven of their unit members to this FUBAR op already. They aren’t feeling magnanimous when it comes to you. I’d tread carefully where they’re concerned.”

Zoe went numb. Her mouth fell open. Her brain failed her completely. She loved her brain. It was her super power. But when she needed it, it let her down. Nothing came to her. No stories to help her find a way clear. No clever ideas. She was nothing but an autonomic nervous system, exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide.

“Are you doubting me? Are you doubting the integrity of my team?” Colonel Guthrie sneered. “Lily died by my command. People don’t go around falling onto Metro rails just as the subway is powering toward them.” He reached over tapped the screen, bringing up a picture of a car that had slammed into the side of a cement mixer. The next picture he scrolled to was a close up of the driver who was obviously dead, crushed under the steering wheel. “This is what happened to Ruby Leibowitz on her drive home from Iniquus. Poor thing. I couldn’t let her go to USIPAC with her information. And now I have Gage.” He waited while this seeped into her conscious.

“How many people do you want to see dead, Zoe? Should I call your folks in Hawaii? Pay your friends Sydney and Holland a visit? Jurnee? She lives nearby, doesn’t she? In central Virginia? That’s only a few hours from here. A nice drive.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response, but Zoe wasn’t in her body. Besides the ability to see and hear, she was little else. She was floating. Weightless.

“There are people you love that can suffer greatly for your heroics. But in the end, you know you’re a patriot and want to help your country. There is nothing intrinsically bad about what you’re developing in terms of safety for the American people.”

“And what do you get out of this? A gigantic paycheck. One from the CIA and the other between you and Bilik from the Mossad.”

Colonel Guthrie squeezed her jaw until she thought it would pop. “Who else knows that?”

“I do.”

“Who else?”

“No one else. I figured it out last night when I was thinking it all through. I’m right, aren’t I?”

The colonel threw her off the chair. She splayed across the floor. She had gotten her answer.

“Really, I shouldn’t need to twist your arm to get you to comply. But I can certainly twist his.” Guthrie flipped back to Gage’s picture.

*He needs medical help.* “Is Gage here? Can I tell him that I’ll be following your directives to the T?”

“I’m not stupid enough to put you in the same location.”

Zoe stood and caught at the back of the chair as she wobbled. “Well, I guess you’d better drive me to Montrim so I can get going in my lab.”

“That’s my girl.” Colonel Guthrie took her elbow in an iron clasp, snagged her purse, and steered her out the door.



## Zoe

**“Living by your wits is always knowing where the wasps are.”**

**~ Stephen King**

• • • •

Zoe put the RoboSphercius down on its petri dish. Her hands were shaking to the point of being ineffectual. She turned her microscope off. Instead of moving forward, she was destroying what she already had in hand. As much as she hated the idea of taking a break while Gage was tied to that chair, she needed to eat. She needed a big fat sleeping pill. She needed to black out like she had at the hospital. She needed to wrangle control of her nervous system.

The man who was tasked to be her shadow was taking his assignment too literally. He hadn't been six inches from her side since she got out of the car at Montrim. His breath had been hot on her neck for the last two hours. She was a tall woman, but this guy was a behemoth. He'd even make Gage seem small in comparison. So far, she hadn't tested out Colonel Guthrie's threat that he'd even be six inches from her while she used the bathroom.

“Do you have a car? I need to go home.” She stood.

The man followed her to the lab door and waited while she entered her codes to lock up. Without speaking to her, he took her elbow, just as Colonel Guthrie had, and steered her down the hall. They wound their way through the labyrinth of Montrim's campus, out the side door, through the courtyard, through another door down the hallway and up some stairs to come out in a back parking lot that Zoe didn't even know existed.

The man was speaking into his cuff in a foreign language. He pressed her up against an air conditioning unit, and they waited. The wind blew. The cold got into her lungs. She coughed to expel it, which reminded her that she'd been holding her bladder all day long.

A car came around the corner and stopped. With an iron claw gripping her elbow, the behemoth thrust her forward. A door popped open on the sedan. Zoe heard a bang. Suddenly, her guard leaned over her, making guttural noises and twitching. He grasped at her convulsively. A ball-like object flew past her into the open car door. There was an explosion that lit her auricular nerves on fire. She stuck her fingers in her ears and collapsed under the guard's weight. She tried to push him off and saw that the car had filled with billowing smoke. The air became acidic. Zoe breathed into the fabric covering her elbow.

The driver tried to take off driving, but the smoke was too thick to see through. He ran straight into the cooling unit, not two feet from where she and her captor lay. Zoe screamed and flung her arms out, making the guard drop off of her. Two men fast roped down the side of the portico roof. One grabbed her and jerked her back inside of Montrim.

Zoe fought with everything she had. But the man had wrapped her in his arms and had a hand over her mouth stoppering her screams.

“Zoe. Calm.”

She bit his finger hard, and he flung her out away from him, but kept a good grip on her wrist.

“Zoe. Calm. It's Titus.”

Zoe panted. Relief and danger fought for dominance. “No, you *can't* save me. I need... They have Gage!”

“Zoe. Shhh. *We* have Gage. He’s at the Iniquus infirmary.” He held up his cellphone with a picture of Gage lying on a cot. The wounds she had seen earlier were cleaned and dressed in pristine white bandages.

“You saved him? How?” Zoe was completely confused. “You saved *me*? How?”

“We’re good at what we do.” He held out his hand. “Come on.”

“But the CIA are good at what they do too. They have the same capability as you do. More.”

Titus touched the comms that wrapped his neck. “Panther actual. Roger that. I’m exiting with our precious cargo.” He pushed the door open and took her by the hand. “We weren’t up against the CIA, just Guthrie. Guthrie had a friend at NSA who was helping him with satellite images. We have friends there too.”

“But Colonel Guthrie said—”

“Let’s get you back with Gage, and we’ll tell you what we found out.”

Zoe moved out into the diffused light of a gray winter’s day. Red Christmas bells, hanging on the parking lot lights, swung in the wind cheerily. Special Agent Prescott was hefting her captor to his feet. He was in cuffs. Prescott looked over at Titus. “I’m loving these stun rifles, man. So much less paperwork.”

Brian had another man bent over the hood of his car, cuffing him, as well. Smoke billowed around them.

Zoe was escorted to Titus’s Hummer. He helped her in, then scooted around to his side. She was too stunned to speak.

“You’ll feel better once you see Gage,” Titus predicted. He did her the great kindness of not talking again until she was in Gage’s arms.

• • • •

ZOE SAT AS CLOSE AS she could get to Gage without actually crawling into his lap. Touching him helped her remember that he was safe, not being beaten and bound, with his life on the line for her ethics. He reached up to stroke his hand over her hair and planted a kiss on her temple.

After she had gone to the infirmary to see Gage, the female doctor had taken her off to make sure that she hadn’t been sexually attacked during her captivity. Zoe hadn’t even considered the possibility. It was though. Possible. And she remembered again how Colonel Guthrie had said these men would be within six inches of her when she slept and peed and bathed. She was fine. Thank God, both she and Gage were fine. Lily was not. Ruby was not. What a horrible string of events.

She and Gage had eaten and now they were back in the Panther war room, waiting for Special Agent Prescott to come and debrief them.

“Can you tell me what they found in the Mercedes?” Gage asked, lacing his fingers with Zoe’s. Zoe grasped his hand with both of hers and pulled it up against her belly.

“Yeah, sure,” Brian said. “We stripped it down. The envelope was taped up under the rear seat. It had Colin Bunsinger’s name on it. The envelope was still sealed when we handed it over to Prescott.”

“They charged the men at the farmhouse? They’re still in custody?” Gage asked.

“Yeah, we have eleven of the twelve up here, counting both hot and cold bodies. We have one who was picked up in Miami,” Brian said.

“Lynx’s ploy dragged one of their guys down there?” Gage grinned.

“Looks like it. He was caught trying to sneak onto the cruise ship. Either he was on his way to the Panama Canal on vacation, or he was falling into her trap. Strike Force kept an eye on the cabin for us. They’re the ones who nabbed him. FBI took control of the guy and is shipping him back here.”

Gage was laughing and held up a hand for a high five.

Zoe decided to ask Gage about the story of Lynx and the cruise ship later. Right now, she wanted to be very still and very quiet. Gage seemed to answer that thought with the kiss he brushed into her hair.

The Panthers rose respectfully as Special Agent Prescott moved through the door. Gage went to stand as well, but Prescott caught his eye and waved him back into his seat. Zoe sat up straight as the mood shifted from hanging out to official debrief.

Prescott stood at the front of the room. “I want to tell Panther Force how appreciative my unit is and how grateful I am for your help on this case. Nine men from the Israeli Special Forces are in custody, and three of them were killed while committing their crimes. We haven’t yet learned how they came to be in America. This case will continue to unfold.” He reached up to scratch his brow. “The CIA has been apprised and will be working with the FBI on the best way to handle the situation from this point forward.”

There was a general groan that went up with the Panthers. Prescott acknowledged this with a calming hand gesture. “I know that’s a stretch of the imagination, but on this case, it is in America’s best interests that these criminals be kept under wraps. We can’t let the public know in any way, shape, or form about the BIOMIST program. You’re right, Zoe.” Prescott opened his hand toward her. “This database has been of immense help to our intelligence community. On that, there is no disagreement between the FBI and CIA.”

Prescott focused on Gage, and Zoe could feel Gage’s muscles stiffening. “I have spoken directly with the Director of the CIA and apprised him of the actions and pressures that were put on Dr. Kealoha as well as the illegal contract they had developed with Montrim’s board member, Christopher Bilik.”

“Only Bilik?” Titus asked.

“From the papers that the team brought in that were meant to be disclosed to Colin Bunsinger, the funds were to go into two offshore accounts, both in shell companies’ names. Bilik, of course, needed someone of Guthrie’s stature at DARPA in order to gain access to the designs that Zoe was developing. It’s being investigated. Guthrie is being held on two counts of kidnapping, and one count of torture, and a list of accompanying crimes. He won’t be free from prison in this lifetime.”

“What’s the CIA’s position on my research?” Zoe asked.

“The CIA’s unofficial position is that their need was great. They were forced by circumstances to use whatever means they had at their disposal, bribery being one of the tools they have in their toolbox.”

“They were okay with the plan to steal Zoe’s intellectual property?” Brian asked.

“That’s what the CIA does. That’s their job. You’d understand that better if you made Zoe a stranger. Pull the personal out of the equation,” Prescott said. “And again, that’s unofficial. Officially? Grossman and Parker are being reprimanded for their actions and for reckless behavior that put lives at risk, ultimately leading to two deaths.”

“Wait. The CIA wasn’t running the Israelis?” Gage asked.

“As far as we can tell, in this set of circumstances, they were not. They did know that the project was in danger because Lily was helping Senator Billings. They’re the ones who put the spyware on both Lily and Zoe’s phones.”

“And in their watches?”

“We haven’t figured that out yet. The CIA says it’s not them, and they’ve been forthright with the rest of the information.”

“Colonel Guthrie said that he had ordered Lily’s and Ruby’s deaths.” Zoe felt the full weight of the betrayal resting on her chest. She had trusted the colonel. He’d been an uncle to her her whole life.

“We were apprised that she was in a car accident.”

“She hit a cement mixer. I think it was the same one that chased us.”

“We can pin that down through license plate recognition,” Nutsbe said as he tapped his keyboard.

“At this point, we know Guthrie is a key player in all of this. We believe that Bilik is complicit in the BIOMIST scheme as well,” Prescott said. “We have a warrant out for his arrest based on the correspondence between him and the Mossad.”

“What was going on with the tattoos and the Rex Deus?” Titus asked.

“The men all say that it was a pledge of brotherhood they made to each other. They claim it has no implications beyond that. We are, of course, at the beginning of the investigation,” Prescott said.

Gage leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “And Bilik’s not in custody yet?”

Prescott checked his watch. “There’s a team on it now. As soon as we have him in pocket, you should be safe again, Zoe.”

“Thank you.” Zoe’s eyes filled with the tears that had been turning off and on like a water faucet since Thursday evening. She scanned the faces of all the men, including them in her gratitude.

Titus crossed his arms over his chest. “Zoe, Mr. Spencer, one of the Iniquus owners, also let the Director of the CIA know about Grossman’s and Parker’s connection with everything that’s happened. At that time, Spencer made it clear that you, Zoe, are under Iniquus’s protective wing. We don’t allow bad things to happen to one of our own.” He gave her a nod that punctuated the statement.

“This is part of the FBI contract?” Zoe asked, confused.

“No,” Titus said. “It’s part of Gage’s contract. He listed you as his fiancée. Like I said, we take care of the Iniquus family. By contract, that means you.”

Titus walked up to shake Prescott’s hand, and they moved toward the computer system when Nutsbe flagged them over.

Zoe and Gage moved to the corner to talk privately. They wrapped their arms around each other.

Zoe tipped her head up. Gage’s eyes were turquoise green. The shade they turned when he was very happy.

“You didn’t ask me yet—we hadn’t decided on marriage when you signed those contracts with Iniquus,” she whispered.

Gage canted his head and sent Zoe a sexy grin. “You didn’t ask me yet either when you signed my name to your hospital advanced directive, giving me the right to make life or death health decisions for you.”

“My Montrim contract required me to put two local names.”

“Funny.” He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. “My contract only asked for one. Aren’t you glad I picked you?”

“Yes.” Zoe came up on her tiptoes to give Gage a gentle kiss. “As a matter of fact, I am.”

**This is not THE END**



**CONTINUE** reading about the Panther Force in their series Uncommon Enemies part of the Iniquus World of romantic suspense mystery thrillers. The next novel in the Uncommon Enemies series is [RELIC](#).

Would you like to know more about Fiona Quinn's writing and follow her newsletter?

• • • •

Stop by [www.fionaquinnbooks.com](http://www.fionaquinnbooks.com)

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

**FIONA QUINN** is a five-time USA Today bestselling author, a Kindle Scout winner, and has been listed as an Amazon Top 100 author in: Romantic Suspense; Mystery, thriller, and suspense; Mysteries, Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror.

Quinn writes smart, sexy suspense with a psychic twist in her Iniquus World of books including: Lynx, Strike Force, Uncommon Enemies, Kate Hamilton Mysteries, and FBI Joint Task Force Series.

She writes urban fantasy as Fiona Angelica Quinn for her Elemental Witches Series

And, just for fun, she writes the Badge Bunny Booze Mystery Collection with her dear friend, Tina Glasneck.

Quinn is rooted in the Old Dominion where she lives with her husband and children. There, she pops chocolates, devours books, and taps continuously on her laptop.



# NICK THACKER: THE ENIGMA STRAIN

---

THE ENIGMA STRAIN  
BY NICK THACKER

**Author's Rating:**



**Language:\*\* Sexuality:\*\* Violence:\*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

*The Enigma Strain: Harvey Bennett Mysteries, Book #1*

Copyright © 2014 by Nick Thacker

Published by Turtlesell Press

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance of fictional characters to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All right reserved. No part of this publication can be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, photocopying, mechanical, or otherwise—without prior permission of the publisher and author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.



A virus that's been dormant for centuries...

...has been released.

A reclusive Yellowstone park ranger is forced into action, teaming up with a beautiful woman from the CDC.

Harvey Bennett isn't a fighter, but he'll fight for what's right.

And he'll do anything to take down the terrorists behind the attack.

From Yellowstone across the American landscape, Harvey and Juliette must do what it takes to survive, before it's too late.

A bestselling action-adventure thriller series that's been described as "National Treasure meets Indiana Jones" and "the next James Rollins."

From USA Today Bestselling Author Nick Thacker, *The Enigma Strain* is a fast-paced action-adventure and technothriller with terrorism elements and virus apocalypse themes, and it will have you clinging to the edge of your seat! If you like James Rollins, Clive Cussler, and Preston and Child then you will love the entire Harvey Bennett Thrillers series.





## Alexei Expedition Northwest Territory, Canada 1704

The sound of another exploding tree caused Nikolai Alexei to jump.

He heard the men behind him snicker, but he did not care to address them. It was not worth his time, and besides, it was poor leadership to acknowledge such pettiness. His father had explained the odd occurrence to him on a wolf-hunting trip when he was a boy; the frozen tree sap inside the trunks of the pines would expand, causing the bark and wood to explode. He had often lain awake at night, counting the rippling explosions as they worked their way through the wooded area around their cabin. He knew the sound well, but it still took him by surprise when it happened, even now.

He grumbled to himself and marched onward through the knee-deep snow.

He enjoyed this land. It reminded him of home; of the countless miles of deep black forest, filled with the same animals he used to hunt, the same trees he used to climb, and the same bitter cold he used to long for with fresh blankets of snow thick enough to halt a horse. He remembered the smells, too—the ripe evergreens and the sheer emptiness of the air. He was more comfortable in the woods than any of his men, with the possible exception of Lev.

And yet their laughter frustrated him. It was not a sign of insubordination as much as it was a sign of their laziness. For three months they had made their trek over mountains and across valleys so high and so deep he had thought they would not make it to the other side with their entire crew intact. They had crossed tundra, plateaus, and wetlands, all without losing a man. Their hunting excursions were always successful, and most nights ended around a large bonfire with a deer roasting on a spit. Breakfast was hot soup, and they snacked on smoked meats throughout the day.

Nikolai had to admit that so far it was one of the more successful expeditions he had been on, and he knew God was smiling on them in this new land. But he knew also that it made them weak; it made them soft. They had grown fat and sluggish, covering less ground each day than the day before. Their energy and excitement had been replaced with a restlessness that had turned their stories and poems around the fire into passionless songs.

Without glancing back, Nikolai called out behind him. “Doctor?”

A short, thin man struggled through the snow but Nikolai did not slow his pace. “We will stop and make camp when we next find a clearing. The river is to the north, and we can fish there for as long as we like.”

“Split the men into crews of two and three,” Nikolai said, “and I will send them out in the morning to chart the area. These Cossacks will find pleasure in a change of scenery, and I myself will enjoy an excursion of a more solitary nature.”

Nikolai was a man of his word; a man of integrity. He had promised the Tsar a map of the deep terrain of North America, and he intended to deliver it. His expedition had grown mundane, and it was time to bring it back to life.

“So you will wander alone through these parts?” the doctor asked.

Nikolai laughed. “I will take care to not lose myself in the fog, if that is what you are asking. Sometimes a man must wander, my friend,” he said. “But rest assured, we will gather together after three days.”

The doctor nodded and fell in line behind his leader. Nikolai was uncertain if this plan of his would do more good than it would endanger them all, but it was a risk he was willing to take. They had found nothing useful thus far; nothing the motherland would be inclined to return to claim. Cartography was their stated manifest, but he was under no false pretenses. By moving outward in smaller groups, the expedition could cover more territory and more ground than by moving in a single line.

So far, they had charted the great river to their north all the way from the sea, but they knew that every river began somewhere. Whether it was a lake amid the mountain peaks or from tributaries caused by glacial melt, he did not know.

And he did not care.

Nikolai Alexei was here for one reason, and one reason alone. His homeland sought riches, as did his men. All men sought more than what God had initially blessed them with. It was a man's duty to find what he was owed in this life, with all the more blessings to be bestowed upon him in the afterlife.

This new land was not known for its riches, but only a fool would think the Spanish had been capable of taming it when they came. This land was made for Russians. Only they understood it. This great unknown that had attracted Nikolai was an opportunity that he was not going to let pass.

# Prologue

## Alexei Expedition

### Northwest Territory, Canada

1704

When the first star appeared in the heavens above them, the men made camp, throwing oilskins over tent poles in a circle by the river bank.

They were slow, Nikolai noted. After the last few days' effort it did not surprise him, but it did not please him much either. It took over an hour to set up the ten tents and build a fire, but no more than ten minutes for the men to begin huddling around it.

Soon the moon rose, nearly full. A meal was prepared, a roasted deer and herb soup, and the men began singing.

But Nikolai had had enough. He broke away from the camp and lifted the moose skin hood up and over his head. This Siberian Yupik coat was one of the best trades he had made. The bitter cold tried to bite into his flesh, and the gentle wind threatened to chill his core, but he didn't notice. He made for a smaller clearing to the south that he had seen earlier, one with a rock outcropping against a higher mountain cliff. The river they were following had likely cut down into this valley they were currently in, and if he was lucky, it had left some interesting formations for him.

He reached the clearing and scared away a small beaver that would make a fine pelt when it reached adulthood, and stepped out into the open grassy area to get a good look at the outcropping. It appeared that the boulders were precariously situated around a hole near the ground, beckoning him closer. As he approached, he could see even in this failing light that what he had found was an opening to a small cave.

He had no light with him, but he ducked inside anyway. It was useless. He could explore little with just hands and arms.

Tomorrow, he would head here first thing, bring a torch and a few extra men. This was the type of cave that would have made a perfect shelter for one of the native tribes that might call this place home. So far, they had not encountered any such people, but he had no way of knowing if these indigenous tribes he had heard tell of lived along these rivers or not.

A light appeared behind him, flickering and orange. He could almost feel the heat of the torch as it grew brighter.

"Nikolai?" A voice said, softly. "Is that you?"

It was the doctor's voice, a little unsure.

"Yes, doctor," Nikolai said. He felt the excitement within him growing. "Bring the light! I would very much like to have a look at this place."

The doctor joined him and lifted the flaming torch up in front of them.

Scrawled upon the walls were dozens of paintings articulating dancing men and women around fires, hunting trips, and deaths.

So many deaths.

One particularly macabre image depicted a man and woman lying sideways next to each other, their arms crossed as in a representation of death. Six children were drawn below them haphazardly as if added at different times in the past.

Nikolai and the doctor gazed at the drawings, trying to decipher their meaning. Sections of paintings had been scratched out or painted over as if the original author had changed the story halfway through.

“I don’t understand. Do you, sir?”

Nikolai didn’t respond. He took the torch from the other man’s hand and continued on deeper into the cave. A few feet past the first wall, the ceiling grew higher, and he drew himself up to his full height. More cave paintings decorated the walls to his left and right, and arrows were drawn near the floor. Farther on, and the small cavern twisted to the left and ended in a rounded chamber.

He swung the torch around this room, at first looking for a continuation of the path he was on. Finding none, he held the torch lower. Stacks of bones and skulls lay atop one another, of all shapes and sizes. Men, women, and children all lay close together, though arranged into what he assumed must have been families.

In front of these, he found baskets made from sinewy animal skins, with lids fashioned from skin and bones. The leatherwork was remarkable and he reached down to grab one. He examined it closely, handing the light to the doctor. Stamped into the sides and top of the basket were designs and symbols that he could not interpret. They swirled around the edges, leaving no section of leather untouched.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. He twisted the top of the basket, finding the lid secured tightly, either by design or from years of rest. He gave the lid a harder twist and felt a pop.

The top of the basket came off, sending dust shooting through the air. He waved it away and dropped the lid to the ground.

He saw what was inside, and only then realized how heavy the basket was. He turned the basket upside down, emptying its contents out onto the cave floor. Hundreds of silver coins bounced on the dirt and rolled around.

“For the glory of...” the doctor said, his voice hoarse.

“I imagine this is the sort of thing we have come here for,” Nikolai said. He scooped up a handful of the silver coins and held them up to the light. “Do you recognize these?”

“No. I have never seen such a design.”

Upon the surface of each coin was a remarkably intricate design; either hand carved or stamped. It featured the bust of a native man, and Nikolai could even see the outline of a frown on his face. He was surrounded by what looked like fire, each wisp carefully measured and drawn.

“From the local population?” the doctor asked.

Nikolai shook his head. “No. The people here use the shells of clams as their currency, and most simply trade goods instead. This... must be from somewhere else entirely.”

He flipped it over in his hand. The back was a reflection of the front, with the same native man frowning up at them. The fire, however, was markedly absent from this side. In its place were swirls and lines, which looked to be framing the man in the center.

“Fire on one side, wind on the other,” Nikolai whispered. “A dichotomy. What could it represent?”

“What is in the other baskets?” the doctor asked. He reached for another, trying at first to lift it from the ground. The basket slid a few inches toward him but stayed on the floor. “This one is considerably heavier, sir,” he said.

Nikolai reached down and twisted the lid free. He pushed the basket over with his right foot and watched as more silver coins tumbled out, identical to the one in his hand.

“Doctor,” he said, “bring the men. And bring the satchels as well. I count at least twenty of these baskets. What about you?”

The doctor shook his head excitedly. “Perhaps more.”

“If each contains even a portion of what is in these first two, it should be more than enough to justify a return home, do you think?”

The doctor smiled.

Nikolai wasn't greedy, but he felt the stirrings of excitement growing in his chest. He would share this treasure with his men without question, but he needed to be sure of what he had found. He moved to the back of the cavern, now standing directly in front of the pile of skeletons. Reaching down, he lifted the lid on one of the baskets that had been placed close to the back.

More dust spread outward from the freshly opened container, and he blinked and waved it away with his free hand. He moved the torch down closer to the top of the basket and peered inside.

It was empty.

*Odd.* He reached for the basket nearest it and lifted its lid too.

Empty, save for a few small tools.

He considered calling the doctor back, but stopped himself. *Why would they bury them here?* he wondered. *Why would they place a nearly empty basket next to a tribute to their deceased loved ones?*

Had someone come before him? Someone who had found the baskets and emptied what they could? It did not make sense. Anyone who had explored this cave before them would certainly have emptied it of its treasures. They would not have left anything of value behind, and they would not have put the lids back on each basket. Thieves were anything but tidy.

Yet these two baskets were empty? He looked again, this time lifting one of the baskets to eye level and turning it. He could see the fine sinewy lines of the bottom, woven together and sewn shut. A few tools shifted at the bottom; what looked like a few small pipes, a bowl made of clay, and some other small sticks and rocks.

He coughed and realized for the first time how thick the dust in the air had become. Waving his hands, he backed away from the burial site. He coughed again, and this time, felt his lungs strain with the effort.

He turned away from the room and walked back upward until the cave ceiling closed in on him. He stepped out into the small clearing. Night had fallen completely, and thousands of stars peered down at him. He fell to his knees, trying to catch his breath. He sucked in air, forcing his lungs back open again. He struggled forward then rolled onto his back in the snow.

Nikolai struggled to calm his thinking and shut his eyes.

*Breathe.* He willed himself to breathe, in and out, until he felt the dust clearing from his system. His breathing became normal and controlled.

Just then, he heard the footsteps of his men running toward the clearing. He stood and brushed the snow from his back. He lifted his head and walked towards the edge of the woods. “Have you retrieved the satchels?”

“We have, sir. Where is the cave?” The voice was Lev's, the huge bear of a man tumbling out of the woods first. His eyes were wide, and his breath was heavy, pouring out of his mouth and nose in great bursts. With scars on his face and body from a lifetime serving his homeland as a soldier and a woodsman, Nikolai enjoyed the man's company and trusted his skill as a dedicated naturalist who was as knowledgeable as himself.

Nikolai gestured to the entrance. The group, fifteen men in all, trotted past and soon emerged three at a time with their satchels heavy. The endeavor took only thirty minutes, and they joined Nikolai in the clearing when they were finished. Only four of the baskets had been empty, including the two Nikolai had found.

If the men were jovial before, they were near ecstatic now. They knew their leader was a fair and honest man, and they would each get a good portion of the discovery. The primary cartographer among them, Roruk, began scratching some notes into a small notebook he had produced from his pocket. He measured the edges of the clearing, counting each step as he went and drawing them into this book.

When he finished, he nodded to Nikolai and they returned to the main camp.

“We leave tomorrow,” Nikolai said as the other men gathered around. “We have added too much weight to continue the expedition for now, and it will be a burden already with the water and food we must carry with us.”

Cheers erupted around the fire and the men broke into song. Nikolai wondered how men could be so merry without the aid of spirits and drink, but he did not stifle the mood.

He silently stepped away from the doctor and Lev and entered his tent. As the leader of this expedition, he shared it with no other man, and he enjoyed the privilege. He slipped off his coat and nestled onto his cot.

The noise around the campfire grew, but Nikolai could hardly hear it. He felt as if his mind was on fire, as if his head was being held above a pot of boiling water. He started to sweat, and his hands and arms began to itch. Nikolai struggled to stifle the burning sensation, and considered calling out for the doctor’s aid. Before he could, however, he drifted into a welcome and deep sleep.

# Prologue

## Alexei Expedition

### Northwest Territory, Canada

1704

Nikolai awoke the next morning to an odd sound.

Silence.

Pure, pristine winter silence. The quiet he had not heard since before they had left Russia. The quiet of his youth. Intense and intimidating. Nikolai would normally have welcomed it with a sharp sniff and a deep, satisfying breath, but this morning should not have been so quiet. An expedition with a group of almost thirty men guaranteed that every moment would be filled with some racket or another.

He threw the blankets off and stood. His head brushed the top pole of his tent as he opened the flaps. The fire had long since diminished, though wisps of cold ash rose with the gentle breeze, giving the appearance of smoke. The cluster of tents was situated in a circle around the fire, like spokes on a wagon wheel. His tent was the northernmost one, and separated from the others on each side by a few rows of trees. The tents were traditional, two vertical poles and a horizontal one resting atop them, with canvas stretched over it and staked into the ground at the corners. Each tent was immaculately placed, perfectly spaced, and set up to look exactly the same. His men were good men, Nikolai knew, and they cared deeply for these small details. But where were they? Why weren't they preparing for their long journey home?

"Doctor? Lev?" He called out. He entered the nearest to find the two men still asleep beneath mounds of blankets and furs. He kicked at the doctor's cot with an unlaced boot and asked again.

Hearing nothing in return, Nikolai pulled the blankets from the man's head. The outermost blanket, a thick woven fabric, caught on something and he struggled to pull it down. After a more forceful tug, the blanket fell away to reveal the flesh of the doctor's face eaten by a rash, red boils covering the surface of his skin.

Nikolai stumbled backward in disgust. A portion of the skin on the poor man's forehead had stuck to the blanket, glued there by dried tissue and blood. The doctor's eyes were open, but they were glazed over in death.

Instinctively, Nikolai clutched a hand to his mouth, struggling to hold back the vomit he felt rising in his throat. He pulled the blanket away completely, and found every inch of exposed skin on the doctor's body covered in similar boils. He turned to Lev's cot and made the same cursory examination.

More rash. More boils. More death.

Lev had also passed sometime during the night. Both men lay in their blankets, gazing up at the roof of the tent with blank eyes. Nikolai moved away. Closed the flap behind him. He looked down at his own hands and arms and noticed the same rash spread and thickened over most of his skin.

It was no longer itchy, but he felt the heat radiating from his skin on the places around his body that had been infected. Last night it was just his hands and arms. Now he felt it over his shoulders, neck, and upper back.

He checked two more tents, finding the same horrifying faces staring up at him in each. All of his men—all twenty-seven of them—were dead.

He was the sole survivor on an expedition that was now thousands of miles away from home, in one of the remotest places known to man.

Another tree cracked in the distance, and he knew that winter was about to set in for good.





## Yellowstone National Park Wyoming Present Day

Harvey “Ben” Bennett eased the end of his rifle through the small space between the two bushes. He readjusted his left knee, moving a rock to the side of the bush he had crushed under his jeans. He held the rifle steady, using a stray branch as a platform. He watched the scene through the end of the scope.

The grizzly was busy rummaging through the food from an overturned cooler in the clearing. The female, small for her age but no less dangerous, grunted in delight as she discovered bits of bacon and pancakes from that morning’s breakfast.

The campers had long since fled, calling the main park line and complaining of a nuisance bear in the area. They were worried the bear would enter their camp and scare their kids, or worse.

*Worried the bear would do what it was designed to do*, Ben thought.

These types of campers were the worst kind. They left a mess, complained constantly, and ruined the sanctity of the ecosystem they’d stumbled into.

People from the cities treated camping like a luxury all-inclusive resort vacation. As if nature was designed specifically to please them. Ben hated them, almost as much as hated this part of his job.

Nuisance animals, everything from raccoons to grizzlies, were a major turnoff for visitors and tourists, and therefore a problem. People had no idea how to handle animals looking for an easy meal and tended to freak out and assume they were under attack rather than calmly leave the scene and find a ranger.

Ben slid a round into the chamber and took aim. He closed each eye in turn, checking the distance and trying to gauge where the bear would move next. His left eye provided him a view of the attached manometer as he peered through the scope, allowing him to adjust for pressure without losing sight of the target. The aluminum barrel and American Walnut stock felt warm in his hands; alive. It was a comfortable weapon, and Ben was satisfied with the department’s purchase of these relocation tools.

He watched the bear’s thick neck muscles throb as she tore off a chunk of cardboard from the pile of smelly trash she’d discovered.

That was the other thing Ben hated about these people. They had no intention of learning anything—how to cook, what to eat in the woods, how to find food—they just wanted the comforts of home in a temporary excursion from reality.

The bear straightened its neck slightly, and Ben suddenly caught a glimpse of her left eye.

It glistened with age, a sheen of gray sparkling in the corner.

Mo.

Ben recognized the grizzly from the other times he’d encountered her down here. He had helped a few crews move her only months ago last summer, and again two years prior to that.

Ben sighed, and focused on the air leaving his lungs. He sucked in a quick, small breath, and held it in. He counted to five and pulled the trigger.

The soft popping sound took him by surprise—it always did. The juxtaposition of the man-made machine he’d just fired was severely out of place in what was supposed to be a pristine environment. Yet here he was adding to the mess and he was immediately remorseful.

The bear bristled and sat straighter, her back still to Ben. She turned slowly, her head lolling around as the tranquilizer began to take effect. Mo wouldn't charge him. The projectile dart alone wouldn't have alarmed the bear any more than if a small branch had fallen on her, but Ben knew the two milligrams of etorphine and acepromazine maleate compound the dart had just injected into the side of the bear would be more than enough to drop it.

Ben waited, not wanting to alert the bear. Angering or exciting an animal just before they fell asleep would cause undue stress, and it may even put them in danger. After a few more seconds, the bear let out a low moan as she stood on her hind feet. She turned in an unsteady circle, then fell back to the ground. The grizzly lay down on the damp leaves, and her head fell to the forest floor.

Ben waited a full minute before stepping out of his hiding spot. He pushed through the bushes, not bothering to spread the brambles apart and crossed the clearing and stood over the animal.

"Sorry about that, Mo," he said softly. "Let's get you back up north again." He removed the small CO2 cartridge from under the barrel of the rifle and dropped it in his pocket. He crouched down and found the red feather-tipped dart protruding from the bear's left flank.

The dart was expensive and reusable, and the department prohibited rangers from leaving them in the parks, even if they were damaged or destroyed.

Ben unclipped the walkie-talkie from his belt and rotated the knob at the top.

"This is Bennett," he said into the device. "I've got Mo dropped up here; requesting assistance to get her cleared."

The radio crackled, then came to life.

"Okay, tag the location and stand by for location verification. We're sending out a crew—out."

Ben tucked his radio away and took out his phone. He tapped an app on the home screen and clicked around a few times, setting his current location into the device's memory, then turned on the GPS beacon.

Within minutes, a crew of four men and two women arrived at the campsite and began strapping the grizzly onto a board.

The rangers would move Mo to another area of the park with less human traffic. She would eventually wander down again, drawn to the enticing opportunity ignorant campers left her.

This was Mo's third repositioning, and Ben was worried it would be her last.

*Don't come back down here, Mo, Ben willed the sleeping giant. I won't be able to help you out again.*



The Chevy hiccuped over an invisible pothole in the road, and the aging suspension compensated with a clicking sound and a groan.

Ben pulled the truck to the left, easing it back to the center of the narrow dirt road before turning the radio up. The country song already blaring through the strained cabin speakers didn't need a boost, but it got one anyway.

"You really don't like to talk, do you?" Ben's passenger yelled. The young man sitting to Ben's right glanced over at him.

Ben kept his attention on the uneven road lying before them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ben noticed Carlos Rivera turning back to looking out his side window. Over the past hour, Ben had said maybe ten words, and what he had said was mainly instructive, telling Rivera to "call in to base" or "check Mo" in the truck bed. To his credit, Rivera had dutifully done as he was told, but Bennett still hadn't warmed to him.

They drove on for another fifteen minutes, moving slowly over bumps and divots, until finally, Ben pulled off the road and began guiding the truck over a small plain toward the edge of the forest. Behind it, a small mountain lifted itself from the flat ground, shadowed by Antler Peak to the north. As they drove, Ben took in the surroundings—it was beautiful, pristine. He took a deep breath and turned the radio back down.

"No, I don't much care for talking," he said. Rivera glanced over. "You're a decent enough kid, I guess. Thanks for helping out today."

Rivera laughed. "Kid? What, aren't you like twenty-five yourself?"

Ben kept his eyes straight, looking out at the road. "Thirty-two."

Rivera nodded, a surprised look on his face, as they pulled up to the thick tree line. The section of woods in front of them stretched around the base of the mountain, ending about halfway up and turning into a scraggly patch of saplings and bushes. Ben maneuvered the truck backwards into a gap between two trees and jumped out. He unhitched the tie-downs on the side of his truck and waited for Rivera to do the same on his side.

Ben moved to the rear of the truck and started to pull the tailgate down.

"Did you feel that?"

Ben looked up at his partner. Out of nowhere, a heavy bass note rocked the ground at their feet, and Ben felt a pressure of sound vibrate through his head. The deep rumble grew to a deafening tremor, then quickly died, reverberating through the trees.

"What the—" Rivera backed away from the truck, looking to the east and squinting through a strand of trees. His eyes grew wide. "Ben. Look."

Ben followed the younger man's gaze. A smoking mass mushroomed from the horizon upward. The cloud billowed out, growing exponentially.

Neither man spoke. They just watched, glued to the spot.

Suddenly an earthquake tore through the trees, ripping roots and stumps from the ground and lifting the truck into the air and throwing both men thirty feet head over heels. Ben hit the ground so hard he felt his insides churn.

He forced himself to sit up, trying to get his bearings, but the temblor would not stop. The truck lay on its side but he couldn't get to it even if it wasn't.

The ground had opened up. A widening gap in the earth drew a jagged line in the cracking dry soil and threatened to swallow the entire vehicle. Ben stumbled when he tried to stand.

*We have to get out of here.* Ben whipped around. *Where's Rivera?*

He wasn't at the truck. The bear's cage had toppled off the back and now lay upside down. Ben broke into a run and leapt over the widening crevasse.

Working frantically at the animal pen, he unlocked the padlock on the door and unlatched the two enclosures. He swung the door open and reached in.

Just as he did, he ripped his arm back.

Of all the things there was to worry about, and all he was concerned with was helping this bear survive.

*Good way to lose a hand,* he thought. He looked into the cage to find the grizzly unmoving, but breathing. The great beast was still unconscious.

The earth began to settle back to normal.

As fast as it had happened, it was over. In a mere thirty seconds the ground had lifted up, been pushed together with cataclysmic force, and fallen back down again. Trees had toppled over one another, trunks battered and smashed in half. Boulders that had rested in place for a millennia now sat disturbed, some cracked and broken.

And now, tranquility...

"Ben! Help!"

Rivera's voice came from somewhere on the other side of the truck. He ran toward it, skidding to a halt near the edge of the new fissure in the ground. Ben could see that the earth actually sloped downward for about twenty feet before it dropped straight down into an abyss.

Rivera was dangling over the edge, his white-knuckled fingers clawed around a tree root.

"I can't hold on," Rivera said.

Ben dropped to his stomach and reached down, grasping the other man's free hand. He gritted his teeth, summoning all his strength, and pulled.

The edge of the fissure wasn't solid rock, and as Ben pulled Rivera upward, the sides of the cliff eroded and fell away. Ben struggled with the angle for a half minute, then stopped.

"Switch hands. Give me your other arm," Ben shouted down to Rivera.

The young man's eyes burned with fear as he tried to do as instructed.

His arms shook as Ben willed himself to drag his colleague out of the hole.

And then, an aftershock, trembling through the woods.

The ground quaked again.

Ben lost his grip.

Rivera tumbled back down, swinging from the root with his other sweat-soaked hand.

Ben lunged over the edge to grab him, his finger glancing across Rivera's collar but missing him by mere inches. His hand slammed back into the wall of the cliff.

And then the tree root broke loose and snapped away from the dirt.

Rivera looked up at Ben as he realized in that instant what was happening.

The tree root fell away and Rivera with it.

Within seconds he was gone.

Ben called down to him.

There was no answer.



“What do you mean, *crack*?”

Ben looked up from the couch. “Crack. Fissure. Hole in the earth.”

“Like a sinkhole?”

“Yes. Sort of.”

“Then why didn’t you just say sinkhole?”

“I didn’t think of it,” Ben said. “And it *wasn’t* a sinkhole, technically. It was caused by some... explosion.”

“And Carlos Rivera fell into it?”

Ben nodded, his expression blank. The officer sighed and turned to his partner. The second officer stepped forward, resuming the line of questioning. “And you said you two were moving—relocating—a nuisance bear?”

A man walked into the room. His large, round frame was unmistakable. Ben’s boss, George Randolph, jumped in to the discussion. “A nuisance bear is a bear that’s caused no harm or considerable damage and just needs to be relocated to a more remote area—”

The officer was not impressed. “This is Wyoming. We know what a nuisance bear is.”

“Look, Mo, the grizzly, has three strikes against her now. We were trying to get her far enough away that she’ll stay put.”

The officers wrote everything down, the others muttering amongst themselves. Ben sat motionless on the lounge couch, the only remotely comfortable place in the entire room. The lights above the gathered local officers, park rangers, and staff burned down on him like the sterile lighting in a hospital wing. Ben felt trapped, out of place, and anxious.

*The last time I was in a hospital...*

Ben shook away the feeling. He knew it wasn’t going to help his anxiety levels now to dwell on memories from the past.

All the staff on duty during the explosion had been summoned to this staff building to “debrief,” as the local police called it. A fire and rescue team was on its way, due to arrive any moment. Ben also saw a few men and women milling about whom he didn’t recognize, talking quietly to individual members of the Yellowstone team about the morning’s events.

*Government*, he thought. One of the women walked toward him. Slim, fit, and wearing a tight suit that matched her demeanor—like the kind of person who took herself too seriously.

When the woman didn’t deviate from her course, Ben almost said something he shouldn’t have.

The words left her mouth before she’d even stopped moving. “May I ask you a few questions?”

Ben didn’t respond. He glanced at her quickly, top to bottom, and aimed his eyes at the only window on this side of the building.

“Mr. Bennett, correct? Harvey Bennett?” she asked.

Again, he didn’t answer.

“People usually call you Ben, though, right?”

Reluctantly, he nodded.

“Mr. Bennett, you’re a ranger here at Yellowstone? You’ve worked here for thirteen years, correct? First as an intern of sorts, then moving into your current role.”

These weren’t questions. She was verifying information some subordinate had given her.

“Standard procedure would suggest you introduce yourself first,” Ben said.



The woman wasn't sidetracked, and she continued. "You were nineteen, moved your life up here, and now live in a trailer just outside the park's perimeter. May I ask what you were running away from?"

Ben clenched his jaw and resumed staring out the window.

*I wasn't running away, he thought. I just needed space.*

"Later, then. What about Rivera? Mr. Carlos Rivera, twenty-five years old, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. How long had you worked with him?" The woman's emphasis on the word "had" was not lost on Ben.

"Are you going to ask any questions you don't already know the answer to?" he shot back.

The woman hesitated, before nodding. "Fair enough. Mr. Bennett, can you talk about what you saw up there this morning? The explosion?"

Ben thought for a moment. "Looked like a bomb. Mushroom cloud and everything."

"Right. And what reaction did you and Mr. Rivera have when you noticed it?"

"We didn't have time to react to it—there was an earthquake, and then..." He didn't finish the thought. She was wearing an ID tag he didn't recognize.. "Who are you with?" he asked.

"The Centers for Disease Control, BTR Division, local out of Billings, Montana."

Ben got off the couch and stood over her. "Listen, uh, CDC, BTR—whatever, lady," he said as he walked past her. "I've answered questions now for almost an hour. If you want more information, just read the reports." He walked through the gathering of people, heading for the door. He pushed it open and stepped down onto the patio, not looking back.

He heard the outer screen door slam closed behind him, then creak back open again. Footsteps quickly pounded down the steps. Within seconds, the woman was next to him. He didn't slow down.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bennett, I know you've had a rough morning, but—"

"*Rough morning?*" Ben stopped and wheeled around to face her. "A rough morning is what Rivera's family is having. A rough morning is what the families of the—what, one hundred or so?—people who were killed in that explosion are having. I'm just trying to have *a* morning, but it's apparently not going to be possible."

"I—I know, Mr. Bennett, I just—"

"Stop calling me that."

"Okay, I just need to know exactly what happened."

"You *know* what happened. You and everyone else. A bomb went off and a lot of people died. There was an earthquake, the ground opened up and Rivera fell into it. What else do you need from me? I tried to save him, okay? I had his arm, and he fell. What? You think I'm a suspect in a murder investigation or something?"

She lowered her voice. "No, *I* don't, Ben. But my boss isn't the kind of man who will just let things be. He's going to ask some questions—some very specific questions—and I need to be able to answer them to his satisfaction. I just want to get back to Montana, back home."

Ben kicked at a stone at his feet, then met the woman's eyes again. "Where exactly is home?"

"Outside Billings, small town called Lockwood."

He thought for a moment. "Will you do me a favor, uh—what is your name again?"

"Julie. Juliette Richardson."

"Right. Just do me a favor, Julie?"

She waited.

"If you can make sure I don't have to talk to anyone else about this mess? I'll tell you what I know; that's all I can do. But I don't want to screw around with the other government types like you or

anyone else. Fair?"

The corner of her mouth tugged upwards, almost into a smile. "I think I can work that out."



The club connected with the ball directly in the sweet spot. Josh Hohn watched it sail down the fairway, breaking left before landing and following the contour of the long par 5, as if the ball had been guided remotely. Josh smiled, knowing exactly what his boss, Francis Valère, would say.

He heard the older man standing behind him mutter a French curse word under his breath and then, in English, “must be that nice piece you are using.”

Josh knew that his countless hours of practice and thousands of practice drives, as well as his commitment to fitness, were the real reasons he was able to send the ball just about wherever he wanted it. But the TaylorMade SLDR driver was a gift from Valère, and the man tried as hard as possible to make Josh feel bad about it.

“Well, you picked it, boss.” Josh winked at him.

Francis Valère grabbed a driver from his golf bag strapped to the back of their cart and marched up to a bright pink tee. Placing his ball carefully, he took a few practice swings before launching the ball down the fairway. He watched it rise and get caught in a gust of wind that pushed it to the right. The ball landed close to a sand trap, bounced a few times, and came to a stop in the taller grass just before the tree line.

Josh laughed. Valère glared at him.

“Should have bought one for yourself, I guess.” Josh shrugged.

“Said the man who is still trailing me by three.” Valère returned to the cart and put his club away. He slid into the driver’s seat. “Come on, that one is going to be hard to find.”

Josh was already sitting in the cart and checking his cell phone. “You’ve got to be kidding me...” He glanced up. “You’re not going to believe this. Looks like a bomb went off at Yellowstone. ”

“Terrorists?”

Josh scrolled through an article on his smartphone, skimming the news article that he’d pulled from his feed reader. “I don’t know. It says there was minimal damage, some casualties...” he paused. “Shit, I don’t mean to be morbid, but if you’re going to bomb a place, wouldn’t you choose one a little more, uh, populated?”

“I suppose I would.” Valère kept driving, keeping the cart on the path that stretched along the right side of Hole 13. “Unbelievable.”

“I know, right?”

“I am talking about the ball. I cannot see it anywhere.” He brought the golf cart to a halt and stepped out. “You want to help me find it?”

Josh returned the phone to his pocket and exited the vehicle. “What were they hoping to achieve?”

Valère poked around with his foot, trying to find where the white Nike ball had landed. The grass was perfectly trimmed, left a little long to differentiate it from the short-cropped blades nearby. “What do you think they are working on?”

Josh thought for a moment, the question and change of subject taking him by surprise. “Who knows? Maybe they’re actually taking a vacation, like you ordered them to.” Josh knew his boss was talking about the two lab assistants who also worked for Frontier Pharmaceuticals Canada. Valère had founded Frontier Pharmaceuticals Canada only a few years ago with a massive personal investment and some venture funding from a couple of his friends. He’d hired Joshua Hohn as his right-hand man and partner, and Josh had, in turn, hired the two part-time university students to help with data and organization.

“You know them as well as I do, Hohn—they are probably hard at work curing cancer or creating the next *superfood*.” He stressed the word “super” with his thick French accent. Josh knew he meant it as a joke, as they’d often made fun of America’s blind obsession with “super” fruits and vegetables. He loved creating hybrid plant fungi in their lab that included an extra dosage of a vitamin or two, then trying to get Valère to market it as the “next big thing.” It was a fun game Josh played while working on the other project.

And their other project really *was* the next big thing.

For the past three years he had inched closer to the finalization of a very real “super” drug: an organic shell that could grow around the cell walls of microscopic organisms. The shell acted as a sort of flexible and semi-permeable “armor.”

It was fascinating to Josh, to conceive of a lab-created chemical bonding molecule that actually fused to a cell’s outer wall and added an extra layer of protection while still allowing the cell’s internal functions to interface with the outside world. It would revolutionize the pharmaceutical world. The world of nanotechnology was almost upon them, and Josh knew his career would be solidified if they were successful.

So far, they had been. Their biggest breakthrough happened last week, at the end of a long stretch of over twenty hours in “The Dungeon,” the nickname he had given their dark, cluttered workspace. Josh had called Valère frantically, almost tripping over his words as the test results poured in.

The nano-coating he’d applied had finally done what it was supposed to do—it stuck.

Valère finally found his ball near a tree stump that was lined up perfectly between himself and the hole. He cursed again, grabbing a pitching wedge from his bag.

“Going up and over?” Josh asked, clearly surprised.

“I do not have it in me to waste three shots and let you catch up.” He took a few practice swings and set into his swing ritual.

The shot was beautiful—a perfect arc that carried the ball cleanly over the stump and straight to the middle of the fairway, mere inches from Josh’s first shot.

“Well, I’m glad I didn’t bet you that you couldn’t do it,” Josh said.

“I am not a betting man,” Valère said.

“No, you’re not, but you should be. With this product of yours, you could have been set.”

Valère turned to Josh. “Rest assured, my friend, my exposure in this company is over and above anything I would wager out here with you. And do not forget, you have quite a stake in this as well.”

Josh nodded. He had signed on for a half-million-dollar salary, in Canadian dollars, and had taken an options contract as well in preparation for their inevitable IPO. Further, he had a small percentage share in the company’s future profits.

Basically, both men were about to be rich beyond their wildest dreams.

“When I get back into the office next week, I have a call with our other two investors and patent lawyer, and from there I will make a decision about timing,” Valère said.

“What do you need me to work on, then?” Josh asked. They’d arrived at the mid-point of the hole and walked to where their balls lay in the grass. “I’m guessing we’ll need to set up some meetings with the bigger representatives and start on the marketing?”

“No, we will wait on the marketing. I need to get the sample to the investors, and they will start production.”

“Production of what?” Josh asked.

“Do you remember my trip to the Northwest Territory that I took a year ago?” Valère asked.

Josh cocked his head. This was an interesting and sudden change of subject.

“I visited the site of a native tribe of people who have long since perished. There, we also found the remains of a camp, and what we assumed was a Russian expedition.”

“We? I thought you went alone?”

“I met with my investors—as you know, we have been business partners for a long time.”

“So this was a business trip?” Josh asked. He was growing more and more confused.

“Of sorts, yes. Anyway, we discovered the cause of death for these poor explorers. A plant that is capable of releasing a small amount of its natural defense mechanism into the surrounding air when disturbed. In its powdered form, I believe, it was used by this native tribe as some sort of hallucinogen. However, over time, that same defense mechanism turned into a quite lethal substance.”

“You’re talking about the sample you have in the freezer, right? Those boxes that were shipped back with you?”

Valère nodded. “We wished to *also* use this substance as a defense mechanism, just like the plant did. However, I needed to strengthen it; to improve its potency—”

“You created a virus?”

“I *discovered* one. In its natural state, its potency is barely enough to harm a small mammal unless it is ingested in large quantities. But with a few alterations and improvements—”

“What are you talking about?” Josh was horrified. “That’s not a medical application, Francis—”

“It does not concern you what the application is,” Francis said.

Josh stepped up to his ball and slammed his club down in a reckless swing. The ball flew off the ground, leaving a dirty streak of brown in the grass. He watched, his anger building, as the ball careened to the right and over the line of trees. Without turning back around, he began walking toward the trees to find it.

*How could he do this?* he wondered. Josh had been working with Valère for over three years, and he thought he knew the man. They both had been interested in *preserving* life through their work and science.

This sounded like the exact opposite.

He crashed through the thick bushes that marked the end of the golf course and the beginning of undeveloped land and kept walking toward a stand of pine trees he’d last seen his ball flying toward. As he neared the trees he could hear the sound of running water.

The trees stood like sentinels in front of a steep hill, standing guard over the cliff. The hill fell away at a steep angle down to a river, where he could see water tumbling over rocks and forming small rapids as it wound through the canyon.

What he didn’t see, however, was his ball.

“I believe it landed farther up,” his boss’s voice called out from behind him. Valère had driven their cart to the edge of the course and walked to Josh.

“You can’t do this, Valère. You can’t sell us out like that. Who’s buying, anyway?”

“It is not a matter of money—”

“Bullshit!” Josh barked. “Of *course* it is! Why else would you have kept this from me?”

“I told you, it is not something you should concern yourself with. This plan predates our arrangement, Josh.”

Josh watched as his boss removed Josh’s driver from his bag. He inspected it, examining the lightweight graphite build. “We have been working for a lifetime on this, and it is not something I will abandon before I am finished.”

Josh took a step back up toward the hill, a pained expression on his face. “Seems like *you’re* a terrorist. That’s all this is. You smug, genocidal fool.”

“You have your names for what I do, and I have mine. I am working on something *far* bigger than anything you can imagine,” Valère said. “Something much more significant.”

“You won’t get away with it,” Josh said. “You won’t be able to run from it when you’re done.”

“I am not planning on running, Josh. I am here, and I will stay right here. And if I am removed, there will be another to take my place. And another.”

Josh saw his friend and business partner watch him, as if he were examining a specimen. “It is truly a shame, Joshua.”

“What?” Josh’s eyes widened as he noticed Francis raising the golf club into the air.

Valère lashed out with the club and struck Josh in the head. There was a sickening smack, and Josh immediately fell to the ground.

Blood ran into and over his eyes. Coating his vision with a shade of red. Another second passed and he couldn’t see at all. The pain was excruciating. His brain felt like mush. He couldn’t think; he couldn’t speak—

“It is a truly a shame to lose a mind such as yours, my friend. But you are wrong. I will get away with it. America is not united enough to save itself.”

Josh tried to raise his arm, to do something to fend off the attack he knew was coming—

But he could not.

He could only stare with unseeing eyes as Valère brought the driver down and smashed it into his skull.





Ben and Julie sat tucked away in a back corner of the staff cafeteria where the peeling paint on the walls had gone unnoticed for years. The faint smell of fryers and old food mixed with cleaning supplies was off-putting and yet familiar at the same time. Unpleasant if you were a newcomer, oddly comforting if you weren't.

Ben sipped his coffee, black, almost too hot to drink, while he waited for Julie's next question.

"Did you know Rivera well?"

"No."

"That's it? That's all you've got for me?"

"If you hadn't noticed, I don't make friends too quickly."

"So what was the deal with this bear?"

"Mo."

"Excuse me?"

"The name of the grizzly," Ben said. "Her name is Mo."

"You named the bear?"

"Yeah, we give names to some of our frequent flyers. Mo's got three strikes now, but we got her moved up there pretty far. Hopefully she was okay after the, uh, incident."

Julie scrawled some notes in a miniature notepad she'd taken from her back pocket. Ben sipped his coffee, waiting for her to finish. He listened to the gentle commotion emanating from the front lounge, bits of conversation floating in from rangers and park staff.

"...Was probably nuclear, right?"

"No way, too small—I mean, could have been a test or something gone wrong..."

"...Government's probably gonna try to cover this one up and sweep it under..."

Julie looked up and caught Ben's eye. "This wasn't an accident, but it certainly wasn't a government test or anything. They're going to be all over this place within the hour. By tonight, Yellowstone will be crawling with FBI, CIA, DoD, every acronym you can think of."

Ben cringed. "What about BTR?"

Julie glanced down at her own name tag briefly as though seeing it for the first time. "Oh, BTR," she said, "Biological Threat Research division of the CDC. Not exactly top-secret, but it's a new program the CDC's trying to get funding for. We're keeping it quiet until we have some victories under our belt."

"Like trying to figure out who bombed Yellowstone?"

She snorted. "Well, more like trying to analyze the long-term negative environmental effects of possible radiation in the fallout zone."

"Hmm, not exactly tabloid-worthy."

"No, it's pretty unexciting stuff, and that's why it's just an idea at this point. But if I—we—can write up something worthwhile, they might just make it a formal department."

Ben nodded. "And your office is in Billings. Seems like a pretty small city for a CDC office."

"It is, and that was part of the attraction. It's a skeleton crew right now, just me and my team of five—"

A loud shout echoed through the corridor from the other room, followed by a growing commotion and more voices.

"Get him inside, on that couch!" one voice shouted.

“Who is it?” Ben heard.

The voices grew frantic, Ben heard the deep gravel of his boss, George Randolph, trying to make his orders heard over the din. “Get him down and get some water. Pull his shirt off and let’s get a look at that rash—”

Julie was on her feet. Ben followed along on behind.

“How much is covered? Hands, arms?”

“And his head—look at his neck!”

Julie pushed on the swinging door to the hallway and barred Ben from going any further. “Wait. We don’t know what that is, but it’s not going to do anyone any good if we walk in there, and it’s contagious. They’ve got enough people in there anyway.”

“But—”

Her cellphone started ringing. “Richardson,” she said as she brought the phone up to her ear.

After a minute, she banged the phone on the table.

“A bit one-sided for that to have been an argument,” Ben remarked.

“My boss. Come on,” she said. She didn’t wait for Ben to follow as she slid out the cafeteria’s rear exit, through the back of the commercial kitchen.

Outside, they were met by a bright noon sun and a red haze from the morning’s blast.



## Northwest Territory, Canada University of Manitoba Archaeological Dig One Year Ago

The rest of the afternoon faded quickly into evening, but thankfully, their excavation moved at a brisk pace as well. Before nightfall, the team of six—five students and the professor—had uncovered the remains of a camp.

Their excavations had revealed that the camp was arranged in a semi-circle around a central opening, in which one student found the remnants of a campfire. Another student found a nearly complete flap of canvas tent, with tie-downs and a large tent stake. Next to it, a small pouch containing five silver coins—a miraculous find, especially considering that the Native Americans who had lived in these parts had never printed any coins.

They shared the information about depth, soil density, and procedure as they went, and just as dusk approached, the team found three more tents, all collapsed in on themselves and preserved reasonably well beneath layers of the cold soil.

Together they marked, documented, and mapped the entire area, eventually creating a computer model of the landscape and coordinates.

But it wasn't the tents, or the artifacts, or even the coins that caused the most commotion.

It was what the team had found *beneath* those tents.

As two students carefully removed the canvas from the ground under the watchful eye of Dr. Fischer, what lay undisturbed beneath it for three centuries became visible.

The corpses of a lost expedition.

Some bodies were preserved better than others, but it was clear from the clothing, cranial structures, and some of the additional artifacts found nearby, that it was the fabled Alexei Russian expedition of the early 18th century.

Dr. Fischer was ecstatic; this was a discovery that, to him, surpassed anything he'd ever achieved in his professional career before now. He would write a book—maybe a volume of books—about this expedition, what it was attempting to accomplish, where it had been, and what had led to the eventual demise of these poor men.

Of course, there were questions to answer before these secrets would reveal themselves.

They had found pieces of maps, journals, and scraps of clothing, but they would need more to piece the story together. But now that Dr. Fischer had committed to exploring the nearby caves tomorrow, they had even less time to spend at this site.

He moved to another rectangular opening in the earth; a new hole they'd dug to continue their exploration. Another three tents were revealed, and another six skeletal remains were uncovered. In one, a student had removed a smoking pipe of carved bone and a small leather-bound journal. The student gave the pipe directly to another student, who was hard at work logging the items into the computer database and mapping the precise location they were found. The journal he handed to Dr. Fischer.

"Thought this might be interesting to you," the student said.

Dr. Fischer donned a pair of fresh latex gloves and held the journal delicately. He felt its worked leather surface, noticing the fine craftsmanship and attention to detail. After so many years, it really

was remarkable.

Most remarkable, however, was the fact that some of the paper inside the journal was still intact. Dirty, smudged, and difficult to read, but intact nonetheless.

He held the journal open, barely enough to peer inside, as he did not want to damage the worn spine, but he moved the book around to let enough light in to see what was on the right-hand page.

“Anyone read Russian?” he called. “And good eyes? This is too small for me to see.”

“Losing your vision already, old man?” one of the students yelled.

Dr. Fischer laughed.

Gareth, the student working the computer, stood and stretched. “I got it,” he said. “I can use a break anyway. Anyone want to take over?”

Another graduate student fell in behind the computer screen and continued to document the dig site.

“You read Russian?” Dr. Fischer asked.

“Yeah, it was an undergraduate minor. Something I was interested in.”

“Why?”

“Girl I met before that semester. I was hoping to impress her when I saw her again next year. Turned out she was German, but I kept taking the classes for fun.”

Dr. Fischer shook his head. He handed the small book over to his student and waited.

“Okay, yeah, I got this. Pretty good handwriting, actually. Let’s see... ‘*One more eventless day. Full moon last night and one of the men has caught a rabbit.*’” Gareth looked up. “Pretty exciting stuff, Doc.” Some of the other students who had gathered around chuckled.

“Keep reading,” Dr. Fischer said.

“‘*One other place in my life I have found solace such as this...*’ Can’t read that word; I think it’s a town or something. ‘*The wind whispers through our ranks; the snow crunches beneath our feet, and you would imagine it was the loudest noise in the forest.*’” He gently flipped through a few more pages. “A lot of this is more of the same,” he said.

By now, the other four students were gathered around Gareth and Dr. Fischer, each leaning on a shovel or sitting on the ground.

“Skip to the end,” Dr. Fischer said.

Gareth flipped to the back of the small leather journal. “Here we go. Last entry: ‘*It has made us sick. The baskets filled with that strange powder. No treasure is worth this. It has consumed us all. It is clear to me now that I am to die here alone...*’” Gareth’s voice trailed off just as the words of the journal entry had. His eyes were wide, surprise on his face. “Whoa. Pretty intense.”

“Damn,” another student whispered.

Dr. Fischer replayed the words in his mind, trying to commit them to memory. They’d found baskets somewhere. Somewhere close to where they now stood. Whatever was in them, besides these coins, was deadly. He looked up sharply, finding a young woman’s face in the crowd. “Steph—did any of you find any of these baskets? Or more coins?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing like that yet...” her voice shook. “Should we be worried? You know we hear about live *Yersinia pestis* being found at sites once in a while.”

“No, no, I don’t think this is the plague,” Dr. Fischer said. “Besides, the coins were out in the open, so they should be fine. But we need to change our plans a little. I’m not sure excavating any more of this area tomorrow is such a great idea.”

The students nodded solemnly. Somehow, just knowing this information had changed their perceptions of this site. Knowing that it wasn’t starvation or attack that had killed these men, but

something sinister and hidden, had deeply unnerved them.



“David Livingston,” Julie said to Ben as they walked across the parking lot, “is pretty much exactly what you think of when you think ‘bureaucracy by the book.’ He’d rather fail doing it the right way than succeed by not following the rules.” Julie turned left and started down a row of parked cars, Ben in tow; sedans, small station wagons.

“He’s not exactly the easiest person to work with, either,” she continued. “Actually, you don’t work *with* Livingston at all. You work *for* him. In his world, that means everyone’s working against him, and it’s up to him to right all our wrongs.”

“Sounds like a bucket of fun,” Ben said as they passed yet another Subaru Outback. “Which one’s yours?”

Julie clicked the button on her key fob and a beep sounded from down the row. Ben stopped short. Ahead lay a monstrous Ford F-450, extended cab Lariat. Dark gray. It loomed over the minuscule Subarus around it.

Julie threw him the keys. “You drive,” she said.

Ben wondered if it was Christmas. “Really?” He tried not to seem impressed.

She reached for the back door on the driver’s side and opened it up, grabbing a laptop case and bag. “I’ve got some work to do. You, uh, think you can handle her?”

Ben got into the driver’s seat and strapped in. He turned on the engine and listened to it purr while he waited for Julie to get in on her side. Once seated, he threw the truck into gear.

“Anyway, Livingston’s making us do these reports.” She opened the laptop. “He’s got this idea that if we write everything down and email it to him, he’ll be able to ‘crack the case,’ or figure out whatever it is we’re supposed to figure out. It’s pretty annoying, to say the least.

“So that call just now?” Julie continued. “He wants an *in-person* report every forty-eight hours. Can you believe that? He said if we can’t make it face-to-face, we have to call in, but it ‘won’t look good.’ I’m already up to here with processing, reports, and government forms, not to mention actually *doing* my job. And he thinks if I’m too busy to actually get to the office I have enough time to give him a play-by-play update over the phone?”

Ben listened as she vented, guiding the truck out of the parking lot and down the curved path leading from the staff facility. As he turned onto the main park road, he turned to Julie. “Where exactly are we going?”

She glanced back at him. “Oh, uh, I guess I should ask you first.”

Ben waited.

“You have plans? I could use your help back at the office.”

Ben couldn’t hide his surprise. “Back in Billings? That’s two hours away.”

She shrugged. “Just over two-and-a-half, actually. I assumed you didn’t have anything going on, what with the park needing to be closed for a while.”

“I *do* have a life outside of the park.”

“Really?”

Ben couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not. “Theoretically,” he said.

“I’ve got more questions to ask you,” she said. “But I can’t wait until after I get back. Livingston will want to know as soon as possible.”

He drove in silence for a few minutes. “I’ll need to swing by my place to pick up some clothes.”



“Billings has a Target, buy some when we get there.” Julie’s head didn’t even lift up from her computer screen.

“You buy ‘em, if you want my help.”

“Deal.”

He hadn’t expected that. “Look,” he said. “I’ll help you out for a couple days, tops. But just because I don’t have anything else going on doesn’t mean I want to play chauffeur for you forever.”

“I promise. Just to the office, and then I’ll buy you a plane ticket home—I can get my report prepared and sent on the way, and if anything comes up I can just ask.”

“Okay then,” he replied, uneasily. “But hold the plane ticket. I’ll rent a car.”

Julie didn’t question him. They drove on in silence for another twenty minutes, finally coming to a gas station. “One other thing,” Ben said.

“What’s that?”

“This is your truck. You pay for gas.”



David Livingston sat in his executive leather office chair and cracked his knuckles—an old habit. He ran his hands through his thick, oiled black hair and shifted in his seat. His computer dinged once with the sound of an incoming email, but he ignored it.

Clicking away from the news site, he read through the dossier on Juliette Alexandra Richardson, native of Montana. Other than a brief stint in California during and after college, she'd lived in Montana her entire life. He'd had his data lead, Randall Brown, send a copy to his office, where he scanned it and shredded the paper—a wasted tree and no doubt a waste of productive time. After five years at the CDC, he still had no idea why it was so damned difficult to just email everything. The data lead had tried explaining it to him several times—something about security and sensitive information, but it never took.

He reached the end of the dossier, not finding anything unusual or out of place. He shouldn't have been surprised—this was the third time he'd read it. It was similar to what his own looked like five years ago. Clean, simple, and without a black mark.

He had reached this point in his career through determination, hard work, and then bad luck. He'd first applied to the CDC as an investigator, hoping to land a job that allowed him to travel, study, and research the kinds of terrifying things the rest of world paid them to keep hidden. He'd started out following a team of scientists and biologists into the Andes but couldn't manage to get his name in the paper that was eventually written. After graduating and finishing his internship, he was passed over three times before landing a desk job at the Atlanta campus—CDC headquarters. He had toiled there for four years, e-signing his boss' expense reports and preparing meeting agendas.

Then his boss died. A man of sixty-one, a sudden heart attack left the department without a manager. Rather than replace him, Livingston found himself outsourced along with everyone else and the department all but shut down. Floating around, he landed a brief position as a “research specialist,” effectively a news and media junkie who speculated on which outbreak or natural disaster would lead to the next Mad Cow Disease or Bird Flu.

During his tenure, there was none.

Finally, his luck turned—or so he thought. What appeared to be an opportunity to lead a brand new, recently brainstormed section of the CDC became the mind-numbing middle management job in which he currently served. They'd been relegated to the backwaters of the CDC—southern Montana—and asked to “provide guidance on environmental and biological threats to the nation.”

In other words, he and his team were glorified storm chasers.

To Livingston, it was the worst place in the entire world.

Juliette, on the other hand, had come through his doors as a young CDC employee three years ago, still wet behind the ears with the usual “change the world” mentality. He wouldn't have picked her himself, but she had come highly recommended by people above his pay grade.

Plus, her looks certainly hadn't hurt her chances. Average height, thin, and curved in all the right places, she was certainly what he would describe as “a looker.”

Livingston pushed back from the desk and stood up, stretching his back and popping his neck. He pressed a button on the small intercom next to his computer and waited a moment.

“Please grab Stephens and tell him to come up here.”

A woman's voice responded through his closed door. “Yes, Mr. Livingston.”

Livingston knew his use of the intercom was an act of arrogance, but he didn't care. The intercom was a speaker that had been mounted on the wall outside his door, pointing down at the rest of the staff's desks. Their office space was so small that the only closed-door office rooms inside were his own and Julie Richardson's, which was currently unoccupied. The administrative secretary, technically charged to serve the entire staff of seven, had been given the nameplate "Executive Administrator" by Livingston, in order to help specify to everyone in the room who exactly she—and everyone else—*really* worked for.

When the knock on the door came, he waited a while, sat back down, then cleared his throat. "Come on in, Stephens."

Benjamin Stephens opened the door and stood on the threshold. He looked annoyed. "What can I do for you, Livingston?"

Livingston bristled—he wasn't a fan of people calling him just by his last name. He let it slide, but logged it into his mental file of personal grievances. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

"David, the secretary's desk is literally right next to mine, four feet from your door. If I didn't hear you over her intercom, I would've still heard you asking for me through the door."

Livingston ignored the response and motioned for Stephens to sit.

"I need you to do me a favor, Stephens," he said. "Richardson's out on assignment, and she was near Yellowstone Park." He paused. "You're aware of what happened at Yellowstone Park?"

Stephens nodded.

"Good. Well, anyway, she's out there traipsing around, trying to figure out how the regional environment will be affected by the radiation."

"I thought she was trying to study some fishing traps and the impact they're having on insects downriver?"

"She is—or she was. This is a little side project she came up with when she heard about the explosion. You know how she can be—overzealous and all that."

Stephens nodded again. "She's a hard worker."

"I want you to check in with her, like normal. You're her second-in-command on this team, and I need you to step up. She's not the kind of person to get excited about reporting back, but I know you understand why we do that."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Get in touch with her and stay in touch with her. Stick to the traditional channels—send everything through SecuNet. Clear?"

Stephens hesitated.

"What is it?"

"Well, no, sir, I mean that's great, but I don't understand how this is different than how I usually run things."

"It's not, Stephens. I'm just *reminding* you, since your team lead seems to think she can invent the rules. I don't want you forgetting how we do things around here, okay? You get Julie on speed-dial, and you keep me updated on what she's doing."

"Right."

"Randy from Data is ready to go, and he'll get you set up on SecuNet if he already hasn't. All phone calls, emails, hell—even telegraphs, I don't care—go through Data."

Livingston watched his employee carefully, trying to read the younger man's expression. He knew that *Stephens* knew Randall Brown was on vacation, but he wanted to see how Stephens would react. Would he ask a follow-up question? Pretend that Brown wasn't away? Something else entirely?

It was one of many types of “power games” Livingston enjoyed playing with his underlings—watching them squirm as they tried to figure out how best to respond.

Stephens stood as Livingston was finishing. “Got it, sir.”

In Stephens’ case, Livingston was usually disappointed: Stephens had a fantastic poker face.

“Great.” Livingston looked back down at his computer and pretended to be checking email. He waited until Stephens left the office, made his way over to a small cabinet on the wall at the back of the room.

He pulled out a decanter and poured himself a scotch. He’d made sure to specify in the employee manual that drinking was not allowed in the office, but he also believed that it was his executive right to be able to indulge in some of the finer things in life. He would have lit a cigar as well if it wouldn’t smoke them all out of the small space.



Ben had been driving for the better part of two hours.

Julie was now fast asleep in the seat beside him. Her hair was tousled, poking up from the back where her tight brown ponytail had come into contact with the seat's headrest. She'd kicked her right knee up against the window, trying to curl into a position that was more conducive to sleep, her body pressed into a much smaller space than Ben would've imagined possible. She'd kicked her shoes off long ago. Thankfully her feet didn't stink.

Ben changed the channel to country music. An old George Strait song piped through the cabin.

Julie stirred and wiped her mouth.

"Didn't mean to wake you," he said.

She opened her eyes and blinked. "Oh, my God. I, uh, I guess I fell asleep," she said with surprise. She sat up straight, moving her leg back down and straightening her creased blouse. She reached up to her hair. "Oh, man, what a mess. I guess I was more tired than I thought. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Ben said. He was about to say something else but stopped himself.

"What?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Just, uh, don't worry about it. Go back to sleep, you obviously need it."

"No, I think I'm good." She noticed the music. "Country? Good choice for this road."

Ben thought for a moment. "Hey, back at the staff building. That guy they brought in? What do you think it was?"

Julie didn't answer at first. Ben wondered if she was collecting her thoughts, or still tired. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that too. The way they described it—at least what I could hear—it sounded like a rash. Maybe viral." She sighed. "I should have taken a look before we left."

"Viral? That's a leap. I was thinking poison ivy or something."

"Are you kidding? The way they were talking about it? Those guys were mostly all park rangers, right? You'd know a simple poison ivy rash, wouldn't you?"

Ben shrugged. "Sure."

"Besides, it was spreading. They said it was on his hands and arms, but then a few seconds later said they thought they saw it on his neck, too."

"What spreads like that?" Ben asked.

"Well I guess—if it's just a rash, it could be anything. Candidiasis, rheumatic fever, mononucleosis—chickenpox."

"Chickenpox? Really?" Ben looked skeptical.

"Sure—VZV, the varicella-zoster virus—if you don't get it as a child, can be super dangerous as an adult, especially if you're immune-deficient. But without getting a look at it, it's impossible to say. I'll be interested to see what the medical team has to say."

Ben waited a moment before asking his next question. "Except you don't think it's Chickenpox at all, do you?"

Julie didn't respond.

"This isn't some run-of-the-mill rash, is it?"

Julie didn't look him in the eye. Finally, she turned to him. "I think this is something else—something bigger. First the explosion, then this? What if both are related?"

Ben shrugged. "Depends on if anyone else has this rash thing, right? Might just be a one-off thing. A coincidence."

“Yeah, it just seems fishy.”

They drove on in silence for a while longer. According to the news, ninety-three people had died from the explosion at Yellowstone, and countless others were now being evacuated from the park grounds. Early reports confirmed their suspicions: there was some sort of pathogen that appeared to be infecting some people.

“When will they get the results back on whether this is your fake Chickenpox?”

“We don’t have a mobile lab in place yet, so they’re airlifting the samples to Atlanta in the morning. We should get the results back in a couple of days. Why?”

“You think we can get our hands on a sample?” Ben asked.

Julie seemed circumspect. “Maybe. It won’t be easy, but I think I could. Why?”

“If this *is* bigger than people realize, and we’re talking about a fast-spreading disease, why are we evacuating the park and letting everyone go home when they could be infected?”

“Because we have no reason to hold them.”

“Look,” Ben said. “I might know someone close by who can help. If we can keep this boss of yours out of it...”

Ben watched her think it over.

“How fast would your friend get results back to us?”

“An hour. Two tops.”

“I’ll need to send Livingston *something*, so I’ll see if I can get a sample from the park sent over, and I’ll send part of it to the lab and the rest to your contact, if you trust him.”

“Her. And I do,” Ben said. “She’s not working under any sort of traditional structure, so it should be pretty quick. Maybe it’ll give you a head start.”

“Of course. Who is this person?” she asked.

“Like I said,” Ben responded, “just someone who might be able to help.”





The computer in front of her chirped, signaling a new email. Amid stacks of books, un-filed papers, and other detritus from weeks of research, the desktop computer was almost hidden from view. Dr. Diana Torres found the mouse hidden under a sheaf of papers and shook the screen awake from its preinstalled screensaver—a never-ending ribbon of color.

She navigated across the desktop and clicked on the icon—the only app that was constantly running on this machine. Never much of a computer person, Dr. Torres often called in her research assistant to finalize and prepare her reports electronically. He chided her for the irony of it—a woman whose career was spent creating computer models of molecules and microscopic organisms was afraid of computers. She never let it bother her; it was all in good fun. But regardless of her methods, unorthodox or not, the research firm knew she was one of the best in the business at what she did.

Her position had only recently been finalized after months of contracting with the research firm. She enjoyed the work, mainly because she didn't have to put up with any bureaucracy or any of the usual corporate nonsense that had driven her from previous jobs. The firm had been established over forty years ago and had constantly been in a stage of growth. Still, Dr. Torres had been a “key hire,” and was expected to take the firm to new levels in biological molecular research.

Dr. Torres double-clicked the email—no subject line—and began reading the body of the text. The email was short and to the point; just a request for help on a particular project. She brushed aside an old Wendy's burger wrapper and a half-empty Diet Coke that was lying in front of her keyboard. She rolled her chair closer to the desk and clicked on the “reply” button. As her fingers hit the keys to type a standardized answer to the request, she caught a glimpse of the sender's email address.

She did a double-take and read the email address again. She lifted her hands from the keyboard to think through her response. She reached over to the Diet Coke and brought it to her lips. She took a long, slow sip of the completely flat soda and read the email one more time.

> *I need your help on this one. Sending sample soon. Came from Yellowstone explosion. Please rush, will call soon.*

> *Ben*

*Ben?* She hadn't heard from Ben in over a decade. She knew he'd become a park ranger and had little to no access to the outside world most of the time. Still, she was stunned.

She took out her cell phone—a flip phone relic that she'd used for years—scrolled through the contacts. When she came to his name, she hesitated over the dial button. She'd never actually used this number. She stared down at the phone for another few seconds and then slammed it shut.

*Not now, she thought. Not yet.*

Thoughts raced through her mind. *Where was he? What was he doing? Why did he need her help, of all people?*

She sat in the chair for another few minutes, brooding. She didn't move until her assistant came in.

“Dr. Torres?” The young man's voice snapped her back to reality. She tried to wipe the surprised expression from her eyes but she failed.

“Dr. Torres—are you okay?”

“I—I'm all right,” she said in return. “Just got another request. Something... I didn't expect, but we'll get going on it pretty soon.”

“Sounds good. I can prepare equipment and send word down to Vanessa that some samples will be arriving. Do you have a date?”

At first, Dr. Torres didn't know how to respond. She eased out of her chair and walked toward the young man in the doorway. “Not sure, Charlie. Let's get everything set up now just to be ready. It's just going to be me and you on this one, understand?”

Charlie Furmann nodded without hesitation. The bulk of the company's projects were government funded, but the employed scientists were free—encouraged, even—to pursue personal interests and research projects when time permitted. Some of these projects, Charlie knew, weren't exactly public knowledge.

“I'll get everything set up this afternoon. I'll have Vanessa bring the package up personally when it arrives and leave it outside my office. The lab is open tomorrow night from about 8:30 until the next morning—shall I get it booked?”

“Yes, please. Thank you. I'm going to finish up here and head home. Don't worry about cleaning anything up; I'll be back in bright and early.”

Charlie didn't say anything else. He left the room, closing the door behind him. Dr. Torres turned back to her computer and sat down in the chair. The screensaver had already resumed, and she wiggled the mouse to wake it up.

She stared at the screen for another minute, reading the email over and over again.



**Northwest Territory, Canada**  
**University of Manitoba Archaeological Dig**  
**One Year Ago**

**I**t'll be any minute now, Gareth Winslow thought. He'd called in, just the way he'd been instructed, over three hours ago, just after he'd finished reading out loud the small journal they'd found. Dr. Fischer was ecstatic, mostly because their findings would verify and support his tenure.

He couldn't believe it himself, really. Some weird powdery substance that killed people? *That* was pretty exciting. But what was it? Spores, maybe? It was the ultimate question, but there was no way Dr. Fischer was letting any of them near the cave and the rest of the unopened baskets. It was way too risky, and besides, they didn't have the equipment to start a field analysis of whatever might be inside.

Still, Gareth knew everyone was curious. Beyond curious, actually. Dinner was campfire-cooked foil packets filled with vegetables, and the conversation surrounding the bonfire in the middle of camp related to two topics: What was this substance and who put it there?

Theories ran from the dried remains of some mysterious plant the native tribes in the area held as sacred, or at least viewed as medicinal, to some extravagant assassination conspiracy by a Romanov-era traitor. Even Dr. Fischer, clearly playing along, threw in a far-fetched story of alien invaders using a cosmic element to start their takeover of the human race.

Gareth listened intently, as curious as everyone else, but he didn't contribute to the building exuberance of the conspiracy theorists. He wasn't sure what was in the baskets, but he knew it didn't matter.

*Only a matter of time*, he told himself again. *They should be here by now.*

As if on cue, his ears picked up the faint beating of helicopter rotors. It was low pitched and vibrated gently, seeming to emanate from within his body rather than from a machine flying in from miles away. As it grew in volume, a few other students picked up on it.

"Hey, shut up for a sec—you guys hear that?" one of the students asked. Everyone went silent, and only the crackling of the fire in front of them could be heard.

Another few seconds passed, and another student heard the noise. "Is that a helicopter? Out here?"

Gareth watched Dr. Fischer straining to listen— *he probably couldn't hear it yet*, Gareth thought— *but he will.*

Suddenly, Dr. Fischer's eyes opened wider and Gareth stood, acting out his role. "It definitely is. Weird; I wonder where they're headed?"

Gareth excused himself from the group and walked over to one of the trucks in their three-car caravan. He opened the passenger-side door, reached below the seat, squeezing his arm into the gap between the truck's floor and the bottom of the chair, and felt around.

He found his prize. Slowly, he withdrew his hand, the dome lights inside the truck illuminating the small device.

It was black and silver, plastic with some metal components. A small rubber antenna extended from one side of the rectangular box, directly above a tiny button. He pushed the button, held it, and waited for a faint LED light to flash red once.

*Done.*

It was amazing what technology could do. The tiny GPS tracking device was now activated, and the inbound helicopter would stop tracking the archeology team's *expected* location within a grid of longitudinal coordinates and begin tracking their *actual* location. Their general coordinates had been posted on the university's internal boards months ago, but even Dr. Fischer was unsure where exactly their hunt for the Russian team would take them.

For that reason, the Company needed someone on the ground.

Gareth Winslow was brought onto the team to provide IT and administrative support—a part of archeology that hadn't existed a few years ago, when much of the data collected was shipped off and documented elsewhere. Using his interest in archeology and his undergraduate degrees in Computer Science and Technology Systems, he had assisted in building a suite of software tools that were helpful to archeologists, geologists, and geographers.

And since he was the one who had written the program, he was the perfect grad student to operate it. The recruitment interview with Dr. Fischer was short and sweet—they shook hands, Dr. Fischer asked if he was interested in helping out, and Gareth was in.

It was only after they'd started planning the trip that Gareth was approached by the Company. A shady guy in a black suit showed up at his apartment one day, knocked on his door, and gave him a check.

It was the largest paycheck that Gareth had ever seen his name on before, and he hadn't done anything to earn it.

"There's another one just like it after your trip," the man had said.

"For what?" Gareth knew that everyone had their price, but he wasn't about to kill someone.

"Don't worry," the man had said, sensing his unease. "Nothing illegal. The Company deals in information, and we've set up similar deals with plenty of other digs and research projects around the world."

"And what company is that?" Gareth had asked.

"*The Company*," the man had replied.

Gareth remembered nodding once, still consumed by the amount of money on the check.

"Okay, that's fine. I can live with a mysterious benefactor. But why not just go to the university? Or the expedition lead, Dr. Fischer?"

"We can't have a legal battle if there's anything of value found. You understand that. Plus, we need the expedition to run as smoothly as possible, without any hiccups along the way. Follow?"

"I do. You don't want anyone jealous that I'm making this kind of money on some low-profile dig."

The man had nodded in return. "Good. You understand. As I said, the Company is prepared to write another check in this amount if you successfully report any findings during your excursion." He made sure Gareth was looking at him as he finished. "You have a few days before you depart. I would suggest cashing the check first so you know we're not messing around, and then you'll be given instructions."

Gareth's hand had been shaking the entire conversation, but as the man finished speaking, he suddenly found a boost of confidence. "You got it. I'm in."

That was over a week ago, and Gareth was still riding the high of knowing what would be in his bank account one week from now. So much money it would wipe out his student loans and he'd still have enough left over to live life. He thought through the list of instructions he'd been given after he cashed the check, to make sure he wouldn't mess anything up.

It was a short list:

1. *Participate in the expedition and do nothing to raise suspicion.*

2. *If any profitable or seemingly conspicuous items are found, email details to the address below.*

The rest of the letter was a simple liability waiver, “*that by accepting and depositing the check the Company was hereby removed from any liability yada yada...*”

He’d sent the email after reading the journal for Dr. Fischer, using his laptop and satellite connection. Gareth mentioned briefly that they’d found “some sort of powdery substance that supposedly led to the demise of the entire Russian expedition...” and “we believe there to be more of the substance available in a nearby cave...” He sent it, and almost immediately there was a response.

It was simple:

*“We are converging on your general location. As the included battery will not hold much power, use the device only when you believe we are close to help us find your exact position.”*

*Wow, Gareth thought. These guys are on the ball.*

Now, as the helicopter’s rotor wash grew, he knew they’d be on them in minutes. *Do I need to do anything to prepare?*

He placed the tracking device back under the seat of the truck and slammed the door. As he turned back to the campfire, he noticed the students and Dr. Fischer standing and looking around the sky, trying to figure out where the helicopter was coming from.

“There it is!” the Korean guy yelled out. Gareth hadn’t bothered to learn any of their names—he knew they’d go home empty-handed, so there was no reason to become part of the team.

They all looked to where he was pointing. Southwest, hanging low over the tree line. If it weren’t for the slowly receding hill they were on, they wouldn’t have been able to see the bird at all.

Gareth examined the growing shape in the dusky sky. It looked dark, almost black, but that could be due to the lack of light at this time of day. It seemed to be sleek, too, not like the commercial helicopters he’d seen flying around cities. It was flatter, more military-looking.

*Stealthier.*

The copter finally drew near. It slid gently over the trees, slowing to their location, and began to descend. *Where the hell is it going to land?* Gareth thought. He looked around at their small clearing. The trucks, tents, and campfire were spread out almost evenly over the area, and he couldn’t see where a helicopter that size would fit.

But the pilot had a different impression of the clearing. Gareth watched as the pilot masterfully guided the machine to a spot less than twenty yards from the campfire and then straight down to the grassy platform. He watched the skids land gracefully on the blades of grass, finally coming to a rest without the slightest bump or hop.

Before the copter had even hit the ground, though, three men jumped from its interior. Dressed in black and silver body armor and flight gear, they immediately began walking toward the group of students as the pilot finalized his landing.

It was hard to hear over the rotor noise, but the first man yelled over it anyway. “Gareth Winslow!” he paused and looked at each student and the professor, waiting for a response.

“R— right here,” Gareth yelled.

The three men turned to him and met him halfway between the trucks and the campfire.

“Gareth Winslow?” the man said again. Gareth nodded. “Good. Take me to the location of the discovery.”

“What is this?” Dr. Fischer yelled. “What’s going on here?”

“It does not concern you,” one of the men said. “Gareth, take us to the location.”

Gareth snapped to attention, remembering his bargain. “Right. Okay, come on. We’re about a quarter mile away, through these trees.”

He led the way, the three men and the rest of the group following behind. As they neared the cave, one of the men held up a hand and grabbed Gareth’s shoulder. “Wait,” he said.

Gareth watched him enter the small cave and return a minute later. He nodded to the two other men from the helicopter and began walking back toward them. He addressed the entire group of confused students and professor. “Who is leading this expedition?”

Dr. Fischer raised a hand. “I am. And do you mind telling me what’s going on?”

The man eyed Dr. Fischer. “I see. And you have an idea of what might be inside that cave?”

“I—I guess. We found it earlier today, by accident. I believe whatever was in there killed the Russian expedition we came here to find.”

“I understand that much, Dr. Fischer. But I’m asking if you have any idea what, *exactly*, killed them?”

Dr. Fischer thought a moment, then replied. “I have some ideas, but none that I’m entirely confident about just yet.”

“I see.” The man marched back through the group, the two other men following behind. He delivered orders without turning back. “Mark the location. Get me the coordinates saved and ready to go.” The two men nodded and peeled off from the group, heading back toward the cave.

Gareth was now at the back of the line, watching as the lead man entered the helicopter once again. He heard him address the professor from the inside of the vehicle. “Dr. Fischer, would you care to join us? I would like to discuss your knowledge and experience with the items found within the cave.”

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable—”

The man cut him off as he drew a pistol from a hip holster and aimed it squarely at Dr. Fischer’s face. “Let me rephrase the question, professor, so that it doesn’t seem so... *optional*.”

Dr. Fischer swallowed, then started climbing into the helicopter. “What about the others? The students?” he asked.

The two men reappeared, apparently having finished marking the coordinates, and jumped into the helicopter. Gareth looked around at the frightened students, and a growing wave of nausea filled him.

*What have I done?* he thought. The helicopter, filled with the pilot, the three men, and their professor, lifted a few feet off the ground. The students, wide-eyed and confused, began yelling.

“You can’t do this!”

One of the men appeared in the open door of the helicopter and made eye contact with Gareth, just as he lifted something off the floor. It swiveled, held by some support mechanism, and swung out and stopped just outside the helicopter.

Gareth felt his blood run cold.

It was a gun. A *huge* gun. Gareth recognized the gigantic bullets, strapped together in a shiny gold chain of death. He took a staggering step back, trying to form words. *We need to leave*, he tried to say.

The words didn’t escape his mouth. Instead, he felt himself being lifted off the ground and thrown backwards, hard, just as he heard a new noise. A *chug, chug, chug* sort of sound, but fast. He saw the gun’s fiery tip burning as each round left the barrel and flew into one of the students. He wanted to close his eyes, but he didn’t need to.

Everything went black.





As he walked past the newsstand just inside the door to the gas station, Ben noticed the tiny black and white television sitting on the shelf above it. It was set to a news channel he didn't recognize, most likely only syndicated throughout the small region of southern Montana they were in.

They'd stopped just past Red Lodge, on a stretch of highway that looked like it had been abandoned for a century. When they came to the service station, Julie had opted to stay in the truck while Ben ran in for some snacks and use the restroom.

He asked the attendant to turn up the volume. The old guy complied and Ben listened to the station's reporter on location outside the Yellowstone gates. The information wasn't anything new.

The explosion had, in fact, been a bomb, based on air sample analysis done on site and in a radius around the park. It was a type of thermobaric bomb, combining heat and pressure into a 5-kiloton explosion. Initial estimates postulated that the Yellowstone detonation was contained mostly underground, due to the vast amount of crust that had turned up around the site, as well as the relatively mild explosion. But it wasn't just the immediate effects of the bomb's blast that had the CDC and this news station worried about: the thin layer of crust beneath Yellowstone had been rattled, causing the cracks and earthquake-like effects Ben had experienced.

Ben set a candy bar and bag of chips down on the counter. He paid in cash and headed back out to the truck.

"Got you some chips," he said through Julie's open window. "Want to drive?"

"No," she said. "I'm enjoying being a passenger for a while." She smiled.

"I'm sure," Ben said. "Getting all that work done, catching up on your reading..."

"Just get in. We need to get to my office before tonight. Did you hear anything from your boss yet? What was his name?" she asked.

"Randolph. He just texted me. I'll call him back now." Ben swung into the lifted truck and started the engine. He slid his phone out of the cup holder in the center console.

The phone rang three times before Randolph picked up. The man sounded exhausted; breathing heavily, his voice raspy. "*Ben—that you?*"

"Everything okay?"

"*No. No, it's not, Ben. There's—well, there's been...*" Randolph took a labored breath. "*It's Fuller. He's—he's dead.*"

Ben whispered the news to Julie. Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry," Ben said into the phone. "He was a good man."

"*Whatever got to him, it's spreading.*"

"What do you mean?"

"*I mean exactly what I said. It's spreading. Jumping, almost. We can't figure it out. It's fast. Much faster that we would have thought. Those of us who helped Fuller are covered in the rash, and our skin is starting to burn—me, Matheson, Frank, Clemens, everyone who was in that room. We've got it. We're quarantined inside the main building. Matheson passed out not too long ago, but—this is bad.*"

Ben didn't know what to say. "Listen, Randolph, you're going to be fine. You just—"

"*Ben, listen. I didn't text just to keep you in the loop. We're in over our heads here. Two of my guys are already starting to hyperventilate, and there's a doctor in here that's checking everyone*

out. He pulled me aside an hour ago and told me it's some sort of viral infection, he thinks, and there's nothing he can do for us without quarantine facilities and better supplies.

"I wanted to see how you were doing. I don't know where you were when we brought Fuller in, but you might be safe from it. Did you get out of the park?"

"We did."

"We?"

"I'm with Julie. Juliette Richardson, from the CDC."

"Oh." Randolph paused, taking a deep, raspy breath. "Okay, good. Well, stay away from the park, Ben. I'm not sure what's going to come of this, but if we can keep the contagion isolated long enough, we might be able to get a jump on it and figure out what it is before anyone else..."

"Right. I'm headed to her office now. We're outside of Red Lodge, Montana." Ben stopped for a second, catching himself. "Randolph—George. I—I'm sorry."

"Stop. Don't worry about it. Stay with that CDC gal and help her do what she can to stop it. Oh, and there's one more thing."

"What's that?"

"Fuller was at the lake when that bomb went off. He said he was close enough to feel the heat, and the pressure blast knocked him on his ass. But he wasn't hurt badly, and started walking back to his cabin when he felt the itching start.

"I'm starting to think it might have, uh, dispersed something into the air."

"How can a bomb do that?"

"I don't know. But he was the closest person to that explosion that we've talked to, and he's the first person who's died from this virus—whatever it is—that we know about. Understand?"

"I do, George," Ben said. He considered apologizing again, but thought better of it. *What was the point?* They were already dead.

He hung up the phone and hammered on the gas pedal, aiming the truck down the long highway.



Francis Valère poked at the food in front him. One of Quebec's finest restaurants and he couldn't get himself to eat.

Did killing Josh really affect him that much?

*Of course it had, but it needed to be done.*

He wondered if he needed to vomit again. The anxiety had risen immediately after their encounter on the golf course. Valère forcefully pushed the memory away and looked down at the plate in front of him.

Lobster, filet mignon, and the most decadent-looking chocolate mousse he'd ever seen stared back up at him. Not a bite had been taken from any of them. He used his fork to poke around the plate, pushing the meat to one side. He used another utensil to pile the lobster on the steak, forming a wall. It was a castle; a sanctuary now. If only he was small enough to fit inside...

"Are you alright, Valère?"

The voice snapped Valère back to the real world.

"Valère? Are you okay?" A second voice asked.

He was fine, but he needed them to assume he was struggling with his earlier decision. He had to hide the... *nervousness*. The anxiety that had plagued him since he was young.

*Yes, I am okay, but I will play the role for as long as it is needed.*

He looked up at his dinner guests sitting across from him. Roland and Emilio. He'd called the meeting on his drive back from the private golf course, suggesting this location for its world-renowned American cuisine, and for its semi-private rooms. One of his partners, Emilio Vasquez, the man now sitting across the table from him on his right, had called ahead and reserved the banquet room.

Even so, they'd chosen the table in the far back corner of the room. The waitress, a young blond woman in her thirties, had been instructed to enter the room only once every fifteen minutes. So far she'd performed well, never interrupting the men as they discussed the day's events.

The man to Valère's left didn't wait for him to respond. "Everything is taken care of?"

Valère nodded and finally spoke. "*Oui*, everything was accomplished. I do apologize, gentlemen, I seem to have lost my appetite."

Emilio smiled. "It is nothing, Francis. I remember the first time I, well, had to remove a *piece* from the chessboard. It is never an easy task."

Valère nodded once, accepting his friend's gesture. "Nevertheless, it is time to move to the next phase of our plan. We need to inform the media channels of our intention, and what is at stake."

The first man, Roland, swallowed loudly, trying to vie for their attention. While Valère hadn't touched his meal, Roland was on his second plate of dessert. Rotund, with rosy-red cheeks and jowls that hung nearly to his chest, the man was loud, invasive, rude, and liked by his peers for one thing, and one thing alone: his money.

They looked toward him. "We will wait."

Valère waited for him to explain. Never one to deny himself an opportunity to heighten the drama, Roland instead took a bite of a roll of bread that had somehow escaped earlier destruction. He chewed it no fewer than five times before speaking again. "We will wait to tell the media. We need to let the Yellowstone incident take center stage for a little longer. The news down there—hell, even here—is eating it up, and they're not letting go of it soon." His southern accent grew in strength, no

doubt egged on by the three glasses of wine he'd already consumed, and he continued. "The more pressure that builds around this story in the States, the better off we'll be."

"We'll lose our opportunity," Emilio said. Valère nodded.

"No," Roland continued, crumbs falling from the corners of his mouth. "We'll benefit from this timeline. They have no idea what's gone on there, and they won't be able to get anything from the site without losing anyone they send in. We have the advantage of time, and we need to keep it."

Valère frowned. "That wasn't the plan. Why are we waiting? And what are we to do in the meantime?"

The fat man answered immediately, his mouth now full of vanilla pudding. "There are still loose ends to tie up. Something our contact at the CDC has informed me about. There's a woman there, digging around. Nothing major, but she's clever. More importantly, she's persistent. We need to get a jump on it, and make sure she doesn't talk."

The man to Valère's right looked upset. "No, we can't. It's too risky. Besides, the body count is rising, and for what? And what about the coins? I have heard that the students and that professor uncovered some of them."

Valère pitched in. "The coins are beside the point, and there is nothing left of the group that found them. There is no way to tie them back to us. As for the body count, I understand your concern. Believe me, I do. But think of the end result: it is the same."

"Then why the needless deaths? Won't there be enough of that?"

"Yes, my friend," Valère said. "But consider the alternative: we cannot let something leak before we're ready. Remember the rules: we control the means, we control the end. Nothing less, nothing more."

Valère and Roland nodded in unison. Emilio shook his head. "I am with you, but I do not agree. We risk more by trying to tie up these loose ends than we do in just letting them run their course. Can we not let this particular one go?"

"No. It's not a matter of risk, it's a matter of principle," Roland said. "I won't let anything like this slip. It's not in my nature to let things get out of my control."

They all knew that to be true, but the other man was still persistent. "If something happens, and this leaks before we're ready..."

"Let's vote on it." Roland spoke louder, obviously trying to control the conversation. "That was the agreement, was it not?"

"What is the proposition?" Valère asked.

"We take necessary action to prevent any of these *externalities* from becoming too knowledgeable. We postpone the media's involvement for another day and use that time to rehearse our strategy once again. The extra time will help settle us, and it will help our contingency do what it can to snuff out these little discrepancies."

"So," Valère said, "you suggest we use part of the allotment we've been given for containment and eradication?"

Roland smiled. "I do. What good is a dragon, then, without its fire?"

The two other men considered this. It would only take one more of them to agree with the man's decision before this plan would be enacted. Valère looked at the two men, measuring the addendum to their plan against the alternatives.

He pushed his steak around on the plate once more, toppling the castle and destroying his sanctuary.

“I agree. This is the best option for us at this moment.” He looked up at Roland. “Alert your chosen men and deliver their objective.”

It had been exactly fifteen minutes, and the waitress entered. All three men put on their most unassuming smiles as she hovered over them, refilling their water glasses.





The truck pulled up to the opening of an alley, and Julie told Ben to take a left down the narrow road. Run-down apartments and worn out buildings lined the route on each side as the truck bumped over potholes and through brown puddles.

“Seems like a pretty fancy place you’ve got here,” Ben said.

The truck lurched over a deep pothole and bounced wildly as the suspension tried to compensate. Ben knew that any other vehicle would have suffered damage, but the massive lifted truck handled each bump and dip in stride. The alley curved to the left, and the truck and its two passengers found themselves facing a wide, squat warehouse. Made of metal siding and covered with a shallow steel roof, the warehouse fit in well with its dim surroundings. Ben slowed the vehicle and glided it toward the building, aiming for the small parking lot in front.

“No,” Julie said. “Go around back. Park on the street.” Ben didn’t argue as he pressed the gas pedal and the truck lurched forward. “Most people assume this place is abandoned,” Julie said. “We’re okay with that, so we like to park on the street across from the health center.”

They found a parallel parking spot on the street at the back of the warehouse, and Ben pulled the truck into the space smoothly.

“Wow,” Julie said. “It took me about three weeks to be able to do that.”

“Not bad,” he said. “I’m surprised you can even see over the dash.” He stepped onto the curb and waited for Julie.

She led him around the side of the warehouse and up a short flight of stairs. Her fingers brushed the keypad. She typed six numbers.

*123456.*

A small LED on the door blinked green, and the locking mechanism clicked.

“123456. Really?” Ben asked.

“Well, we’re not the CIA,” she said.

“Let’s hope not.”

She pushed the handle down, and the door slid open. Ben felt a wave of heat from the building’s interior wash over them as they stepped in.

“Let me check in with Livingston first,” she said. “If you don’t mind waiting by the front door.”

Ben shrugged. “Take your time.”

She wasn’t gone long. When she returned, she motioned for him to join her at the end of the hallway.

“He must be out golfing,” she said. “Let’s see if Stephens is in. He’s my assistant, but we’ve got him working on another case right now. He’ll at least appreciate that I’m checking in.”

This time she headed to the right, and as Ben followed, he realized how small the office complex really was. The hallway intersected with another that ran perpendicular, but then opened into one large workspace. Half a dozen cubicles were sprawled in the middle, with two closed-door offices around the exterior. The fluorescent lighting was either on a dim setting or someone had neglected to replace many of the bulbs.

Julie led him to one of the cubicles and stopped in front of a thin man with his back to them.

“Hey, stranger,” she said. The man spun around in his chair. “Hey, boss. Good to see you. How was the trip? Fishing traps and insects, if I recall correctly?”

“Something else came up, as I’m sure you’ve heard. This is Ben,” she said. “Ben, meet Benjamin Stephens.”

Stephens got up and extended his hand. “Nice name. Good to meet you.”

Tall, wiry, and with black horn-rimmed glasses to match his disheveled hair, the kid looked as if he were maybe sixteen years old and on his way to a comic book convention.

“And what do you do, Mr. Bennett?”

Julie interjected. “He works at Yellowstone. Any news?”

“Not much,” Stephens said. “It’s all over the web now, though.” He stepped to the side, revealing a triple-wide monitor setup full of open tabs and browser windows. Just about every one that Ben could see was filled with reports of the Yellowstone incident and explosion.

*CNN, Fox news, Yahoo!, and the Wall Street Journal.*

“I’ve been following it since it broke about four hours ago,” he said. “You guys okay?”

“We’re fine,” Julie said. “We could use some coffee. Where’s Livingston?”

Stephens walked over to the wall where an antique coffee pot sat empty. He placed a filter in it and added water as he spoke. “It’s Thursday,” he said, as if that explained everything. “He’s golfing. Listen, there’s more to it than just the Yellowstone incident.”

Julie didn’t understand “What you mean?”

“About an hour ago, a local news station way up in the northern part of Minnesota released a statement regarding some sort of debilitating virus that’s already killed two people. Husband and wife, up near the border. He was out hunting, according to some neighbors, and she was waiting for him at home. Next thing they know, when the neighbors went to check on them, they were both dead.”

Ben listened in silence.

“What makes you think it’s related?” she asked. “Could be just some sort of seasonal fever. It is flu season.”

“The bodies were found with a deep red rash covering their skin, and boils and welts over most of their body as well. The man was out in the snow, facedown. His wife was on the bathroom floor. Doesn’t sound like any flu I ever heard of.”

“That’s awful.” Julie glanced briefly at Ben. “Sounds like he was trying to combat the fever. With cold.”

“Sounds a heck of a lot like what’s going on at the park,” Ben said.

“Rashes, boils, and a heat fever?” Stephen asked. The kid was obviously eager to confirm the details for his files, likely hoping the virus would turn into something significant that might lead to a promotion.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Nothing we can do about it now except figure out what the hell this thing is.” Ben said.

“Let’s do it,” Julie said. “Stephens, you know the drill. Anything you find goes through Randy’s system, even though he’s on vacation. Send me what you have curated and ready so far. Skip the duplicate content.”

“Right,” he said. “I’ve already started compiling it, and I’ll send it through SecuNet later this afternoon. Hey—do you think this is going to get big?”

“It’s already big.” Julie said. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t get any bigger. An explosion that was obviously man-made, followed by *two* instances of whatever this virus thing is at the same time? Even if it’s not an outbreak, it very well could lead to one.”

“What do we do?”

“What we’re trained to do,” Julie said, as though she were a concerned parent, trying to console the hyperactive imagination of her child. “We find the source and stabilize the potent properties, then get it to the higher-ups for processing and propagation. Standard stuff. You know that.”

The coffee machine behind Stephens began gurgling hot water down through the filter. Almost immediately, the smell of coffee filled the office air.

Ben licked his lips, just now realizing that he had driven the bulk of the journey from Yellowstone without so much as a sip of the stuff. “You going to pour that? I could use a cup.”

“Oh, right,” said Stephens, obliging. “Where are you two headed now?”

“Back to my place first,” Julie said, “then we’ll find this guy a hotel,” gesturing to Ben. “Livingston won’t cut his golf game short for anything short of a nuclear attack, but he’ll be expecting all of us to work an all-nighter tonight if this thing blows up.” She winced at her poor choice of words but continued. “Like I said, give me what you have whenever you can and keep it coming. As long as he’s got information coming in, he’ll stay quiet.”

Stephens sank down into his chair. “Sure would be easier around here if you ran this place,” he said almost under his breath.

“I would keep it down if I were you,” Julie said. “Knowing Livingston, I wouldn’t be surprised if he has this place bugged.”

“Right” Stephens said, smiling. “But I’ve seen the budget for this operation—I think we’ll be okay.”

Julie turned and raised her eyebrows, silently asking Ben if there was more to cover. He shrugged. They took their coffees with them on the way out.



The evening sky turned to a bluish haze thanks to a gentle showering of rain and a near-full moon. Livingston clicked the key fob on his keychain.

The Mercedes-Benz was his pride and joy. He'd taken out a second mortgage on his condominium to ride in this kind of style, and he hadn't regretted a moment of it. As a government employee, he understood the irony and the juxtaposition of seeing a man of his status rolling around in a vehicle like this, but that was all the more reason to love it.

He'd always been fond of money. His first word, in fact, was "money," a story he loved sharing at parties and around the office.

Livingston headed over to the squat warehouse building that served as his temporary office. He liked to think of it that way: *temporary*. Everything in this life was temporary, he knew, but especially dead-end jobs like this one. He'd get to ten years, cash in his tenure play, and move on to a middle management job in a huge corporate bank or investment firm. Companies like that were always looking for management who weren't pushing for more and driving everyone around them to insanity. He'd fit in well at a company that needed an axe-man or a standard-issue pencil-pusher.

He'd also fit in well at a place that enjoyed the same type of indulgences.

Julie, Benjamin, Charles, his executive assistant, Laura—these people didn't understand him. He couldn't care less if they did or not, but he at least expected more respect than he got.

Wasn't a \$400,000 luxury car enough to make an impression?

He tapped his six-digit entry code into the keypad, opened the door and breathed in the musty air. *God, I hate this place.* At the T-intersection in the hallway, he stopped to check his appearance in the long window of the lab room.

Tall, dark, and slightly heavysset, he wasn't a bad-looking man. Years of sedentary work had taken his college swagger and turned it into a waddling gait, but he still had a full head of brownish-blond hair and a proud jaw. He'd played hockey in college, but he'd lost his youthful spryness long ago, as well as a couple of teeth.

He hooked right into his office at the end of the hall.

He dropped his briefcase onto the chair next to the door and hung up his overcoat. He poured himself a double shot of scotch and opened the miniature freezer to find a cube of ice, and—

*Perfect. Laura couldn't even remember to do that right.*

He slammed the door shut and sat down at his desk. Like his car, the desk was an indulgence even the United States government wouldn't waste money on. He'd spent all \$2,000 of his office decoration budget line item as well as another \$1,500 of his own money to get this antique mahogany desk, complete with a hidden door beneath the top drawer.

He opened up the laptop in front of him and clicked around for the folder he needed. A prompt nudged him for the password. He entered the string of characters, the folder opened, and Livingston browsed through the list of pictures, sipping on the warm scotch.

Double-clicking on one particular image, Livingston sat up straight in his chair. It was a picture of Julie Richardson, smiling in a two-piece bathing suit at the local branch's company picnic. She was holding a volleyball under one arm and talking to someone off-camera.

He clicked on another. This time Julie was mid-serve, the volleyball inches above her right hand, and her body stretched out to its maximum length.

Livingston didn't know who had taken the pictures, but when Laura had given everyone in the office Dropbox access to them, he'd made sure to save them locally to his hard drive.

Another picture opened—Julie and Benjamin Stephens sitting at a picnic table across from one another. Julie's back was to the camera, and Livingston clicked the magnifying glass to zoom in slightly...

The phone rang.

He checked the caller ID. It was his daughter. He let it ring a second and third time, and waited for it to go to voicemail. He hadn't talked to Rebecca in almost a year, and he knew he'd regret not answering it later.

The answering machine picked up. He groaned as the sound of his own voice interrupted his thoughts. *"This is the voicemail box of David Livingston, Director..."*

At the beep, his daughter's voice punched through the low-quality phone speaker and into his office. *"Daddy? Hey, it's me... Just wanted to say hi. I figured you'd be working late again, but I wasn't sure."* The voice paused for a moment. *"Listen, call me back sometime. It's been awhile."*

Another pause, then the sound of a phone hanging up. Livingston swirled a sip of scotch in his mouth and stared at the conference phone on his desk. He swirled again, swallowed, then took another deep sip.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, holding them for a moment as the burn of the low-quality scotch ran down his esophagus. "I miss you too, honey," he said to no one.

He took another drink. Nine years since her mother had walked out. Nine years since she'd slept with that rat-bastard from the softball team..

He snapped his eyes open. Was he still alone in here? *Yes. Good.*

He sniffed, trying to shake off the feeling of delirium caused by the whiskey. *Get it together, Livingston. You're better than this.* He slammed the rest of the whiskey and set the glass on the far corner of his desk.

He needed a way to keep tabs on Julie without raising a flag in the data center. He thought for a moment, then sat back up and clicked away from the picture.

The image of Julie at the park bench disappeared, replaced by a browser window displaying the SecuNet homepage, an intranet server with a user interface for the company's secure communications and file storage.

He almost laughed out loud. Though SecuNet was secure enough for the CDC's standards, he knew all too well how *unsecured* the shitty browser was. A perfect example of "good enough for government work," the browser had been thoroughly proven unsafe by just about every web development and tech blog on the net, but it was the mandatory browser installed on every government computer, and it was a serious pain in the ass to circumvent it.

The page had a few options available, and he clicked on one toward the bottom in the first column. The site redirected him to a secure page, and he typed his username and password in the respective boxes and was soon faced with a new dialog box:

*"Email Redirect: Choose Originator"*

Being considered "executive" at a government organization did have its perks, even if it didn't pay well. Livingston entered Julie's email address, then added a second Originator email address entry for Benjamin Stephens. In the "Enter Forwarding Address" box, he entered his own email account and hit "submit."

The dialog box disappeared, and Livingston closed the browser window. The redirect would be "silent," meaning it would run invisibly in the background—neither of his employees would know

they were being tracked via email—and it would be relatively untraceable. Only a seasoned IT veteran specifically looking for the redirect would be able to find it.

He stood, refilled his scotch, and sat back down at the computer. He smiled at his own ingenuity and went back to the folder with the pictures from the company picnic.





**D**r. Diana Torres peered through the compound microscope, certain that whatever it was, she hadn't seen it before. The structure was different. This was not a normal virus. First, it appeared to have an integumentary system that protected the rest of the microscopic body from external elements and diseases. What she assumed was the capsid was studded with odd bumps and scrapes, as if the virus *itself* was infected. Secondly, while she recognized the lipid and protein structures that made up the bulk of the body, she couldn't quite place their configuration.

Finally, the entire inner cavity of each individual viral body was made up of the traditional nucleocapsid and capsomeres, but also other bodies she didn't recognize that seemed to be crammed in as well. While the overall structure was standard for a type of herpesvirus, it didn't fit any of the eight strains modern science was aware of.

She took another measurement and checked her notes.

*"Varicella Zoster strain; assumption smaller form. Standard nucleocapsid and lipid envelopes; odd protein buildup differs from traditional strains."*

*"Most spherical virions 80 to 90 nm in diameter; largest observed 93 nm, smallest observed 73 nm."*

The results were accurate; her measurements weren't off. Her assistant, Charlie Furmann, had reserved the lab space at 5:30 that evening and she'd been inside until now. She checked her watch.

*7:30 PM.*

The act of checking her watch suddenly triggered her body to announce that it was exhausted. She yawned and stretched her arms. Standing, she shut the light from the microscope on the long lab table in order to prevent any unwanted reactions in the sample. She slipped on her lab coat once again—essentially her entry key to the myriad of rooms, labs, and closets spread around the building. She rarely wore it inside her office, but it was considered bad form to walk around the campus without it.

It would also get her into the cafeteria on the main level; her chosen destination. The nature of the work at the research facility, as well as the personality types of those doing it, meant that the facility had 24/7 cafeteria access. The scientists and research assistants that populated these offices weren't governed by traditional 9-to-5 jobs, nor did they care for culturally accepted norms about when to sleep and when to work.

Torres stepped off the elevator on the main level. The halls were dimly lit, but the open doors to the cafeteria spilled light out into the corridor, beckoning. Another involuntary response in her brain reacted to the smell of food, hunger pangs running up and down her insides.

Surprised to find the cafeteria empty, she pulled out a small plastic bin of hummus and crackers and a 20-ounce bottle of Pepsi from the open-faced refrigerator and tapped her identification card on the credit card terminal. After the terminal beeped, she clipped the badge back to her lab coat pocket and walked back out into the hallway when she felt her cell phone buzz in her jeans pocket. She juggled the Pepsi around and reached for the phone. It was a text from Charlie.

*"Where are you? Wanted to check in with this model."*

She frowned, wondering why he had taken the time to send her a text message when he could have just waited for her to return. She sent a quick reply.

*"Went to cafeteria. On my way back. What's up?"*

She didn't wait for a response; instead, she stepped into the elevator and pressed the number for her floor. She found Charlie, his back to her, hunched over the microscope.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Charlie jumped and turned. “What is this, Diana? Is this the same sample that was sent over from earlier?”

“Yes...” Dr. Torres replied.

“Did they say what it was?”

“What do you mean? They sent over a standard laboratory-required specimen size for examination and classification. If they knew what it was already, they wouldn’t have sent it.”

Charlie nodded. “I guess I’m just confused...”

“About what?”

“Well, I don’t understand why you would have mounted both samples at once.”

Now it was Dr. Torres’ turn to be confused. “Both? What do you mean?”

Charlie plugged in the external monitor display into the microscope’s output line, displaying the image from the microscope on a 60-inch display hanging on the wall behind them. “Look,” he said, using a wireless computer mouse to draw a circle around one of the spherical objects on the screen.

“This is your virus, right? The ‘*Varicella Zoster*’ strain, or whatever?”

She nodded.

“Well, when you continue to zoom in, you’ll see the standard components—nucleocapsid, lipids, different protein amalgamations, etcetera.”

Dr. Torres nodded again, trying to hurry him along.

“But then if you *keep* increasing the magnification...” he paused to reset the microscope’s magnification wheels, “you’ll notice that the interior structure of the virion is completely crammed with foreign bodies.”

“Foreign? How can they be? They’re part of the virus.”

“Right—but that doesn’t mean they always were. The virus certainly doesn’t *look* like it wants them in there, does it? They’re all bulging at the seams, thanks to the spirillum pushing everything around.”

Dr. Torres looked up sharply. “Spirillum? What are you talking about?”

He zoomed in further. As the microscopic components of the viral organism came into focus, she saw the unmistakable spiraling of one of the common bacterial shapes. The twisted object grew as Charlie pushed the microscope to its limits; the screen suddenly appearing grainy and slightly out of focus.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“You didn’t see this before?” Charlie asked.

She shook her head.

“So, then, I’m guessing there weren’t two different samples?”

Both scientists were speechless as they stared at the TV monitor. The fuzzy black and white image was unmistakable.

“No. No, Charlie. There weren’t,” she said. “We’re looking at some sort of herpesvirus that contains a *living, breathing*, bacterial infection around it as well.”

“So it’s a virally infected bacteria?”

“No... it seems that they have some sort of symbiotic relationship with one another. I can’t really explain it, but they *both* seem to need the other to exist.”

“But that’s impossible,” Charlie said. “There’s no way for the virions to provide livable conditions for the bacteria, and the capsid would need to have access to the world around it. And a bacterial cell is so much larger than —”

“I know,” Dr. Torres said. “But we’re dealing with something completely different here; something outside the realm of what either of us has studied before.” As she spoke and stared at the screen in front of her, Dr. Torres grew increasingly confident that what she was looking at was in fact, exactly what she had said it was.

Impossible or not, what they were looking at was a *virus*, fully functioning and living *inside of* and supporting a bacterial cell.

“How is that possible? It’s against the laws of nature.”

Diana Torres looked up at Charlie. “It’s possible because I don’t think *nature* had anything to do with it.”



## Six Months Ago

Dr. Malcolm Fischer gasped. Sucking in a huge breath of air, he tried to swallow. It was painful; somehow, something wasn't right. He tried to look down, but had a hard time moving his head.

*Weird.*

He tried moving his hands instead. Nothing.

His fingers, maybe?

*Nope.*

Malcolm felt glued down, lying on his back. At least it was comfortable.

*What do I have control over, then?* he wondered.

He opened his eyes, blinking once, twice. He moved his eyeballs around; at least he could see.

He tried to make sense of his surroundings. Bright lights, fluorescent. The kind used in offices and commercial buildings. Whitish walls, some sort of sterile color.

That was it.

*Okay, what does that mean?* Malcolm tried moving his body, his limbs—anything. Nothing would give. It was as if he were—

*Am I paralyzed?*

He considered it a moment. He didn't remember taking a fall, or any type of accident. Actually, now that he thought harder, he couldn't remember anything. There was...

*A helicopter.*

*Oh, God.*

The memory roared back into Malcolm's mind in a flash. *The students...*

He remembered being forced into the chopper at gunpoint, being pushed down into a seat and strapped in, then the gentle upward motion of the pilot's expert takeoff. They ascended only a few feet off the ground.

*The gun.*

The horrid sound of hundreds of miniature explosions rocking the gunman back and forth on the side-mounted machine gun.

The one he'd fired into the students. *His students.*

Intense pain seized him, but he couldn't tell if it was merely psychological. He closed his eyes again, breathing. Still, his hands and legs and arms wouldn't move; *everything*, was frozen in place.

*Where am I?*

Just then, he heard a beeping sound. It had grown louder—or had he just now noticed it?

He pushed his eyelids apart and tried to look for the source of the sound. As his eyes opened, the beeping grew more intense; quicker.

He heard footsteps. Running.

“...Patient experiencing some sort of shock. Possible reaction...”

Voices drifted in and out. They were in the room.

Who were ‘they?’

Malcolm was growing agitated. He wanted answers, and he wanted to be able to *move*.

“He’s awake!”

More footsteps.

Now he could hear multiple people—three?—moving around his bed.

*I'm in a hospital. It must be. I'm paralyzed.*

“He’s no longer comatose?” one voice asked.

“No, he’s got his eyes open. The new cocktail they sent down must have done more than just keep his muscles from atrophying.”

The voices were hurried; frantic.

“Okay, let’s get some Codeine into him; he’s probably going to be a little rough around the edges.”

“Got it. We’re keeping him up?”

“No, no. That’s just to hold him over until he goes under again and his musculature calms down. It shouldn’t be long.”

Malcolm heard a popping sound, followed by the smell of something bitter. Some sort of chemical. A bag of liquid suddenly passed directly in front of his face. He saw a strange assortment of letters and numbers, then a few letters that his brain computed as words.

*Global. D-something Global.*

“Ok, right. Medesinsk is going to be here tomorrow morning, and we need to get him back down.”

Another pop, followed by a sloshing sound, reached Malcolm’s ears.

He tried to speak, but he wasn’t sure he had control of his vocal cords. It didn’t matter anyway, as he realized he couldn’t even open his mouth.

A small hand pulled his chin down then placed a hand over his throat gently, another hand reaching for his shoulder. He felt two — three — hands on him, and then saw someone placing a needle into his IV line.

“It won’t matter —I’ve already reported that we’ve achieved success.”

“Yes, I know, I read the report,” the first voice said. “Still, they won’t want to see him awake. They’ll need him under for the final round of testing, so there’s no reason to let him become too aware.”

Malcolm tried to piece things together. He *was* paralyzed. Waking from a coma, anyway. His body felt... good. Weakened, but usable.

“How’d he wake up?” the second voice asked. It was a woman.

“It’s a standard reaction to the chemical; almost like developing an immunity. Most subjects awaken after four to six months. He made it to five and a half.”

“Can we up the dosage?”

“No, a higher dosage will likely kill him. Keep the mg count steady; just track it closer. Any increase in heart rate or changes in sleep cycles, have someone come in and check it out.”

“Got it.”

Malcolm heard them finish up, then leave the room. He was left to his own thoughts and the slow, methodical beeping noise.

He suddenly felt the pricking of thousands of nerve endings flaring up in his neck and head, as if needles just below the surface of his skin were trying to poke their way out. It was painful, but it meant something else.

*He could move his head.*

It was the same feeling he’d had when a body part fell asleep. He could feel the line of nerves crawling up and around his face. Slowly, painfully, he tried to move the outer muscles in his face—cheeks, lips, ears. He thought he could feel the slightest of motions.

His face continued to “wake up.” He’d have preferred the traditional feeling of being awake, rather than the feeling of millions of ants crawling over his skin, but he didn’t argue. He moved his

mouth.

Using an unbelievable amount of energy, he tried lifting his head. *Yes!* It was moving. His head was lifting up from the bed, slowly, surely...

It fell. He could hold it no longer. His head fell back into the pillow.

With a deep exhalation, he recovered and tried again. A little farther this time.

Now he could see his body covered in a sheet, his feet poking out from the bottom. Beyond that, there was the door to the room he was stuck inside. It too was that skeletal white color.

Again, his head fell back into the pillow.

*This is good, he told himself. I'm getting stronger each time.*

As Malcolm tried for the third time, however, he realized they'd injected him with something. No doubt *multiple* things.

He was probably only minutes away from passing out again.

*I need to get out of here.*

He lay back for a few extra seconds, summoning energy, then tried once more to lift his head.

He wanted to scream. Pain seared through his skull, worse than any migraine he'd ever experienced. *Don't. Stop.* He chanted to himself over and over again. *Don't. Stop.*

Through sheer will, he forced his neck to articulate, and glanced down at the maze of tubes that were inserted into different parts of his body. He had no idea what they did or what human bodily function they were intended to perform. Some appeared empty—maybe those were waste tubes?

Others had clear liquids running through them, and a few had deep crimson liquid coursing through them.

He didn't have much choice. He could still only move his head, and he didn't have the luxury to wait around for more of his body to wake up. He looked down and to his right, noticing a small clear tube that had been inserted into the soft skin underneath his upper arm, just below his shoulder.

*If I can reach that...*

He struggled again, forcing his head forward and down. *A little more...*

His lips were on the tube now, but there was no way his teeth were going to reach that far. He needed a little more. *Millimeters* more.

*Come on, Malcolm.* He willed himself to push forward again. The pain was unbearable, his face flushed.

*Just a few millimeters more.* It had to be.

*Don't. Stop.*

He exhaled the last of the air that was in his lungs, and his face inched forward just enough. He felt the cold steel of the IV line's end hit his mouth, and he clamped down. He didn't care what he yanked out, as long as he disconnected *something*.

*Yes!*

He bit down as hard as he could, tugging on the tube with his teeth. His shoulder throbbed, but he didn't stop. Until—his head fell back. He waited a moment, letting his body regroup. Finally, he lifted his tongue up and felt for his prize.

It was there, cold steel and clear plastic tubing. It bumped up against his mouth as it fell, and he was ecstatic.

*He'd done it.*

He could see the plastic tube out of the corner of his eye, disappearing off the side of the bed and around the room somewhere, its contents no longer able to enter Malcolm's body.

He smiled—or what he thought was a smile—and closed his eyes again.

*Only a matter of time...*

He waited for the drug's effects to wear off; waited for the prickling line of needles to expand their reach, overtaking his body with the beautiful gift of motion. Any moment now, and he'd be able to move again.

*What was that?*

He felt something, or rather, understood something. It wasn't a feeling as much as a sort of *knowing*. His body was crashing, falling again. He felt the line of needles receding, going back down into the surface of his body.

*No!*

*Just a little more time.*

But it was not to be. Malcolm's body was going to sleep again. He could do nothing but lay, helpless, as his eyes closed out the world around him. He could hear his breathing, feel the rising and falling of his chest, but it was odd, as if it were not his own body that was controlling it.

To be sure, he tried lifting his head again. *Nothing.*

He couldn't cry out, couldn't make a sound. His mind was shutting down, sending him to sleep once again, and he couldn't think...





“Anything yet?” Dr. Torres said, her frustration really starting to fizz as she waited on Charlie to return with the results of their latest test on the sample.

“Not yet,” Charlie muttered under his breath. They’d put the sample through a battering ram of tests—the standard lab-required composition, attributes, and plausible generation tests, as well as a few others Dr. Torres ordered hours ago. Charlie was still finishing up the last of these—a test to determine any possible effects external forces might have on the sample.

Charlie returned to the table carrying a Petri dish with a swab of the sample inside. Transferring the sample from an observation plate to the dish had made prescribing tests so much easier.

“I don’t understand why you won’t just send an email to Levels 4 and 8,” Charlie said as he set the dish down on the table in front of her. “What can possibly go wrong by getting more people involved?”

Dr. Torres grabbed the dish. “Come on, Charlie, you know the rules. This one isn’t company sanctioned, so there’s no way we’re doing that.”

“Yeah, but don’t they encourage us to take on private jobs?”

“They do, but only if they can maintain the standpoint of plausible deniability for any of their scientists’ clients’ work,” she answered.

“Seems like a backwards way of doing business, in my opinion.”

Dr. Torres sighed. “Well, in *my* opinion, it seems like a good way for them to stay out of trouble. You and I both know that there’s enough non-sanctioned work going on here that’s ended in all but disaster. One of those leaks, and we’ve got incriminating evidence on our hands. For all of us.” Dr. Torres gave Charlie a look that was supposed to mean the conversation was over, but Charlie continued.

“I get it. The company won’t take credit for anything unless it ends in dollar signs for them.”

“Welcome to America, Charlie.”

Charlie let the insult slide. He’d been raised in Idaho and had lived in just about every small town there was. Hope, Irwin, Twin Falls, and his parents now lived in Mud Lake. Now that he worked in Twin Falls, it seemed like Charlie was going to spend the rest of his life inside the borders of his home state.

He’d grown up like most normal American boys. Street hockey in the summer, pond hockey in the winter, with other random sports thrown in during the off-season. He was of average build, not tall but not short either, making him an ideal candidate to fill out a team roster for just about any sport he tried out for.

Much to his father’s dismay, however, sports were not Charlie’s strong suit. Before football practice and after school during the fall semesters, Charlie spent his time in the science club at his local high school. What his parents thought—and hoped—would be a just a phase, turned out to be a career choice for the young man. He enrolled in night classes at the local university while only a junior in high school, convincing his parents that it would be good for his future. While it was certainly useful later in life, the truth of the matter was that Charlie was actually just interested in studying robotics, something his local high school did not have a program for.

He ditched the robotics studies after his first semester in college, opting instead to study microbiology. After graduating summa cum laude, he was quickly tapped for an internship at a local clinical research firm, then a pharmaceutical company, and finally as an assistant to Dr. Torres.

Charlie enjoyed the job; Dr. Torres was a good boss, and she treated him appropriately—hard enough that he was challenged to continue learning, but friendly enough that he knew she still cared about his education. It was because of this relationship, and Dr. Torres’ leadership, that he was able to succeed in the role while gaining worldly experience at the firm. As even-keeled and mild-tempered as he was, however, it was on nights like these that Charlie wished he were working somewhere else.

Dr. Torres just wouldn’t stop. They’d been at it for over six hours straight now, with no end in sight. He enjoyed discovering and learning just like any other scientist, but he also enjoyed sleep. Furthermore, he could already feel himself growing hungry again.

“Hey, chief, it’s getting late,” Charlie said. He hated to play that card, but he was long past his ability to be effective.

“Huh?” Dr. Torres said softly as she stared down at the sample and the associated report. “Oh, right, I guess it is getting a little late.”

She looked at her watch.

*10:57 PM.*

She pushed her glasses back onto her nose and straightened the pile of papers in front of her as she stood up from the table. “Are you heading out?”

Charlie had worked with Dr. Torres long enough to know what the question really meant. *Had enough? Can’t handle the grind of real science?*

He had also worked with her long enough to know how to handle the situation. “Yeah, exactly.” He laughed. “We’ve done every test in the book and all the reports are there in front of you. I’m happy to stay and read them to you, but I’m pretty sure you’ve got it covered on your own.” He half-smiled from the left side of his mouth. It was enough to tell Dr. Torres that he was seriously tired, but not serious enough to tell her that he didn’t care. “Plus, you know that I’m only an email away.”

She nodded. “Let me finish up here, and I’ll be on my way out, too.”

• • • •

WHEN CHARLIE LEFT, Dr. Torres found herself alone in the sprawling state-of-the-art laboratory. Just another specimen amid the gadgets, tools, and instruments that she could only guess were used by others in the building.

The laboratory she worked for had been around for over forty years, and from stories she’d heard, it had been successful from day one. Operating in the black each and every fiscal year. They could afford sparing no expense for their top-notch scientists. Dr. Torres was no exception and she knew it.

There were scientists working here she had never met, who had been published in every month of every trade journal she subscribed to. There were also scientists who had spoken at every conference she had ever heard of. These were her peers, and nothing less was expected of her too.

Dr. Torres enjoyed her position at the company. While she was certainly not the most tenured, nor the most esteemed scientist in the building, she knew that the only way she could improve was by challenging herself. World-renowned or not, working somewhere where you were only a number among many other numbers caused you to strive for more than you thought you were capable of. Most days, Dr. Torres felt this way. It was the reason she had come this far in her career, and it was the reason she was not slowing down yet.

She grabbed a stack of papers and the small Petri dish from the table and carried them down the hall to her office. Charlie had affixed a lid on the Petri dish and taped it shut, complete with a label signifying what the sample contained.

*Unknown s.248—sample 248.*

The viral/bacterial infection that she'd been sent to study.

Back in her office, she placed the sample on the far wall next to her personal microscope kit and took the report to her desk. She placed it on the stack of papers that she had scattered all over her desk, careful not to cause any to fall to the floor. She moved a few Styrofoam cups and plastic takeout trays to the trash next to her chair and sat down in front of her computer.

Her email was still front and center on the screen. She clicked on the last message she'd received and replied.

>To: Harvey 'Ben' Bennett <hbennett1419@yahoo.com>

>From: Diana Torres <diana.torres@focalresearch.org>

>Subject: Re:

>Body: *I think we've figured part of this out. Report attached; p-protected. Use my bdate with his first name.*

*Miss you. Are you ok?*

She read through the email to make sure it included the attachment and the information he would need. She was still surprised by the recipient, though not as overwhelmed as she had been when she'd first heard from him.

*It must be more than ten years*, she thought. She couldn't actually remember the last time they'd spoken on the phone. Still, it was amazing to hear from him. These weren't exactly the best of circumstances, but she knew that if he was contacting her, it must be something important.

Just then, she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Was Charlie coming back?

*No*, she thought, *Charlie was wearing sneakers all day*. These footsteps were clearly made by either a heeled woman's shoe or a man's dress shoe. Her ears perked up as she listened to the sound, now growing louder.

It lacked the purposeful quickness of a woman in high heels, and it seemed heavier. *Who was visiting her?*

She knew for a fact that no one else on her floor was currently in. After three or four trips to and from the lab on the fourth level, she could tell in a quick glance up and down the hallway that there were no other lights on besides her own.

The footsteps continued toward her open door. She stood up from the computer, forgetting about the email for a moment and turning toward the door.

Just as she turned, a man entered the space inside the doorway.

"Dr. Torres?" The man asked. His voice raspy; not quite that of a lifelong smoker, but one that seemed tired or weary with age.

She nodded.

The man stepped in and took a long, slow glance around.

"Can I help you?" Dr. Torres asked.

The man's eyebrows abruptly lifted, as if he had forgotten that he shared the room with another occupant. "Ah, yes. Dr. Torres, it's great to meet you." He extended his right hand forward. She reluctantly reached for it and allowed him to grasp it. His hand completely enveloped her own, though he did not squeeze tightly. "I'm here from the CDC, which, as you know, is currently operating in a crisis mode."

"Well, I—I didn't exactly know that," Dr. Torres said, still caught off guard. "Do you mean the explosion at Yellowstone?" Charlie had filled her in about the day's events when he came in this morning, though she still hadn't checked for an update.

The man smiled. He retracted his hand and placed it in his pants pocket.  
“Yes, in fact, that is exactly why I’m here.”



"What's your name?" she asked.

Rather than answer her question, the man simply put both hands in his pockets. "We're following this thing as well; trying to stay ahead of it."

"Do you know what this *thing* even is?" Dr. Torres asked. She sat back down in her leather desk chair and steepled her fingers thoughtfully.

"We're guessing it's some sort of bacteriophage; T4, Coliphage, something like that." He motioned to a chair. She nodded once, and the man pulled it out and sat across from her. "But the lab results haven't come in yet. That's why I'm here. I wanted to know if you'd figured anything out yet."

Dr. Torres couldn't even begin to fathom how he knew she'd been working on it.

The man smiled. "The package that was delivered. A colleague of yours received it and sent it to you, but was prudent enough to document your research and testing phases as well."

*Charlie*, she thought. She swallowed her anger, remembering that her assistant had only been doing his job. All of the lab techs and assistants at the company had been instructed to keep a record of any and all testing done on-site on any materials that could be considered "potential threats." While she'd wanted to keep their work quiet until she could prepare a final report, she hadn't considered asking Charlie to bypass this security step.

"It's okay, Dr. Torres. This type of thing happens all the time. You don't want to make any mistakes in the research phases and potentially damage your career. Even if you *had* kept this one hidden from us, I'm not here to reprimand you."

Dr. Torres nodded. "May I ask why you *are* here?"

"Information," the man said without hesitation. "Like I said, we need to keep ahead of this one, especially if it's some sort of bacter—"

"It's not."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's not a bacteriophage," Dr. Torres said. "Actually, it's exactly the opposite."

"What do you mean? The symptoms we're seeing in patients suggests that it is some sort of bacterial-viral combination."

"Well, you're right about that," Dr. Torres said, turning around in her chair and opening a file on her computer. "It's bacterial *and* viral, but not in the sense of a bacteriophage. Rather than a virus attacking and piercing a bacteria, we've recognized the exact opposite. A bacterial infection within a larger virus."

The man stood up and began pacing the office. Dr. Torres chose to continue.

"It's a standard form of a spirillum bacteria, only crammed inside the shell of another body. I've never seen anything like it before, really. It's quite ama—"

The man spun on his heel. "And who else has been working on this project with you?" he asked.

"J—just my assistant, Charlie Furmann."

"I see. And do you have the sample here with you?"

Dr. Torres fidgeted in her chair, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. Her eyes flicked to the test tube on the table, then quickly back to the man. "I'm sorry—can I ask again why you're here?"

The man had already begun moving to the table. He reached down and grabbed the small glass vial just as Dr. Torres stood up from the chair.

“Hey! Excuse —” The man held the tube away from Dr. Torres with his right hand and lifted his left arm. He swatted the back of his hand at Dr. Torres’ face, catching her just below her left eye.

Dr. Torres stumbled backwards, stunned. Tears welled in her eyes. She gasped. The man continued moving, retrieving a pair of latex gloves from his pocket. In one fluid motion, he stretched them on over his thick fingers and walked to the small lab sink.

“What are you doing?” Dr. Torres asked as she regained her balance. “Wait!”

The man threw the vial containing the sample down into the sink. It shattered with a loud crash, launching glass into the air. The man was already moving toward the open door. He reached for the handle and stepped out into the hallway.

Dr. Torres watched him reach into his coat pocket and remove another vial, this one containing a clear liquid. He held the tube up in front of her.

“Dr. Torres. I am sorry it came to this. However, rest assured your research and time will not go to waste.” He threw the sample down. The hard floor obliterated the glass vial, and the clear liquid bounced upward and onto Dr. Torres’ feet. Before she could react, the man slammed the door shut, and Dr. Torres heard the clicking sound of his shoes retreating down the empty hall.

She ran to the door and tried to open it, fumbling and slipping over the now-wet floor. Finally, the handle gave, and she nearly fell into the hallway. Her breathing labored heavily, but she pushed on down the hallway regardless, following the sound of the man’s shoes. Just as she reached the elevator, it dinged.

The doors slid open. A shocked Charlie Furmann stared back at her. “Dr. Torres—are you okay?”

Her eyes were wide and wild. She backed away from the elevator, putting space between herself and Charlie.

“I—I...” she stammered. “Yes, I’m... I’m fine. Go home, and I’ll call you tomorrow,” she said. She turned away from Charlie and the open doors of the elevator, and stumbled to the stairs at the end of the hallway.





Juliette Richardson and Harvey Bennett drove to the other side of town leaving Julie's office behind. Julie behind the wheel. Ben cooped up in the passenger seat. Just as they passed the city limits and left the metropolitan area, the high-rise apartments and multi-floor office buildings slowly changed into larger, flatter buildings and individual houses on suburban streets.

"I moved out here after living in the big city for ten years," Julie said.

"Big city?"

"San Francisco. I was right in the middle of everything," she said. "It was great at first, but it wears on you after a while."

"Yeah, I bet," Ben said.

Julie laughed. "Well, sure, I guess *any* city's big to someone like you."

Ben thought about that for a moment before responding. "I didn't always live out in the middle of nowhere," he said. Before Julie could interject, he added, "But I guess I always wanted to."

They drove on, passing yet another neighborhood filled with one- and two-story houses painted either brown, tan, or beige. White picket fences separated them from one another, and perfectly manicured lawns signaled a strict HOA governed the neighborhood.

"So the park is a great job for you," Julie said.

Ben nodded, looking out the window. For the first time during their trip, he was only a passenger in the vehicle. Julie had offered to drive from the office to her apartment.

"It is," Ben said. "I guess, I mean it was."

"It's going to be fine," Julie said, trying to convince herself more than anyone else. "We'll figure this out."

After passing the neighborhood stretching over the road on their right and left, Julie turned onto a smaller country road, and Ben could see the houses and white fences receding in the distance. Fields and farms now replaced the neighborhoods on each side of the road.

"I thought you lived in an apartment," Ben said, noticing the herd of cows.

"I do," she answered, "but it's just the upstairs room of a converted barn. I rent from the family that owns it."

While she spoke, she took the next turn down a gravel road. Up ahead, a crop of tall pines surrounded a house and a few out buildings, among them a large barn which didn't look like it had been kept up for many years.

"It looks worse on the outside," Julie explained apologetically. "They stopped using it as a barn in the '70s, but converted it back in 2003. It's completely renovated inside, and has everything I need."

Ben shrugged. "You don't owe me an explanation."

Julie pulled into the long driveway that led to the farmhouse and barn, and the truck lurched over potholes strewn over the single lane. "It's quiet and it helps me relax."

Ben's phone buzzed in his pocket. When he reached for it, he stared down at the number for a moment before answering. "Hey. H—How's it going?"

A few moments later, "What? Are you okay—how long ago?" He listened again. "Where are you now?"

Julie looked over at her passenger as the truck slid onto a gravel driveway in front of the barn. She shut off the engine and waited for Ben to finish his conversation.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m coming—I’ll leave now.” He hung up and stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

“Where are we going now?” Julie asked.

“*We’re* not. You’ve got work to do here.”

“Like hell I’m not.”

“I have to get to Twin Falls.”

“We’re in this together, remember?”

He didn’t actually remember when they’d decided they were in this together, but he let it go.

“Listen, that was Diana Torres, the person I sent that sample to. Something’s gone wrong.”

Julie remained quiet.

“She’s infected, and I need to get to her...” his voice trailed off.

To her credit, Julie didn’t intrude by asking more questions. “Ben, I’m sorry. I’m going with you. Let me get some stuff from the house, and then we’ll get to the airport.”

“No, I don’t fly.”

“Your friend’s in trouble, and you won’t fly?”

“I—I can’t.”

“Don’t be a baby.”

“I don’t need this right now, okay? Besides, it’s less than a day’s drive from here. Plus, it doesn’t sound like there’s much I can do about it.”

Julie looked like she wanted to ask, in that case, why it mattered that they go visit her. Again, she was quiet.

“That’s fine, you can come. Hurry up in there—we need to get on the road.”



## Six Months Ago

**D**r. Malcolm Fischer gasped again.  
*I'm alive.*

His eyes were open, blinking, as if trying to clear a veil from in front of them. The room was the same, but it was darker now. The ceiling lights were off, but some light source from outside was trickling in under the door.

He lifted his head to see. *Yes, that's where it's coming from.*

And then: *I just lifted my head.*

Malcolm wondered if he was dreaming. *How do we check that?* Then he remembered. He lifted his right hand and pinched his left.

He could feel it.

There were no pins and needles this time, no probing behind his skin. He was awake, and fully conscious. He blinked a few more times and tried to sit up.

He let out a groan as his right arm pushed off the bed. He looked down at the location of the pain—his shoulder. There was a large purplish welt where he'd ripped out the needle with his teeth, and he could see that he hadn't done a great job: the small metal needle was still resting on his skin, the end slightly poking into his arm.

He reached with his left hand and gently slid it back. It came out easily, leaving a spot of blood behind.

He swung his legs off the table, waiting for the slightest noise.

No beeping. No instruments in the hospital room seemed to be trying to alert their masters that their subject had awoken.

He put his feet on the ground and tried to stand up. Malcolm's body collapsed immediately. He laid prone on the floor for a moment before trying to stand up again.

*How long have I been here?* He tried to remember. The last time he'd woken up, he'd been asleep for six months. *Not enough time to have completely atrophied. Plus, didn't they say they injected something that would help my musculature?*

He forced himself to stand again. Shaky, but he was balanced. He focused on the tubes that were mainlining into his body. He noticed a reader on his finger—wasn't this the one that tracked his heart rate?

If he removed everything, he knew the machine would start beeping again, sending the alarm that his heart had stopped.

*What to do?*

He couldn't start switching off the machines, either. They were obviously going to be tracking the data, if the machines suddenly went offline one after another, they'd be in here in seconds.

He looked around. Nothing to use as a weapon, really, unless he was James Bond.

And he wasn't James Bond.

Besides, what could he do? There were at least three doctors around, and possibly the beasts who'd brought him in. Three- or more-on-one didn't sound like good odds.

He did have the element of surprise, though. Unless there was a silent alarm emanating from one of the machines, they—whoever they were—had no idea he was awake.

*What had they said? “The chemical usually renders the patient comatose for around four to six months” or something like that?*

He thought about it for a moment. They had also said Medesinsk was coming tomorrow morning. If they *had* come, they surely would have noticed the giant welt on his arm, and the misplaced needle that should have been sticking properly out of it.

That meant he had only been asleep for a few hours.

He'd done it.

Malcolm did a small fist pump, more to test the motion of his right arm than anything. He was awake, but he still needed to get out of there, and fast.

*At least before tomorrow morning. Hopefully long gone by tomorrow morning.*

Again, though: what could he do?

He took another look around the room. The many computers and instruments hooked up to him wouldn't *all* alert anyone if he started fiddling with them. The ones that would, he could only guess at. Then he noticed the computer connected to one of his fingers. It was on a rolling cart, and he couldn't see it plugged into anything.

He hobbled over to it, using the bedrail as a support. Sure enough, it was a standalone machine. Battery powered.

He looked at the screen. It *looked* like a heart rate monitor, from what he could tell. There were numbers flashing on every inch of the screen, but the majority of it was a continuous graph, with peak appearing every second on the right side.

*Well, what do I have to lose?*

He started taking the rest of the trackers and monitor tubes off his body. *Disgusting.*

Next were the needles poking through his chest, arms, and legs. Finally, the clip-like things that were connected to his fingers.

All except the heart-rate monitor.

He hoped that was the only one that would alert his captors. Why wouldn't it be? They expected him to be completely comatose, after all, not an alert, mobile prisoner.

He checked the wheels on the cart and began pushing it toward the door. Malcolm checked the handle, found it unlocked, and pushed the door open. He hobbled behind the cart, careful to not let the tube fall to the floor for him to trip on.

It *looked* like a hospital wing, except one with no one else in it. It was a little creepy, actually, he realized. Not a soul was anywhere to be seen, and the only lights that were on were the emergency lights that ran up and down the hall between the brighter fluorescents.

He wheeled the cart to the end of the hallway. Unlike what he'd expected of a “real” hospital, there was no T-intersection here. The hallway ended in what seemed like a janitor's closet in front of him. He checked the door. Locked.

He needed a plan, and fast. He couldn't exactly wheel the heart monitor computer out and down the front steps, but he had no idea how to disable it without sounding an alarm somewhere. If he shut it off, he was almost positive an alarm somewhere in the building—no doubt where the nightshift was still working—would sound, and his jig would be up.

Unless...

He thought for a moment. *It might work...*

But where?

He hobbled along, faster now, turning the cart around and pointing it back the way he came. He pushed past his old room, noticed the door open, and pulled it closed. *Can't be too careful.*

He continued to the center of the hallway and found his T-intersection. He was in the top of the “T,” and this stretch of hallway in front of him was short—likely just a bridge or covered walkway to another section of the hospital. He entered it, noticing the floor curve up in a gentle arc.

He walked slightly uphill until he reached the center of the bridge, then stopped in front of a door. *Electrical 2-A.*

He was on the second floor, and this was the electrical closet for building A, which was either the one he’d just come from or the one he was about to enter. He hoped he’d chosen correctly as he tried the door. This one was unlocked, and he pushed the cart inside.

A light switch on the wall next to the door flicked on a single overhead bulb, enough to light the space in a dim yellow bath of light. Finding nothing at first besides a few mop buckets, some brooms and dust pans, and a shelf of cleaning supplies, he was about to leave. When on the right-hand wall he found an electrical panel, the kind that housed the fuses and breakers, The whole unit was easily as tall as he was.

*Okay, he thought. Let’s get to work.* Whatever he tried, he couldn’t disable the monitor from signaling that he’d been tampering with it. But he could, however, try to disable the system on the *other end*, so that it wouldn’t receive the signal.

He opened the panel and looked inside. Standard stuff—each of the breakers was labeled with cryptic text that would only make sense to the electrician who’d installed them.

*67A.*

*46-49B + J34.*

It was a good thing he didn’t need to understand any of it. Was there a master anywhere?

There. At the very top of the panel, right at eye level, was a large breaker that reached almost across the entire width of the panel. He pulled it as hard as he could and felt the pop as the breaker handle hit the other side of the panel. He thought he could hear a deeper *pop* from somewhere outside the room.

The light in the closet stayed on.

He looked around nervously. What if it hadn’t worked?

He made up his mind. He reached up and started flipping off each of the individual breakers, one at a time, as fast as he could. If the master hadn’t actually turned anything off, this certainly would.

He reached the bottom of the left side and started in on the right, this time working bottom to top. He got faster as he went, now using the palm of his right hand to flick sections off all at once. Somewhere in the middle, he hit the power breaker for the closet he was in, and darkness fell around him. He waited for his eyes to adjust, but they didn’t. It was *dark*. Even the greenish glow of the heart rate monitor was useless.

Malcolm reached out again and felt for the rest of the breakers, using his left hand as a guide until he’d turned off the remainder of the switches. Satisfied, he looked down at the monitor waiting patiently next to him, like a pet. He ripped the clip from his finger, and a beeping sound immediately echoed from the machine. He spun the cart around, looking for a power switch.

There, on the top of the back panel, he found it. A standard I/O computer button. He pressed it, letting out a deep breath as the machine died. For good measure, he tried to hide it behind the mops and buckets that stood in a corner. It wasn’t spy-worthy, but it at least wouldn’t be immediately noticeable.

Now, he had to get out of the building. He assumed doctors and other night staff would be around soon, checking in on him until the backup generators turned on. He guessed he had less than a minute to get out.

Voices called out in the hallway.

“Yeah, I’ll check it out. Probably a brownout or something.”

“Okay, holler if you need anything.”

Malcolm waited until footsteps raced past the closed closet door. Just as they receded up and over the bridge-like walkway, he opened the door and looked out. A balding man jogged down the other side, into the hallway to the room where Malcolm had slept for the past six months. The man was only seconds away from realizing that his patient was no longer there.

Malcolm grabbed a mop, stepped out into the hallway and ran, trying to disconnect the mop head from its handle as he went. As he reached the entrance to the other building, the mop head fell off.

He burst through the open doors, only pausing to get his bearings. The electricity was out here, too—a good sign, at least until the generators kicked on.

“Anything?” he heard another man ask. The sound came from just ahead, around the corner.

Malcolm heard the clicking sound of a walkie-talkie, then the notoriously poor sound quality of another voice from the other end.

“Nothing. Lights off down here, too.” A pause, then heavy breathing. “Checking in on 0-10-7... what the...” The voice continued breathing, then it shouted. “He’s not here! 0-10-7-5-4 is gone! I repeat—”

Malcolm had heard enough. He had no idea if there was one man around the corner or twenty, but he took his chances. He flung himself around the end of the hallway, relieved to not have the burden of the heart rate monitor cart.

A lone young man in his thirties had his back to Malcolm behind a circular desk situated in the middle of an open atrium. This man was not a doctor, Malcolm realized. He was wearing a navy blue suit and black belt.

*Rent-a-cop.*

Malcolm kept running. Through the darkened atrium, shafts of moonlight piercing the darkness through skylight leaving a odd silvery tint on the plants, and marble-art work with its sharp light, like a modernist’s interpretation of film noir.—Shadows cut through everything crisscrossing the pristine lobby.

Malcolm ran past a glass elevator and caught a glimpse of a sign glued to the side of the elevator shaft.

*Floor 2.*

And below it: *Drache Global.*

*Drache Global*—something clicked in Malcolm’s mind. *That had been the label on the bag.*

By now, Malcolm was sure the man could hear him coming, but he didn’t turn around. Instead, the rent-a-cop flicked the button on the walkie-talkie and asked again, “Hey, you hear me? What’s up?”

The doctor tried to respond, but the connection either cut in and out or the doctor was inept at the use of walkie-talkies. The voice flickered. “—Patient... need assistance...” The cop tried to respond again, finally realizing that there were loud footsteps behind him.

It didn’t matter. Malcolm was now within range of the cop, and he brought the mop handle up and over his head. He felt the burn in his right shoulder as his muscles voiced their discomfort, but he ignored it.

Malcolm felt a rage building inside him. *Six months. My team; my students.* Their faces flashed through his mind as the mop handle crashed down on the cop’s head just as he spun around.

The handle connected with the man’s temple, and a look of shock appeared on both the men’s faces. The act of violence was unlike Malcolm, but he followed through. The mop handle broke in



half, but the damage had been done.

The cop's head crunched sideways, and he fell from the stool he was on. He managed a quick gurgle of pain, but was silent as he fell to the marble floor. Malcolm dropped his half of the mop handle.

Without checking to see if the man was alive, Malcolm turned to the elevator. *There has to be...*

There. Stairs. Off to the left of the elevator shaft, he saw a small open entrance.

He went down the stairs two at a time, his body at once excited for the movement it was now allowed as well as struggling to provide it. He reached the bottom and found himself in a similar lobby.

*Floor 1.*

*Drache Global.*

No one was at the desk, but he didn't take any chances. He found a door to the left of the stairs that was labeled *L1-Garage*, and pushed it open.

A sharp snap of air hit him in the face. *Six months since I've felt fresh air*, he realized. He'd been asleep for just about all of that time, but his body knew. He drew in a deep breath and ran outside.

The parking garage sloped upward, and he now felt the strain on his muscles as he reached freedom. Ahead, he saw cars zipping by. The building must be on a busy road.

He ran, daring not look back. Closer.

The edge of the street was tantalizingly close.

*Closer.*

"Hey!"

He heard the doctor's voice yelling from behind. "Stop!"

*Closer.*

He reached the exit of the parking garage, thankful that the gate was an unmanned, automated machine. He dodged around it and continued running, forcing his legs to move faster.

*Closer.*

He'd made it. He reached the street, not pausing for traffic. Cars honked and swerved as they sizzled by, but Malcolm didn't notice.

He reached the other side, then kept running. Up another busy street.

On his left, cars raced past him. He held up a hand, waving—pleading.

Finally a car stopped. Malcolm slowed to a walk as the car's window rolled down.

"Need a lift?"

The voice from inside was that of a middle-aged woman, raspy from a lifetime of smoking. Her hair was tousled, but she wore a huge grin and unlocked the passenger door.

"P—please." He didn't know what else to say. "I... I don't know where to go."

The woman smiled larger. "I'd guess that. I'd say we get you some clothes, first."

Humiliation surged through Malcolm as he looked down at his body.

He was utterly naked.



For what seemed like the hundredth time in two days, Ben drove the truck while Julie snoozed in the passenger seat. As he pulled into the driveway that he'd known so well for so many years, he realized his hands were shaking. He raised one of them to his face, resting it near his eye, as if he were expecting to wipe away a tear. He parked the truck just in front of the closed garage door and stepped out.

Julie rose, yawning, as she opened the passenger door and stretched on the front lawn, she and the truck casting long late-afternoon shadows on the house.

"Is this her place?" she asked.

Ben was already moving toward the front door.

"So how do you know her, anyway?"

It was the second time she'd asked the question during their time together, and the second time he'd dodged it. "She moved here from St. Louis," He said, as though that answered anything.

He knocked but didn't wait for a response. The door was unlocked. He stepped inside, Julie following on behind. The house was dim, with low ceilings that sported 1970's style texture.

"Hello?" he called out.

A woman's muffled voice came from somewhere at the back of the house, so the pair walked down the narrow hallway until they came to a closed bedroom. Ben took a deep breath before knocking again.

"Stay away from the bed," the woman said when he opened the door. "The contagion is extremely potent."

Ben rushed forward, coming to his knees at the edge of the bed. He reached for the woman's hand and held it in his own.

"You never were a good listener, Harvey Bennet." She nodded her head but smiled at the same time. "How are you?"

Ben swallowed, trying to find his voice. "I—I'm good, Mom. What's going on?"

"Some sort of viral-bacterial combination, not unlike a bacteriophage," she said, glancing over at the doorway. "Who's your friend?"

—"This is Julie. She's with the CDC."

Julie's eyes widened as realization swept over her. She, too, approached the bed.

"Stay close to the door," Ben warned. "We can't have you getting infected with this stuff."

"It's okay," Dr. Torres said. "I can't explain it yet, but I believe it's safe... under some circumstances. Something about the dosing, though I haven't yet cracked it."

"Still," Ben said. "Not worth the risk."

"Dr. Torres? It's... nice to meet you." Julie waved awkwardly from the corner of the bedroom. She stared at the large man beside the bed, doing all he could to not burst into tears.

"Mom, what happened? Was it the sample?" And then, just now realizing that there was bruise across her face, "Why aren't you in a hospital?"

"Slow down, Harvey. No, nothing like that. And you two both know a hospital can't do anything about this. It wasn't your sample." She took two breaths, each sharp and staggered. "I mean, it was the same strain, I believe, though not the sample you sent." Again, a breath. "There was a man. Said he was with the CDC too." She looked through pained eyes toward Julie. "Which, I now know, was a lie."

Ben stood and dropped his mother's hand. "Did he do this to you?"

Tears squeezed from his eyes, and Ben felt his face flush with anger. His eyes narrowed. "Mom. Who was it?" The words were clipped, on edge.

She shook her head again. "I don't know. I didn't recognize him. But that's why I think you're safe. It's... it was meant for me, and me only. He walked into my office and emptied your sample in the lab sink, then... then..." Her eyelids fluttered. She took another sharp breath and tried to continue. Ben suddenly noticed how red her skin appeared. He examined her neck and arms and found. They were covered in the same shiny, bubbling rash he'd seen back at Yellowstone.

"He threw it at me. A test tube full of something much more lethal." She took a breath again. "Listen, Harvey, I don't have much time."

"Stop it."

"No, listen. You know this by now but listen anyway. There's more to this than just a freak virus. The explosion, men pretending to be from the CDC—"

"Mom, we're going to—"

"Harvey, knock it off." The words were more intense than they had been, and Ben fell silent. "I don't care about any of that. I can't. I've got hours to live. You listen to me, okay?"

He nodded.

"Harvey, I love you. It's been over ten years since I've even heard from you, and you need to know that I love you."

A single tear fell down his right cheek. He couldn't bear to let Julie see him cry, so he kept his eyes glued to the bed and didn't wipe the tear away.

"I love you, and I never stopped loving you. After your—your father..."

"I love you too, okay?" He felt his voice shaking. *Was it noticeable?* He whispered. "I do. I'm sorry."

His mother's eyes were closed now, and she was trying to breathe peacefully.

"I'm sorry for everything."

He stood up from the bed and left the room.

Julie caught up to him in the hallway and followed him into the dining room, where he collapsed on an old leather sofa.

"—I don't know what to say..." she stammered.

Ben stared blankly at the flat-screen television that sat on a stand in the corner of the room.

"Ben," Julie said. She waited for him to look at her. "Ben, I know how this sounds, okay? But if we stay here, we might die."

"I'm staying here," he insisted. "You heard what she said. She thinks it's safe, that the stuff she was —"

"Ben! There's no way she could know that for sure. Listen to me. You *know* what's about to happen. If you're not infected yet, you soon will be. And then I will be. It's only a matter of time."

Ben knew she was right, but he didn't move from the sofa.

Julie finally came around the couch and sat next to him. "Can we at least go somewhere we can talk, okay? Somewhere we can figure this out together?"

She reached over and placed her hand on his.

This time, he nodded.



“Anything else?” The frazzled server gazed down at the couple in the booth with disdain. Juliette Richardson shook her head. “We’re good, thanks.” The server was gone before she could finish.

“I thought diners were supposed to have great service,” Julie said to Ben over two plates of waffles and cups of coffee.

He shrugged, taking a huge bite of syrup-covered waffle. “They’re known for their cheap food, I guess. Maybe good service is extra.”

The diner sat just outside of town on the state highway they’d taken into Twin Falls. It was called The Family Diner, and Ben and Julie—the only two guests—weren’t sure yet whether the play on words was meant to be taken seriously or not. So far, they assumed it was meant as satire. There wasn’t a “family”—or even another person, besides their waitress—in sight.

“At least the food’s good,” Julie said, cramming almost half a waffle into her mouth. She guzzled coffee to wash it down, and only then noticed Ben staring at her. “What?”

He grinned. “As hard as this is...” he stopped.

“Yeah?”

“No, just... as hard as this is... I’m glad you’re here.”

Julie swallowed. “Me too. I mean, I can’t imagine... I’m sorry, Ben.” She took another bite of waffle, and this time added a forkful of sausage to it. “By the way, what’s up with ‘Harvey?’”

“That’s my name,” Ben said.

“Well, yeah, I picked up on that,” she said. “But you don’t go by that anymore. Why?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. Dropped it after high school. Seemed like sort of a nerdy name, I guess. Ben’s easier.”

Julie considered this. “I like Harvey.”

Ben stared blankly at her.

“I like Ben too,” she added.

He looked down again at his plate, comparing his plate to Julie’s. *She can really put it away*, he thought. He was almost embarrassed by how little he’d eaten.

“Hey, I have another question. Did Diana—I mean, your mom—did she have any assistants or anything? Anyone we could contact?”

“Always working, huh?” Ben’s response was blunt.

“Oh my God, no, Ben... I’m sorry —”

He shook his head. “It’s fine. Really. I’m shaken up, but this is good. Let’s keep moving; figure out what’s next.” He thought for a moment, using the lull in the conversation to take a deep sip of jet-black coffee. He winced.

“Too hot?” she asked.

“Too crappy.” He swallowed, feigning choking. “Where’d you find this place, anyway?”

“Google Maps. Never steered me wrong so far.”

“Bout time to start using something else. Anyway, uh, I have no idea about her work. I’ve been in the park for over a decade. Man, it’s been a long time.”

A solemn look came over his eyes.

“Ben, it’s okay. If you need —”

“No, I’m fine. Yeah, I can’t think of anything. Hell, I don’t even really know what she does. I remember she worked for a chemical company when I was a kid, but she took this job not too long ago.”

“You spoke with her?”

“No, she’d email me quite a bit. I never responded more than once or twice, I think. I kept the email account open, though. Is there any way to figure out who she was working with?”

“I tried looking it up in the company directory, but they’re pretty good about keeping their work and employees protected. I might be able to get some help from my tech guy, though.” She took a sip of coffee, this time not using it to wash down her meal. From the expression on her face, she could clearly taste it better this time around. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. This is rough.”

Ben smiled, and he caught her gaze. He could almost feel her examining him, exploring the leathery-brown contours of a face that had rarely gone a day without being exposed to the sun and elements.

“Hey,” she said quickly. “I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Why’d you leave?”

She didn’t need to explain it; he knew what she meant. It was a fair question, but also the forbidden one, and she didn’t dance around it or build it up.

He took a deep breath. *No one asks me that*, he thought. It had been years since he could even remember talking about it.

A light flashed in front of the diner. Another visitor had parked and was getting out of their vehicle.

Without realizing it, Ben was suddenly engrossed in the newcomer. He watched as the rectangular, boxy headlights flicked off—it was an older sedan—and the driver stepped out. *Tall, thin, can’t see what they’re wearing. No passenger.*

The visitor walked quickly, heading directly to the entrance. The man—Ben could now see him clearly—pulled the door open and walked inside.

“Good evening, go ahead and sit anywhere,” the monotone voice of their waitress called from somewhere in the back of the restaurant.

Julie realized Ben wasn’t paying attention to their conversation and turned to see what he was looking at. The man continued walking toward them. Ben locked eyes with him and began to stand up.

As he did, the man sped up. Ben’s heart raced. The man was now only fifteen feet from their table and closing the distance fast. *Who is this guy?*

He watched the man reach into the pocket of his coat. Ben saw out of the corner of his eye another flash of lights, then another. *Two more cars.* He reached down and grabbed the closest thing he could find.

A salt shaker.

From the man’s pocket, a gun. Small, compact. *.380. Enough to do some serious damage from this range.*

Ben didn’t wait. He jumped to the side, throwing the salt shaker. It struck the gunman in the forehead, knocking him backwards a few steps. He dropped the gun, instinctively raising his hands to protect his head from further attack.

“Julie! Run!” Ben called out. He’d landed beneath some bar stools set alongside the counter of the diner. He struggled to his feet, feeling the painful throbbing in his hip.

Julie was on her feet, running toward the door, but the man was chasing after her. He overtook her at the diner's second exit, grabbing her waist with one arm. His other hand weaved up and around her left underarm. Julie was helpless, her arm completely pinned away from her body. She tried madly to swing it at him, but the man dodged the blows with ease.

Ben rushed forward, aiming for the attacker's lower back. Just before Ben collided with him, the man turned, exposing Julie's belly to Ben's tackle.

Ben was moving too fast to stop, and the three of them fell backwards out the diner's doors. They collapsed in a heap on the concrete sidewalk, but their attacker was on his feet almost immediately. He pulled Ben up and shoved him up against the tall glass window. Ben held onto the man's wrist, trying to wiggle free, but the man landed a solid punch to his gut.

He felt the wind get knocked out of him, and he caught a glimpse of Julie running toward the man before he was released and fell to the sidewalk. The man anticipated the attack, grabbing Julie's hands just as they fell toward his head. He twisted them sharply, and Ben heard her abrupt cry of pain. The man twisted harder, hugging her body close to his and moving his hands to her neck.

She was turned around, her back to his, so her punches had little effect. She danced around, trying to shove her heel onto the top of his foot, but the man was prepared for this line of defense as well.

The man's grip on Julie's neck grew tighter.

Ben blinked a few times, sitting up against the wall.

*Get up. Come on, move.*

He willed his body to work. His hip wasn't broken, but it was obviously badly bruised.

He heard Julie gasping for breath, her arms and legs flailing wildly.

*Get. Up.*

He forced his lungs to accept a deep breath of air. It was painful, as if someone was stabbing him in the chest.

*Not as painful as getting choked to death,* he thought.

He stood up. Julie's raspy voice broke through the gasps. "H—Help," she said.

He ran forward. His footsteps were heavy.

The man could tell he was coming. He was expecting it.

As Ben got within a foot of the man's back, an elbow caught him directly in the nose. Searing pain shot up his face, tears coming to his eyes. Ben stumbled backwards, nearly losing his balance again.

Just then he heard a shout. The lights from the other two vehicles became clearer.

Truckers.

Two men ran toward the trio, one of them shouting. "Hey! What the hell's going on over here?" One of the truckers saw the man choking Julie. He ran toward them, and the attacker released her neck. She sucked in cold air, falling to her knees on the rocky parking lot ground. Tears fell from her eyes.

The attacker was too late to protect himself. The first trucker had reached him and landed a blow across his face. He followed the attacker backwards as he struggled to keep his balance, but before he righted himself the larger truck driver punched him in the side. He doubled over, and the man kned him as hard as he could.

The second truck driver had reached Julie, and he bent down to help her. Ben crawled forward, trying to regain his balance.

He watched as their attacker jumped to his feet and began to run away. He ran toward a field, chased briefly by the larger truck driver. When it was clear to the trucker that he was being outrun, he turned back to the others.



“You okay?” he asked Ben. Ben was on his feet now, swaying, still trying to catch his breath.

“I’m good. I need to get back to my truck; see if I can find him.”

“You won’t find him,” the second trucker said. “He’s fast, and he’s probably got a ride somewhere nearby. Best call the cops and let them handle it from here.”

Ben was seething. He walked over to Julie, letting his arm fall to her side. He pulled her close to him, wanting to protect her. *It’s too late for that.*

She was sobbing, but she looked at him. “Are you okay?”

He realized what he must look like. He could feel blood draining from his nose, and he was having a hard time catching his breath. “I’m fine. What about you?”

She swallowed hard. “It hurts, but I’m okay.” She turned to look at the two truck drivers. “I owe you my life. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Isn’t my first bar fight, but…” he looked at the now-empty diner. “I guess it is the first one I’ve broken up in a place like this. Why don’t you two get inside, get something to eat?”

She shook her head. “We’re fine, really. Thank you, both of you.”

The first trucker spoke up. “You two need anything? A phone, a ride?” He paused. “A drink?”

Ben nodded. It was time to ditch their truck. “We could use a ride.”

He knew the attacker—or someone—would be back. Whoever it was, they were going to be looking for them. They had to get away from there, and fast.



“What do you mean, you *failed*?” Valère asked.

He tried to steady his voice, to make it sound stronger than it was, for the other two men.

Roland and Emilio. Both were standing behind him, their meeting with Valère interrupted by this fourth man.

“I am deeply sorry, Mr. Valère,” the man said. “I encountered them in a small diner, and when I —”

“Them?”

“Yes. The target was with another man. Large, built, but not much of a fighter. I was able to —”

“Then *why* is the target still alive?” Roland asked. His voice boomed out over Valère’s shoulder, causing Valère to shudder. *If only I had his commanding tone*, he thought.

The man standing in front of him wasn’t sure what to say. “I—I think...”

“And *that* is the problem,” Emilio said. “You *think*, when we have simply asked you to *act*.”

Emilio placed a hand on Valère’s shoulder and leaned down, whispering.

“Your contingency is failing us, Mr. Valère. I suggest a prompt resolution to this matter.”

Valère shook again and clasped his hands. His nervousness had been with him his entire life. It began as a slight tick in his boyhood years, growing into a noticeable oddity by his teens. As a young adult, Valère had learned to control it, forcing it down to a subtle, hardly noticeable level that didn’t manifest itself physically.

*But it was still there.*

Valère was constantly reminded of his weakness. The sweating, the shuddering, the teeth-grinding. All of it was a form of nervousness, a simple reaction to *excitement*.

Whether positive or not, any exciting stimuli in Valère’s life caused him to relive these moments, waiting until they passed. He dared not speak too loudly, or grow agitated, for fear that his weakness would once again wield its power over him.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said, softly. “I do agree.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Wh—what is... what can I do...”

Valère held up a hand, and the man stopped.

“Please do not talk. You have already upset my partners, and I fear you will only upset me if you continue.”

“B—but I can make it up. I *swear*. You don’t need to kill me —”

“*Enough!*” Valère yelled, slamming his fist on the table in front of him. He felt the nervousness growing within him, quickly superseded by the calming sensation of knowing he’d even startled his partners standing behind him.

He saw in his periphery each man take a step back.

The man—the failure—in front of him swallowed.

“Now,” Valère continued. “What makes you think I am going to have you killed?”

The man turned his head slightly.

“No, my friend. I don’t reward complete and utter *failure* with a swift and merciful death. It really isn’t my style, anyway. The messiness of it all, it... well, it disturbs me.

“I have a better idea. SARA?”

“Yes, *Monsieur Valère*?”

The man’s eyebrows arched when he heard the voice coming from the walls around him.

“I would like you to transport Mr. Olsen here to our facility in Brazil.”

“*Of course, Monsieur Valère. Is there a certain destination you have in mind?*”

Valère nodded. “I do. Please alert NARATech of a possible test candidate currently preparing for stasis.”

“Stasis?” Roland asked.

The man in front of them closed his eyes. “Please, Mr. Val —”

Valère shook his head, but SARA took over. “*Mr. Olsen, please refrain from additional comment. Your scheduled stasis prep will begin in exactly fifteen minutes. I have alerted security, and they are en route for escort. Please follow the green arrows I will illuminate on the walls.*”

The man, resigned, left the room and slumped down the hall.

“Valère, what is *stasis*?” Roland asked again. “Emilio—what are you not telling me?”

Valère turned to his partners, scrutinizing the fat man that stood at his left. “Mr. Jefferson, I believe I have waited much too long to reassert my authority over this little project. Please —”

“*Reassert your authority?*” Roland Jefferson yelled. “What are you *talking* about, Valère? This project was given to us by —”

“No, Roland,” Emilio said. “That’s where you’re wrong. This project was given to Mr. Valère and myself, and we brought you along because of your... *assets*, which we found valuable.” Emilio turned to Valère to continue.

“Yes, Roland,” Valère said. “We are excited to say that the Company no longer requires the use of these assets. Our investments elsewhere have performed admirably, and your lack of leadership so far on this project has informed our decision.”

“Your... decision?” Roland Jefferson’s enormous frame had moved out from behind Valère’s desk, and he stood, looming, in front of him. “You can’t... you can’t *do* this!”

“Your investments are in nothing but corporate bonds and shady real estate, Mr. Jefferson. Most of it is drying up as we speak, thanks to the work of *our* investments. Your companies are *our* companies, and your prized real estate holdings around the globe are now being scuttled or revamped, to make way for our next phase.”

“This is an outrage!” he roared, fuming.

“It is, Roland. It truly is. For you. For us—for the Company—it is a natural progression. We all eventually outlive our usefulness, and need to be *redirected*.”

“I will not be spoken to like a child! I have *not* outlived my usefulness!”

“Correct,” Valère said. “SARA, are you still with us?”

“*Always, sir.*”

“Perfect. Please arrange for Mr. Jefferson to join our friend Mr. Olsen in stasis.”

“*Absolutely, Monsieur Valère. And shall I arrange for his delivery to Brazil as well?*”

“No, actually,” Valère said. He watched Jefferson’s eyes grow wide. “Please arrange for Roland’s delivery to our holdings in Antarctica. He will preempt our facilities there, but our stasis research has proven to be quite effective in long-term storage.”

“*Very well, Monsieur Valère. Mr. Jefferson, your scheduled stasis prep will begin in exactly fifteen minutes. I have alerted security and they are en route for escort. Please follow the green arrows...*”



*Crack!* The sound of the rifle shot pierced the air and reverberated as it bounced over the calm, open water. Randall Brown sat up taller on the picnic table and offered advice.

“Good shot. You hit it, but it wasn’t centered.”

His wife grinned next to him, laughing at Randy’s instruction.

His teenage son nodded, reloading the .22 caliber Remington rifle. “At least I hit it.”

Randy smiled. “True. If it had been alive, it wouldn’t be anymore.” He took in the peaceful scene, watching the small pieces of clay disc disappear beneath the surface of the lake and the sunlight diffract over the gentle waves.

*Way better than being at the office.* He checked his watch. Late afternoon. He would normally be checking the server temperatures and running any final diagnostic tests, then getting ready to head home. Randall Brown had worked for the CDC for four years, moving to the Montana offices only a year ago. He’d had a brief stint in tech startups before realizing that he was considered a “dinosaur” in that world—at a mere forty-six years old. His world of IBM, mainframes, networking, and accreditations had been replaced in the past decade or so by a new world, one of sleek laptops, blogging, cloud platforms, and agile development. It wasn’t that he wasn’t needed, or useful; it was just that he wasn’t appreciated.

No one seemed to know, or care, what kind of experience and knowledge he could provide as an IT consultant, network administrator, or general “tech guy.” At the two startups he’d worked for, he was usually no more than an afterthought.

At first he didn’t care. The jobs always paid well, thanks to a mix of youthful overconfidence and arrogant market predictions, but Randy knew better. He’d worked a year at a startup that was trying to bring simple image manipulation to tablets and mobile devices, only to see the writing on the wall a few months into it. The company had a long list of deep-pocketed investors who knew next to nothing about the computing world, and they had an equally impressive amount of VC funding. The trouble was, the product wasn’t profitable. Worse, the college-age owners of the company didn’t seem to care about the future of the company’s product line.

Randy jumped ship to another company, finding many of the same problems and none of the solutions. After realizing his career would be all but over if he stayed on board, he decided to find a more stable position.

That position was found in the CDC’s Threat Assessment division, as the Director of IT for a new department. It was a laid back job, never causing too much stress or overwhelming work duties. Keep email running, dust off the servers that provided intranet support through their SecuNet portal, and keep the coffee in the main office hot.

But while the job itself was decent, it was the *boss* that he couldn’t stand. David Livingston. The man was more callous, abrasive, and downright rude than anyone he’d ever met.

*Crack!* Another rifle shot snapped Randy back to the real world. Vacation, one week, a friend’s lake house. There was nothing in the past year Randy had looked forward to more than this moment.

He saw his son smiling back at him, and only then noticed the crumbling bits of clay skeet falling into the lake. All equal sizes, all the same relative shape.

“Wow—did you get it?” he asked.

His son nodded. “Right in the center.”

Randy stood from the picnic table and clapped his hands, rotating them around in a large circle. A “round of applause.” His wife groaned. A “dad joke,” but, well, he was a dad.

“Seriously, dad?” his son asked. “You’re still using that joke?”

“What? It’s still funny.”

“It was never funny.”

“Hey,” Randy said, walking toward the edge of the lake where his son stood holding the rifle. “You know what *would* be funny? If I took that thing from you and out-shot you with it.”

The gun was a gift for Drew, something he’d wanted for quite some time. The three of them, Randy, his wife, Amanda, and Drew, had taken the trip to the lake house for a short vacation, and to celebrate Drew’s seventeenth birthday.

“You’re welcome to try, old man,” Drew said. He handed the rifle to Randy. Randy eyed the weapon, admiring the craftsmanship and build quality. Before he could lift it to his shoulder, his cell phone rang.

“Your phone works out here?” his wife asked. “Looks like it’s work.” She grabbed the phone from the table and walked it over to her husband.

Randy saw the number and shrugged. “Government’s paying for it, so I guess they’re using the best network.” The number came up on the screen just below the name of the caller. Juliette Richardson. Well, at least it wasn’t Livingston.

He poked at the phone to answer it. “Hello?” he handed the rifle back to Drew and walked back toward the table.

“Randy—hey, it’s Julie. Sorry, I know you’re on vacation. You have a minute?”

“Of course, what’s up?” Unlike David Livingston, everyone liked Julie. She was fun, pretty, and adventurous, never waiting around for the red tape.

“Thanks. Listen, I don’t know if you’ve been keeping up with the news, but something’s going to break, and I’m trying to stay in front of it.”

Randy *hadn’t* been keeping up with the news, which was part of the family covenant of their vacation. As he was constantly bombarded by technology, industry news, and media during his job, his wife had made him promise to give it up for the week they were out of town. No TV, no internet, no computer. Just them, the lake, and peace and quiet for a week.

He glanced over at her now. She did not have a happy expression on her face, knowing that Randy’s cellphone breached their covenant. He shrugged apologetically.

“Uh, yeah, okay. What’s the deal?” The CDC often had something they were “trying to stay in front of,” so it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Julie to be asking for a work-related favor. But the fact that she’d called his cell directly seemed odd to Randy.

And her hurried tone of voice.

“Sorry, I can’t explain it all right now. Can you get me access to a computer?”

“Sure—is it connected?” Randy didn’t hesitate to answer. Even though it was an explicit part of his job description, he considered it to be “hacking” when he needed to gain access to another CDC machine. And he *loved* hacking.

“Uh, yeah, it is, but it’s not onsite.”

“What do you mean? It has SecuNet access, right?”

“No, sorry, I mean, it’s *connected*, like to the internet, but...”

“Aw, geez, Julie, you’re asking me to hack an outside machine?” Randy asked.

“Not hack, just... gain access. I need to get some information on—”

“That’s called hacking, Julie. That’s *literally* the definition of hacking.”

Randy heard his wife let out an exasperated sigh from next to him on the picnic table bench. He looked at her, covering the phone's microphone with his palm. "Sorry... I... it's just something real quick."

"Hello? Randy? Hey, come on. This is a serious request. Can you help me out?"

Randy didn't know what to say. "Julie, this is... you can't. It's not legal, and I could get fired for even trying. Why can't Livingston put in a formal seizure of data request?"

"You know how long those take, Randy. And come on. Livingston? I haven't even seen him for the better part of a week."

It was true. Their boss had been enjoying a series of "work related" excursions, including golf, four-hour lunches, and strip clubs. How he managed to expense everything to the company's accounting division was beyond Randy's comprehension.

"Okay, fine. I assume you're on to something big, but I still can't—"

"It's a matter of national security, Randy."

"Seriously?" Randy almost laughed out loud. "You're going to try to guilt me into this with that line?"

"Randy, turn on the news. You can't honestly be that out of touch. After the bomb at Yellowstone, there was—"

"What? A *bomb* at Yellowstone?"

"Yes, Randy, a bomb. And it released something into the air. Some sort of virus that's killing everyone who came into the area close to the explosion. It's contagious, highly deadly, and we need to find out if anyone has anything on it."

Randy stared out at the water in shock. Never, in his year of employment with the CDC, had Julie ever seemed so... frantic. She was always calm, pleasant, and laid back, albeit in a hard-driving, get-it-done sort of way.

He wasn't sure how to respond. "I... I guess..."

"Okay, great. I need it quick, too. Can you get it, Randy?" She paused. "Randy? You there?"

*Crack!* Drew fired the rifle again, missing the skeet shot. He immediately prepared a second shot and launched the disc from the skeet launcher next to him.

"Sorry, yeah, I was thinking. I don't know, I have my laptop but I'm—"

"Randy, I'm sorry, but there's no time. I can't wait on this. Really. *Please.*"

*Crack!*

"Randy, what is that? God, it sounds like a gun."

"It is—sorry, it's fine. My son's skeet shooting—" he took the phone off his ear. "Drew! Knock it off for a second, alright? I'm on the phone!"

"Randy, you know I wouldn't ask you this unless it was serious. Trust me." Julie paused on the other end of the line.

Randy sighed. "I know. I do trust you. It's a pretty big deal, that's all. But I get it. Yeah, I think I can do it. Give me until tomorrow afternoon—"

"I have less than a day, from what I can tell. I need to get going on this before it's a media craze, and I'm waiting on more information from you now."

"Okay, okay. I can do it. I need to head into town, find a coffee shop." He thought for a moment. "It's not going to be secure, but what are you looking for? I'll email it over."

"Randy, thank you. I owe you one. Her name is Diana Torres. We need to track down anyone this person was working for, or with. I'll send you an email with her name, email address, and the



company she was with. She's the only person we know who was studying the virus, and she might know what it is. Anything she found out will be on her computer, at that company."

Randy thought about the next question he was about to ask. *Did he really want to know the answer?* "Why can't you just ask her yourself?"

Julie anticipated the question and responded immediately. "We tried. She died a few hours ago, and we think her company was behind it. They sent someone to find us, too. Randy—I need this information, and I need it now."

Randy confirmed, but Julie had hung up already. Seconds after he disconnected and left the call, the phone dinged with a new email from her.

He turned off the phone's screen and placed it in his pocket, standing up from the picnic table again. "Sorry, babe, I, uh..." she glared at him. "I think I'm going to need to break the rules for a few hours."



The hotel was, thankfully, better appointed than The Family Diner. Situated in the suburbs of Twin Falls, Idaho, it had been purchased from an out-of-business chain and updated to reflect a lodge-like style. The street sign, front entrance, and two connected buildings that made up the hotel had a consistent wood paneled exterior.

The eighteen-wheeler and its three passengers pulled into the parking lot half an hour after the incident at the diner.

Ben shook the driver's hand before he slid down the steps of the truck. He offered the man a tip, reaching for his wallet. Their driver refused, instead asking the pair if they needed money or any more help.

"You've been more than kind," Julie answered. The man was a career truck driver, working for two main shipping companies and picking up other driving jobs in between. He had a family in Rhode Island, two kids and a wife, and was working his last year before he retired early. Ben appreciated him for another reason: he talked a lot and got along with Julie well. Their conversation had so little empty space that Ben spent most of the ride staring out the passenger window.

"Listen, here's my card," the trucker said, handing Julie a beat-up business card that he'd pulled from somewhere under the dashboard. "If there's anything else you need, you let me know."

"We will, thanks, Joe," Julie responded. She smiled and shook the man's hand, thanking him again as she hopped out of the truck. She stood next to Ben as the truck pulled away.

"Ready?"

He nodded and stepped up to the grand entrance of the lodge hotel.

"I still can't believe what happened. You sure you're okay?"

Ben nodded again. "Just tired. You?"

"Yeah, me too," she replied.

They reached the front atrium, where a young woman welcomed them from behind a chandelier-lit log desk. Everything looked warm and comforting, no doubt built and designed with those exact goals in mind.

"Do you two have a reservation?" the woman asked.

"We do," Ben replied. "I called earlier today to set it up. Sorry, we're a little late."

"No problem," the woman smiled as she grabbed the ID from Ben's outstretched hand. "Did you run into some weather? There were some thunderstorms in the area earlier."

Ben frowned, considering what to say. "No, uh, we just... got a little held up."

Julie smiled, trying to sell it as well. The woman looked them both over and grinned. "I understand. Not a problem." She winked at Ben.

Ben wasn't sure what the woman thought she understood, but he didn't press it. They hadn't called the police, though when the lady from the diner had finally come out to the parking lot, she'd offered to call for them. She may have still called after they'd left, possibly to report the truck they'd left in the diner's parking lot.

The plan was to rent a vehicle the next day and have it delivered to the hotel. After they felt certain they were no longer being followed, they'd return to the diner and pick up Julie's truck.

The woman at the counter finished typing something into her booking system and looked up again, still smiling. "I actually have you down for two full-size beds in room 201. I apologize, I can—"

“No,” Ben said, interrupting her. He didn’t mean to sound so forward, but it was too late. “Sorry. I know, I booked it that way on purpose. We’re…”

He didn’t know how to explain their relationship. He most definitely wanted them in the same room, in case something happened. They were adults after all, but there was no reason to share a bed.

“Oh.” The woman seemed disappointed. “That’s fine—we’re good to go, then. Do you have a credit card you’d like to leave on file? I’ll need one for a deposit.”

“Would you take cash?” Julie asked. It was a long shot, but they weren’t about to use a credit card that was linked to either of their names.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Richardson,” the young woman said. “We need one in case of damages. We would accept a debit card, however.”

Julie handed her a credit card. “This is my company one; it should be fine.” Ben saw that the name on the card was, in fact, the name of her office at the CDC. It wasn’t much, but it might provide a tiny layer of protection for them.

“Very good.” The woman typed some more and handed the card back to Julie. “Thank you. Here are your keys, and will you need anything else this evening?”

Ben shook his head and took the packet of room keys.

“Do you have any wine? Red, maybe? Something, uh, sort of… romantic?” Julie asked.

Ben felt his face immediately flush a bright red. His eyes widened as he saw Julie’s smile, quickly matched by the woman behind the desk. “Well, I guess we could bring something up. We actually don’t have room service, but as you probably know, we have a fantastic menu at our restaurant.”

The woman pointed to a hallway just off the main atrium, beneath a sign that said *Le Petit Paris—French-American Cuisine*.

“You two get situated, and I’ll bring you a bottle in a few minutes.” She turned back to the computer as the pair walked away, a smug look on her face.

As they neared the elevator, out of earshot from the front desk, Ben pulled a still-grinning Julie to the side. “You want to tell me what the hell that was?”

“You should have seen your face!” When she realized Ben wasn’t laughing, she put on a fake-pouty look. “What? It’s not like we’re ever going to see her again. Besides, she seemed so disappointed when she thought we weren’t together.”

“We’re *not* together!” Ben stormed into the open doors of the elevator, Julie trotting behind.

They rose in silence, then exited the elevator to find their room directly to the left. Ben inserted the key, then swung the door open. “I’m going to run down to the desk and pick up some toiletries. Do you need anything?”

“I have everything I need,” Julie said, wheeling the suitcase she’d packed at her farmhouse into the room. “You can use my toothpaste and stuff, if you want.”

He glared at her and let the door swing shut.

When he returned to the room a few minutes later, he found Julie sprawled on one of the beds, gripping a glass of red wine and wearing a pair of pajama bottoms and a worn t-shirt. She looked up as he entered, still wearing the cheesy grin. “It’s good,” she said, swirling the glass a bit. “You should try some.”

Ben shook his head, but found that he was smiling—just a little. He threw the small bag of toiletries he’d just purchased on the bathroom counter and sat down on the empty bed. Julie had apparently done some quick cleaning up. Her hair looked like it had been combed, falling gently

around her shoulders and toppling over the pillow behind her. Ben watched her drink the wine for a few seconds until she turned to look at him.

Again, he felt his face flush. *Come on, Harvey, get it together.*

Julie laughed. “What? Been awhile since you’ve had a girl in your room?”

It had been.

“Shut up,” he said, reaching for a wine glass and the bottle of Merlot that rested on the nightstand between the beds. He poured himself a glass and took a sip. *When was the last time I had a glass of wine?* Most of his coworkers drank beer, if they drank at all. Ben preferred a glass of bourbon or whiskey, single malt on the rocks.

They looked at each other for a moment, each trying to decide what to say next. Julie lost interest first, turning back to whatever was on the television.

Ben wanted to ask her about her life. Who was she, really? Where was she from?

Was there anyone else in her life?

As someone not terribly interested in other peoples’ lives, he was surprised at his train of thought.

But instead, he asked about their plans. “What’s next? After tonight, I mean?”

Julie looked confused for a moment, then turned back to him. “Randy will probably get back to me soon, and he’ll tell us where to go next. Whoever was working with your mother probably lives in the area, and we can track them down pretty easily from there.”

Ben nodded. “Makes sense. You think Randy will get anywhere?”

“He always does. He’s a genius with computers. He’s pretty new at the CDC, but we get along well. He’s probably not stopped working on it since I called him earlier. The real question is if Diana shared any of her findings with anyone else or not.”

“No idea. I hadn’t spoken to her in over a decade. She was never the secretive type, so I imagine she’d be open to working with someone else.”

Julie took in the information, and both lay silent for a few minutes.

“Okay, well, I need to get some sleep,” she said. “I’ve got my phone on, in case Randy calls. We can figure out anything we can from whoever might be around here, then I’ll get us some plane tickets back to Billings for tomorrow night.”

Ben shook his head. “I’ll take the rental back. You go ahead.”

“You won’t fly?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I just won’t. I don’t like it.”

“Come on, it’s perfectly safe. It’ll be much quick—”

“I’m not going to fly, Julie.”

“Ben, what’s the big deal? You won’t —”

“Knock it off, alright? I already told you, end of story. Drop it.” The words came out harsh, stressed. He regretted it, but the damage was done.

“What the hell, Bennett? Why the attitude?”

He didn’t respond.

“Seriously, Ben, what’s up? Why are you like this?”

“Julie...”

“No, I’ve had it. You barely speak to anyone, you treated me like dirt, and you’ve been off the grid for ten years. What is it about you that makes you so *cold*?”

Ben looked up sharply. He thought he could see Julie’s eyes welling up.

He didn't know what to say. Didn't *want* to say anything. *Hell, what am I doing here?* he thought.

He stood up from the bed and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Julie remained, a shocked expression on her face.



They were the only patrons in the restaurant. *Le Petit Paris* was frequented only by guests of the lodge, and this particular week was a very slow one for the hotel.

Ben and Julie sat at the corner booth, enjoying a platter of waffles, sausage, bacon, eggs, and toast. Apparently the restaurant leaned heavily on the American part of “French-American cuisine.”

“Sorry about last night.” Ben said the words slowly, meticulously, speaking through a mouth full of breakfast food.

“Don’t worry about it,” Julie said. “I went too far. I shouldn’t have —”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Ben said, stopping her. “I’m uncomfortable around people, if you haven’t already guessed. I don’t do well with confrontation and, well, feelings in general.”

Julie laughed. “You wish you were a robot?”

Ben thought for a moment and grinned. “Yeah, kinda. That would be okay.”

“Really? No tasting food, no feeling joy, no, uh, *more pleasurable* emotions?”

“No feeling pain, either.”

“Pain’s not a bad thing, Ben. It makes the good stuff that much better.”

He scoffed and grabbed another waffle. “Ever eat these with peanut butter?”

“Gross. Are you serious?”

“Oh yeah. You have no idea. It’s the *only* way to eat them. My dad —”

He caught himself, choosing to take an extra-large bite instead.

“Your dad what?” Julie pressed.

“Nothing. He, just, liked it. I must have gotten it from him.”

Julie swallowed. “Can I ask you something?”

Ben looked at her. “Maybe.”

“What would you be doing if this bomb hadn’t gone off? If there was no virus, and it was just you, at Yellowstone?”

“You mean besides hauling nuisance bears around the park?”

“Yeah, I mean *after* work. What does Harvey Bennett do in his spare time?”

Ben considered the question. “Well, I’ve been working on buying a place of my own, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Some land way up in Alaska. I want to build a cabin on it someday. I’m in the last stages of the deal, but I’ve been waiting for the bank to finalize things.”

“Wow—Alaska?”

“I’ve actually never even been there.” He laughed. “I saw the land online, saw what they were asking for it, and called them that afternoon. It was dirt cheap because of its location. Used to be owned by a trapper who passed away a few years ago. The land went up for auction and a local bank bought it, hoping to turn a profit.”

“You strike me as the kind of person who needs to be around a lot of people and live in a city, probably in a high-rise.”

“Yeah?” Ben smiled. “Seems like me.”

Julie paused to take a few bites, and Ben sipped his coffee. He knew what was coming next. Julie deserved the truth.

“Your mom. Diana Torres. You didn’t tell me she was your mom, and you called her ‘Diana Torres.’ Why?”



He shrugged. “We got in a fight a long time ago. She never really forgave me. I guess we both never forgave each other.”

“What happened?”

Julie wasn't one to waste time. Ben liked that about her, but it terrified him all the same.

“It was the same time I ran away from it all. Thirteen years ago, right before I started at the park. I was camping with my dad and my kid brother. He was nine at the time, and he wandered out of camp and got stuck between a bear and her cub. My dad went to get him, and the bear attacked him.”

Julie covered her mouth with a hand.

“He got hit, hard, and went unconscious. My brother was pretty scraped up, but okay. My dad was airlifted out and spent a few months in a coma, then died.”

“God, Ben, I'm sorry.”

He waved it off. “My mom—as tough as she was—she never really forgave me. It was really Dad, though, I think she was mad at, for letting it happen. But she couldn't express that, you know? And she tried to forget about it, I think. She changed her name back to her maiden name, Torres. We sort of walked on eggshells for a while afterwards, until I gave up. I got some odd jobs, finished school, and just... left.”

“I had no idea,” Julie said. She was tearing up again.

“Why would you? I don't talk about it for a reason, Julie. It ain't something I'm proud of, and I don't particularly like thinking about it.”

“So why Yellowstone?”

“Makes sense, for a guy like me. No education, loves being outside, and hates people. Seemed like the logical thing, really. It's a great organization, too, so I actually enjoy the people there.”

*Enjoyed*, he thought. He looked up and saw that Julie was shaking her head.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It's—it's just that I still don't get you. I am sorry, I truly am, but you don't *really* hate people. You just said it, you know? You like those guys you work with, and you know it. You care for them, but you won't let them in. Right?”

Ben felt again, for the third time in many years, his face redden. “Yeah, I get it. Listen, Julie, here's what people like you—people who have that weird *hope* in humanity—don't get. You know what causes pain? True, *real* pain? People do. You get rid of people, you get rid of pain.”

“That's stupid.”

“Stop thinking that the world works some other way, Julie. Stop trying to make it work the way you want it to.”

The waitress came around and refilled their coffee, while Julie and Ben sat silently at the small table. Julie held back tears as she gazed out the window. Ben simply faced straight ahead, not making eye contact with the waitress.

When he finally looked up, he found the woman staring down at him knowingly, eyeing him strangely. “Let me know if you two need anything,” she whispered. Ben nodded.

“Come on, Julie, what's wrong?”

Julie turned her head. “You need to grow up, Ben.”

He frowned.

“People care about you. People *love* you, and you push them away because you got hurt once. I get it, but you've got to let it go.”

He stood up to leave, but she reached out and grabbed his arm. “Stop. Don't walk away again, Ben. You need to hear this, talk through it.”

He wanted badly to continue, to walk out of the room. Then keep walking.

But he didn't. He wasn't sure why, but he agreed with her. He needed her to call him out. Or was it more than that?

Before he could consider an answer, Julie's phone rang. She held it up and read off the name: Randall Brown.



“Dad! Breakfast is ready!”

Randall Brown heard his son yell while sitting in his office, checking in on things at work. His wife had clearly told their son to get him for breakfast, and this was his interpretation. Seconds later he heard his wife, Amanda, yell back.

“Come on, Drew, *get* him. I could have yelled myself.”

Randy smiled to himself, knowing exactly what came next:

“Then why didn’t you?” Drew asked.

Randy shook his head. Knowing Amanda, Drew was risking his rifle-shooting privileges, or worse, with such a show of disrespect.

*When do they grow out of it?* he wondered. Drew was a good kid, but Randy was regularly surprised by the fleeting attitudes and phases of teenage boys. Drew kept them on their toes, and Randy was positive that Drew was the cause of the majority of the gray hairs on his head.

“I’ll be right there!” Randy called back. Surprisingly, he didn’t hear his wife reprimand their son. She must have decided it wasn’t worth the trouble. Still smiling, he turned back to his cellphone and dialed Julie’s number.

It rang three times before she picked up. “Hello?”

“Hey, Julie, it’s me—Randy.”

“Hey, Randy, good to hear from you. We’re just finishing up breakfast. Anything good?”

“Might be helpful, but I don’t know if it’s *good*.”

“We’ll take anything you’ve got, Randy.”

“By the way, who’s we? You working with Stephens on this one?”

“Uh, no, a guy I met at Yellowstone actually. Stephens is back home. What did you find?”

Randy considered this for a moment. *Some guy?* Julie wasn’t careless but he didn’t question her. “Oh, uh, I found her—Diana’s—assistant. Charlie Furmann, lives in Mud Lake, Idaho, with his parents and has an apartment in Twin Falls.”

Julie paused a moment. He assumed she was taking notes. “Mud Lake? Is that a real place?”

“It is. Town of about four hundred people from what I gather. Shouldn’t have much trouble finding him there.”

“Ok, great. Anything else on him?”

“Not much. He was a PhD candidate in something called ‘molecular modeling’ and worked with Diana as a sort of work-study.”

Again, a pause.

“Listen, Julie. I really need to go.” He thought about his son in the dining room, waiting with Amanda to start breakfast. *Amanda*. She was already upset that he was gone for a few hours yesterday, and she wouldn’t be happy with him for this, either. At the very least, he could tell her what had happened at Yellowstone and hope that it explained why he had been absent.

“Right, yeah, sorry. Randy, thanks for this. Seriously.”

“No problem.” He began to hang up but heard Julie’s voice again from the small speaker.

“Oh, hey. Have you heard anything from Stephens?”

Randy placed the phone back up to his ear with a frown. “Stephens? No, why?”

It wasn’t abnormal for Randy to not be in contact with Benjamin Stephens. Randy was the office IT specialist, not a regular team member. Most of the time he was in charge of setting up and

maintaining the company's intranet server, SecuNet, and setting up email addresses and providing other IT support. In some cases, he had played a more active role by providing on-the-fly information updates and logistics, but his was mainly a hands-off job.

"I just haven't heard anything from him either," Julie explained. "He usually swamps my inbox but..."

"Weird. No, I haven't heard anything."

"Okay. Is the server up, do you know? Any major downtime?"

Randy was almost insulted. "Of course not. Why would there be? You know I've got 24/7 alerts that would get to me even if I was trapped in an Afghani cave."

"Whoa, chill. Can't hurt to ask, right?" Julie said. "I know you're on top of it. It's just weird, that's all."

"Yeah, it is. Give me a minute. I'll remote in and see if there's anything wonky going on. I'll text you in five."

"Thanks, Randy. I owe you one."

"Buy me a beer sometime, and we're even." He clicked off the phone and walked out to the dining room. He eyed his wife and son. "You know the bomb that went off at Yellowstone? Something was released into the air and it's killing people."

His wife's eyes grew wide. Drew's mouth hung open.

"We're fine here, but the CDC has people in the field, and I need to keep checking in every now and then."

His wife nodded, still taking in the horrible news.

"Okay, then. Give me five more minutes and I'll be back out."

He left the room and used the remote desktop application on his phone to access his terminal at the office.

Everything checked out—servers were up and running, intranet cabling didn't appear to have any glitches, and the inbound internet connection was functioning properly. He scanned through the list of configuration files, finding no problems.

Lastly, he clicked on the email server link and browsed the inbound and outbound connections. Through this portal, he could see every email sent and received by every member of his access group—twenty-five people in total. It was a security protocol, one that had required him to maintain a level of security clearance to remain employed. He browsed the list, reading the names of the senders and receivers of each email.

He saw names of other employees sending and receiving emails from other members of the staff regarding the current state of affairs at Yellowstone. He saw emails from Stephens sent to Julie's email address, and he saw emails to David Livingston.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

*Except...*

He didn't see any *received* emails with Julie's name or email address. Though Stephens had sent them, they seemingly had never reached her inbox.

Randy grimaced. This was his area, his responsibility. If there was something wrong with the mail server...

Then he saw something even more puzzling.

For every sent email from Stephens to Julie, there was a duplicate received email with Livingston's address on it.

Definitely puzzling.

He opened the configuration file for the mail server, just to see if there was anything strange going on with the routing. Everything checked out. He found nothing wrong in the name server settings, either.

There was one more place to check. Randy opened the forwarding section of the SecuNet admin portal and read down the list. Most entries were auto-responders set up for staff who were on vacation, working remotely, or otherwise wanting to receive their email through another provider's account. But one was a specific forwarding address that he recognized.

Benjamin Stephens.

Why was his address being forwarded? And where was it going? Shocked, Randy clicked through until he found the answer. Benjamin Stephens' mail was being forwarded to *David Livingston—at Livingston's instruction*.

Livingston himself had set up the forward on the SecuNet server for all of Stephens' mail. Anything the man sent out was instead received by his superior.

And it was poorly done, to boot. Randy couldn't find any sort of encryption on the forwarding record, nor was the address masked in any way to a vanity email address. It was as if the man didn't care who was watching, or more likely, didn't care *why* anyone was watching.

It was certainly like Livingston to be so distrustful of his staff that he'd set up an email forward on an account, but why Stephens? And why not just ask Randy to monitor it for him?

Randy suspected why: Livingston wanted the power trip. He wanted to feel in charge; letting Randy into his little game was like inviting someone else aboard to watch him drive the train. Randy was immediately disgusted, but he was now faced with a bigger dilemma: should he remove the forward?

If he did, Livingston would know soon enough that the forward was no longer working. But if he didn't, Livingston could just log in to SecuNet and see that 'rbrown' had recently logged in and seen the forwarding page.

It was a tough decision, but he had a little time to think through his options. There was, however, one decision he'd already made.

He closed the remote desktop application on his phone and called Julie back.



“Seems like all we’re doing is driving,” Julie said from the passenger seat of her truck. The road they were on had narrowed to a two-lane highway surrounded by farmland.

“You mean all *I’m* doing is driving,” Ben answered. They’d left the hotel that morning, heading toward Mud Lake, Idaho, just as soon as Julie had received the tip from her computer guy, Randy Brown.

“I told you earlier I don’t mind—just let me know when you want to switch.”

Ben shook it off. “It’s fine, really. Enjoy the scenery.”

“Yeah, I just love cornfields as far as the eye can see.”

“They’re soy beans.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.”

They came to a cross street and turned right onto a farm-to-market road that apparently led farther into the great expanse of fields and farms. According to Ben’s map, they were about ten minutes from Mud Lake. Julie had chided him for almost an hour about the map—a Rand McNalley road atlas he’d purchased at the hotel’s gift shop—but if he were in a laughing mood, he would have gotten the last one now.

Never one to trust technology, Ben had purchased the map “just in case,” having a hunch that neither of their cellphones would pull a decent enough data connection to get them to Mud Lake, and then to Charlie Furmann’s parents’ place outside of town. As of about thirty minutes ago, he was proven correct.

“You’d like the CDC. They hate flying too, since it happens to be one of the most efficient ways to spread airborne diseases.”

“I’m not *afraid* of flying,” Ben shot back. “I just don’t... prefer it.”

“Oh, right. Just like I don’t *prefer* spiders.”

“That’s different. I just don’t like feeling so... helpless.”

Julie thought for a moment, looking out the window. “I get that. Makes sense—all those tons of metal, breaking the laws of physics—”

“Hey, I don’t need to be reminded of it.”

“You *are* afraid of flying! I can’t even mention flying without you getting all bent out of shape.”

“You’re relentless, you know that?” Ben said.

“I do. How much longer?”

“Ten minutes, I think. Check the map.” Julie grabbed the open atlas spread out on the center console and looked it over for a few seconds.

“What? Haven’t had to go tech-free in a while?”

“Shut up. I can use it. I just need to get my bearings.”

“North is up.”

“Be quiet.”

“I literally outlined the route we’re on. Just look at the red line—we’re toward the end of it.”

Julie contemplated the map for a few more seconds, then threw it back down and looked back out the window.

“Well?” Ben asked.



“Yeah, about ten minutes.”

Ten minutes later, they saw a lone silo stretching up over a field of deep green, leafy plants. As the silo grew larger, they could see a few smaller buildings spread out over the expanse of soy fields, including a yellow farmhouse. But it was the vehicles in front of the farmhouse that made Ben’s skin crawl.

“Are those police cars?” Julie asked.

“Yeah. Four of them.”

“Oh, man, this just keeps getting better.”

Ben navigated down the road a little farther until he saw a dirt road leading to the farmstead. He started to slow the vehicle, preparing to turn, but Julie stopped him.

“Don’t. They’re not going to let us just walk around there, and if something did happen, we’re not helping ourselves by showing up on the doorstep.”

Ben knew she was right.

“Besides, the police aren’t going to give us anything until they’ve figured it out. Especially if there was a crime. Let’s head back into town and see if anyone knows what’s going on.”

Ben sped up again and grabbed the atlas. “This road intersects with another farm road that runs parallel to the main highway. Should take us back toward Mud Lake.”

They found their road in another minute, and ten minutes after that, they were on the outskirts of town.

Town, however, was too strong a word. Mud Lake, Idaho, seemed like not much more than a rest stop on the way to something bigger. A few stoplights, a general store with a few gas pumps, and a large industrial facility of some sort was all the small town’s main street offered.

Ben pulled the F450 into the small lot in front of the general store and parked.

“Is it open?” Julie asked.

“No idea. Let’s find out.” They got out and walked to the front door. Ben grabbed the handle and was surprised when it gave easily. A series of dings sounded from a group of bells hanging on a string attached to the door let the owner know they’d arrived.

“One minute!” a voice called out from somewhere in the back. They waited at the counter for a moment before a short, rotund man with reddened cheeks and wispy white hair appeared from around a corner. He shuffled along, appearing almost weightless as his upper body hardly moved. He wore an impressive smile, aided by his large, jolly eyes, and his overall impression told the couple they’d found the right place to ask for help.

“How may I help you?” the man asked. His voice matched his appearance in every way. Crisp, light, and nuanced in a way that only an older man with years of communication experience could portray. His demeanor was disarming.

“We’re looking for some information. About someone who lives here,” Julie said.

The man nodded slowly, eyeing each of them for a brief moment. “It’s a small town, as you’ve no doubt gathered,” he said cheerfully. “We do tend to know one another quite well.”

Ben sensed a bit of hesitation in the man. *Maybe this was a bad idea...*

“His name’s Charlie Furmann,” Julie said. “I think he lives here with his parents, just outside of town—”

The man held up a hand, halting Julie. Ben watched as the man’s expression and stature changed almost instantaneously, going from a peaceful, inviting shop owner to a ruffled, bothered old man. “Get out. Now.” He pointed to the door. “Please leave.”

“Sir—we’re just—”

“No. Out.”

Ben clenched his teeth and tried to interpret what had just happened. The man clearly knew Charlie or knew *of* him. *Maybe he knows his parents?*

“Sir, we’re sorry to intrude. Really. But we’re with the CDC... the Centers for Disease Control.” The man’s face softened slightly, but he still looked about three seconds away from grabbing a broom handle and shooing them out of the store. Ben said. “There’s been an outbreak of something, and we’re trying to figure out what it is. We think Charlie might know something about it—”

“It doesn’t matter what he *knew*,” the shopkeeper said.

“Wait,” Julie said. “*Knew*? As in past tense...?”

The man nodded.

“My God,” she said. “We’re so sorry. We drove by his parents’ farm and saw the police cars... How?”

The man sighed, realizing that he wasn’t going to get rid of these patrons as easily as he once thought. “He was found in his apartment, in Twin Falls. Had that rash on him—the one that’s been going around east of here.”

Julie nodded, taking it all in.

“Terrible thing. You people know anything about that rash?”

“That’s what we’re working on now,” Julie explained.

Ben added. “It’s killed a lot of people who were around that blast in Yellowstone. We think it’s related, that Yellowstone was the epicenter.”

The storeowner’s faced drained. “I sure hope not, son. Seems like this country’s already gone to hell in a hand basket. Kid hadn’t been home in something like five years, too. All focused on his work in the city. The Furmanns are beside themselves.”

Ben and Julie thanked the man and left. They walked in silence back to the parking lot and the truck. Ben slid into the driver’s seat.

Julie waited until the truck was on the main road through town before she spoke. “Twin Falls is outside the blast radius by *hundreds* of miles. And the virus is not technically an *outbreak* yet—it’s not contained, but it hasn’t been spreading outside of Wyoming. *Much* slower than a traditional epidemic.”

“Right,” Ben said. “My mom wasn’t anywhere near it either. Whoever got to her also must have paid Charlie a visit...”

They both let that information sink in. What it meant, what it *might* mean, was even more terrifying. Someone had brought the virus to them intentionally.



Julie decided it would be best to check in with her office and see if they had anything new. As they drove in silence, she checked her phone again to see if she had service.

“Anything?” Ben asked.

“Not yet,” she said. “I think I had bars outside Twin Falls.”

“We’re only a few miles out. Keep checking.”

Soon enough, a single bar of service grew to two, then three. Then her phone vibrated. She had a waiting voicemail from Randall Brown. She played it over the phone’s speaker so Ben could listen in.

*“Hey Julie, it’s Randy again. I checked SecuNet. Everything’s working properly, but I did find something odd. Livingston put a mail forward on Stephens’ email account—anything he’s sent in the past forty-eight hours went straight to him. That’s probably why you haven’t heard anything.”*

Julie looked up at Ben, shocked.

*“Anyway, I didn’t delete the forward. Livingston would know that I was in there right away if he stopped getting Stephens’ updates. Still, if he decides to log in to SecuNet again, he’ll see my timestamp there. I’m kinda between a rock and a hard place on this one, Julie, so let me know what you want me to do.”*

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Julie said.

“What’s your boss paranoid about?” Ben asked.

“—Everything and anything, but this crosses the line. To prevent the flow of information like this during an active investigation...” She shook her head, staring down at the phone.

“What do you think he’s up to?” Ben asked.

“He’s always had a problem with me, but this is weird even for him.”

Julie looked out the window. The sign for Twin Falls read: *135 miles*.

“How far are we from Idaho Falls?”

“I’d guess about an hour, maybe less. We’re coming up to Highway 26, which goes back that direction. Why?”

“There’s a regional airport there. I can hitch a ride on one of the smaller jets if there are any going out today.” Julie started. She caught Ben’s eyes. “Don’t worry. I’ll fly back to Billings and get things straightened out at the office, and you can drive the truck back.”

Ben kept one eye on her as he continued driving down the highway.

“Only if you ask me nicely.”

She rolled her eyes. “Would you *please* drive the truck back for me?”

He sighed. “Sure. What’s another five hours of driving, anyway?”

“Actually, six. You’ll want to go around Yellowstone.”

Just then, her phone rang. *Stephens*. She answered it, again placing the phone on speaker.

“Stephens?”

*“Yeah, hey Julie, how is everything going?”* The muffled voice asked.

“Good, I guess. Have you been getting my emails?”

*“I have. Are you getting mine?”* he asked.

She hesitated. “Uh, no, I actually haven’t had time to check.” It was a poor lie, but it would buy her time. Stephens paused on the other end.

*“Okay, right. Hey, how did that last contact work out? Any information?”*

Julie had emailed her itinerary to Stephens before they visited Mud Lake, and in it she'd included the information Randy Brown sent along.

"It was... not fruitful." She changed the subject. "We're still working on where to go next, but I think I'm heading back to the office later today."

He paused. "*Okay, sounds good. Uh, listen, we got some news I wanted to call about.*"

Julie exchanged a glance with Ben. "Okay."

*"Livingston and some higher-ups at the CDC and the Department of Homeland Security called in a team of excavators to check out the area beneath Yellowstone Lake and the West Thumb areas, at the park."*

"Where the bomb went off?"

*"Right. They know there are a few caves that run around that area, though none of them are very long or deep. But they checked them all out just in case."*

Ben scratched his arm while he listened.

"What did they find?" Julie asked.

*"A tunnel, cut into a wall of one of the caves."*

"Manmade?"

*"Yeah. Cut recently, too,"* Stephens said.

Ben scratched his arm again. Julie looked like she'd seen a ghost.

"What's their thinking? That's where the bomb was placed?" she asked.

*"No, or it would have collapsed the tunnel."*

"But it could have been a staging area," Ben cut in. "Away from prying eyes."

*"Correct."* Then the realization that he wasn't talking to just Julie must have sunk in. "*Wait—Julie, was that Ben? That guy from Yellowstone?*" Stephens said.

"Yes, don't worry about that," Julie said.

Ben grew increasingly annoyed with the itch in his arm. *What is that?* He finally looked down at his forearm. A red rash had begun to spread down and over his hands.

His breath caught in his throat. "*Julie,*" he whispered.

Julie didn't hear him.

He began yanking his sleeves down to cover his arms. Reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of leather work gloves without running off the road.

"What do they think is going on, then?" She continued. "Do they know?"

*"They don't know,"* Stephens replied. "*But they have an idea. They're thinking the first bomb was a warning, to get our attention.*"

Julie tried to take it all in. "From who? Wait. What do you mean the *first* bomb?"

"Julie." Ben said her name louder, hoping she'd look over at him. Instead, she held up her pointer finger. *Wait.*

*"They think there's a second bomb,"* Stephens said. "*Bigger than the first. It may or may not have a viral payload this time, but regardless, if it detonates...*"

"Julie!" Ben barked. His voice easily filled the truck's cab, and she jumped.

—Her eyes widened as she saw what Ben had grown so frantic about. His hands and forearms were covered, but he wasn't looking at his own arms. Instead, he was pointing at hers.

She dropped the phone on her lap and stuck her arms out in front of her.

A rash was blossoming across her skin.



Ben gunned it, pointing the large gray F450 down the narrow highway that twisted through Billings, Montana. An alarmed family in the car next to him swerved out of harm's way.

Ben didn't care. The rash had spread and was continuing to do so. He could feel it creeping up to just below his shoulders, though it was still only visible on his hands and arms. It was moving much more slowly than he'd seen back at Yellowstone, but it was definitely moving. He could only hope that Julie's own rash was moving even slower.

He sped ahead of another eighteen-wheeler, this one carrying a load of brand-new vehicles to some dealership. The driver flipped him off. Ben hit the gas in response. He had to get to the hospital. To Julie.

When they'd reached the regional airport in Idaho Falls, she'd nearly convinced him to keep driving, terrified of what might happen to everyone around her while she carried such an extremely contagious disease.

The argument, however, was settled for her when Livingston called. The very man who had been intercepting her communications with Stephens. He voiced surprise when he heard her news but had a plan in action within minutes.

"I'll have a private plane waiting for you," he'd said. It turned out to be owned by a business tycoon who golfed with Livingston often. It was ready to leave as soon as they'd arrived—they could even drive directly onto the tarmac to save time. Julie was overjoyed, thanking Livingston profusely and promising she'd pay him back someday.

They tried to get Ben to go too, as a precaution, just in case he'd caught it. Ben refused to reveal that he *did*, in fact, have a rash, silently convincing himself that Julie's was worse. He'd rolled his sleeves down and spoke as little as possible.

"He doesn't like to fly," Julie kept telling the team. It was the only excuse they had, and besides, there was technically nothing they could do to force him to. So, they'd given him a card and asked him to call if he experienced any symptoms, and they warned him to limit his interactions with other people as much as possible.

Ben told them he would, stuffed the card into a back pocket of his jeans, and was on the highway toward Montana before they could send someone to tail him.

He didn't trust a single one of them.

His phone had buzzed about an hour ago, the number an unknown caller. When he'd answered it and heard Benjamin Stephens' voice on the other end, he knew it could only mean bad news.

"*Julie's here,*" Stephens reported.

"What?" Ben said. "Why is she at the office? She got the virus thing, and —"

"*She's not,*" Stephens said.

Ben breathed a sigh of relief, then remembered his own rash. It had grown a bit, but it hadn't gotten any itchier. He took that as a good sign. "Okay. Where is she now?"

"*Quarantined at a local hospital that's converted a wing for the virus outbreak. She's sedated now and being fully monitored.*"

"How is she?" Ben had demanded. "Don't bullshit me."

"*The rash has spread. It's up to her neck and is beginning to cover her torso. It's still in its early stages, from what the doctors can tell, but it's not stopping,*" Stephens said.

Ben swallowed hard. *Shit.*

“Okay, I’m coming there. Where is the—”

“*You can’t, Ben. The hospital wing is completely off-limits, and—*”

“*Where is the hospital?*” he yelled into the phone.

Stephens paused, and Ben could hear him sigh on the other end. “*Listen, I’m only doing this because she told me to call you.*” He gave Ben the address of the hospital, then added one more thought. “*If the staff catches you in there, Ben, hell’s going to break loose. This is a completely unknown force we’re dealing with, and you’d better believe there are going to be suits from every branch there, trying to figure out what the deal is. It isn’t just the CDC anymore.*”

Ben understood his meaning. *If you aren’t careful, you might get thrown in jail. Or worse.*

“I understand.”

Ben hung up and an hour later he was pulling up to the parking lot in front of the hospital. The small, early 1900’s building sat on an acre of green manicured lawns. A tall iron fence with brick towers at the corners ringed the property. Picnic tables were sprinkled here and there, each shaded by massive, centuries-old oak trees. The hospital itself featured a grand entrance and lobby, adjoined on each side by two five-story hospital wings.

He parked in a visitor parking spot and looked at the clock. It was getting late, but he knew there would still be a night staff. The problem was, he didn’t know what time the switch would happen; when most of the day staff would go home for the night. He took a few deep breaths to relax himself and surveyed the surrounding area.

He saw a few unmarked vehicles parked together in a clump behind his truck. Each had deeply tinted windows and seemed to be brand new. He assumed they were government, but he had no idea what department. He couldn’t tell if they were unoccupied.

He watched the pedestrian traffic in front of the old hospital. An elderly couple walked through the grounds, the woman holding onto and supporting her husband as he shakily moved down the sidewalk. Another couple, younger, sat beneath one of the oak trees, laughing.

A few people wearing scrubs walked into the building using a side entrance. He watched them swipe a card and enter, the door slamming shut behind them. *That’s it.* If he could gain access to one of their cards, he could get in without drawing too much attention to himself.

*It would never work.* What was he supposed to do, beat up some poor old doctor and steal their ID card? He almost laughed out loud. *This is ridiculous. I’m trying to break into a hospital.*

He knew he couldn’t pull that off—he was a park ranger.

Instead, he opened the car door and walked purposefully toward the entrance. If the government suits were, in fact, watching him from their recon vehicles, he needed to look like a visitor. He walked up to the front entrance and opened one of the doors.

“Good evening, sir,” a young man at the front desk announced. “How may I help you?”

Ben panicked. *What do I do?* His thoughts became mush. “Uh, hi, yes. I’m here to see someone I, uh, know.”

The man’s smile faded a little. “Okay, sure. Visiting hours are actually over, but—”

“That’s okay, thanks anyway.” Ben started to sweat. He turned quickly and walked back toward the front door. *You fool.*

As he neared the exit, he stole a quick glance over his shoulder. The receptionist was on the phone, hunched over his workstation. A few other nurses and doctors walked across the expansive lobby, but none seemed to notice him. He saw a skinny door against the wall, wallpapered to look like the lobby’s striped two-tone wall, and he reached for the knob.



It twisted fully, and he pushed it open. He closed the door behind him and looked around. A small orange bulb hanging from the ceiling illuminated the room enough to give him what he needed: it was a small janitorial closet, filled with mop buckets, brooms, and cleaning chemicals. He found an upside down five-gallon bucket against the wall. Sitting down on it, he recapped his plan.

There wasn't much to recap: *enter lobby, find a place to hide.*

*Wait.*

*Wait for what?*

He had no idea. He knew he needed to see Julie, to make sure she was okay, but he was in over his head. He was a large, lumbering park ranger, not a spry little covert operative.

He waited for a few minutes, trying to gauge the activity outside the little closet. He couldn't hear much. Footsteps here and there, telling him nothing other than the general location of the person on the other side of the door.

Another five minutes passed, and he heard footsteps again making their way past his closet.

*No, they're not moving past.*

*They were moving toward him.*

Ben waited, praying the footsteps would recede into the distance.

The footsteps stopped. Someone was directly outside the door now.

*Please go away.*

The handle turned, and he reached for something—anything—to use as a weapon. There was nothing but a bucket of mops sitting within arm's reach. He grabbed one and untwisted the handle from its base.

A second later, the door slid open. Light pierced the dim room.

Ben raised the mop handle, wincing.

A man's frame was silhouetted in the doorway, but he didn't step into the room.

“You must be Harvey Bennett. Ben, I believe?”



“Who are you?” Ben growled.

The man took a step forward, and Ben raised the mop handle higher.

The man raised a hand. “Whoa there, son. I’m not going to hurt you.” He paused, taking another step into the closet. He looked at the mop handle. “Works better than you might think, too.”

Ben frowned but didn’t release his grip on the weapon.

The man was now fully in the room, and the light from the lobby was enough to give Ben some idea of who had entered.

A janitor.

Dressed in crisp blue overalls and a matching blue cap, the man was older than Ben, but about as tall and built similarly. Wisps of whitish hair fell from around the cap, and Ben could see he was not exactly smiling, but close enough.

An ironed-on name badge stared back at Ben from the man’s chest pocket.

*Roger.*

“You—you’re a janitor?” Ben asked.

The man nodded. “We prefer ‘sanitation engineer,’ but yeah, janitor works too.”

“How do you know who I am?” Ben asked.

“I saw you run in here after your *harrowing* encounter with Junior.”

*Junior must be the kid from the front desk.*

“That still doesn’t explain how you know who I am.”

“Right. There’s more to it than this, obviously, but Julie filled me in.”

The mention of Julie’s name sent a chill down Ben’s spine. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. In the quarantined ward, but they’ve got her on some sort of sedative that dulls pain and slows her blood flow. It’s not enough to, uh, stop the virus, but it’ll help.”

Ben was growing more and more confused by the second. Standing in front of him was a man—a *janitor*—who knew who he was, who Julie was, and apparently what sort of outbreak was going on in the hospital’s quarantine.

“She told me you’d be coming here. Gave a pretty good description too. I was in there when they brought her in. There’s a hazmat chamber set up just outside the entrance, but only staff and facilities, like me, can go in.”

Ben shook his head. “Listen, that’s great. I need to get to her. Can you help me or not?”

“Slow down, slow down,” the man said. “We’ll get in there. Mind dropping that mop handle, though?”

Ben didn’t realize he was still poised for an attack. He relaxed a bit and dropped the wooden stick.

“So... you were just cleaning in there, and happened to start talking to her?”

The man’s half-smile disappeared, and Ben could see him grow serious. “Oh, no. You don’t understand. I’ve been working on this for quite some time. It is certainly a coincidence that fate brought her here, but it’s not fate at all that did the same for me.”

Ben had no idea what he was talking about. “Working on *what*?”

“The virus. Trying to figure out what it is. I’ve been studying it—as much as I can, anyway, for months. This hospital *has* to be involved, somehow, but I’m not sure exactly how. I was starting to

lose hope, but then a few days ago they transformed the first floor of the east wing into the quarantine, and I heard whispers that they were helping with the Yellowstone Virus.”

Ben thought about that for a moment. *The Yellowstone Virus*. He hadn't tuned in to what the media was touting, but he was sure the moniker owed its existence to some marketing-minded news editor.

“As the virus spreads there are bound to be other hospitals in the area gearing up for similar quarantine efforts, too, right?” Ben reasoned.

The man shook a finger at him. “But this one is different.”

“How different?”

“This hospital is part-owned by a company called Rainbaucher's, which itself is mostly owned by another company, Dragonstone Corp. There are also two pharmaceutical companies, one in Norway, called Drage Medisinsk, and one here in Canada called Drache Global.”

All Ben could picture was a crazy guy in his basement, Beautiful Minding bits of red string all over a map.

“Dragonstone is the organization behind these attacks,” the man said.

That got Ben's attention. “There's a *company* behind this?”

The man nodded. “I am just following the breadcrumbs.”

Ben thought for a moment. “How'd you know where to start? How did you even find out this information?”

“The smaller companies, like this hospital, have to file public financial statements. They're obviously convoluted and circuitous enough to be nothing short of useless, but it at least gave me a glimpse into what other companies were behind them. I had enough prior knowledge about all of this to know where to start looking.”

Ben didn't know what that meant, but right now he didn't care. “If you know where to look, help me get to Julie.”

The man nodded and held out his hand. “I'm glad I found you, son. You two can help stop this thing.”

Ben reached out to shake the man's hand, before having second thoughts. *The rash*. Even with gloves on he was still infected.

The janitor, Roger, laughed and grabbed Ben's hand anyway. “Don't worry about that. Doesn't matter anymore. Nice to meet you.”

Ben frowned. “Good to meet you as well, uh... Roger.”

The man laughed. “Ha! I forgot I had this on.” He flicked at the small patch on his overalls. “I had to sort of go ‘undercover’ a bit when I started here. You can call me Malcolm.”

“Malcolm?”

“Dr. Malcolm Fischer. Professor of Archaeology.”



There was a crawlspace-like attic above the corridor close to where Julie was being kept, supported by a metal catwalk. Used for electrical conduit, plumbing for the upper floors, and the modernized HVAC system, it was primarily intended to house cables and pipes, not people. When Malcolm showed Ben the small space he wanted them to squeeze into, Ben thought he was joking.

“You can’t be serious.”

“If I can do it, you can,” was Malcolm’s reply.

Ben wasn’t claustrophobic, but this was cutting it close. The space measured about a foot tall by three feet wide. Enough for a dog or small animal to pass through easily, but a large male human? It would be tight.

“I’ll go first, you follow behind. There will be an air vent directly above her room, but we’ll need to reopen it. The CDC crew that was in here sealed up all the airflow points and redirected them so they could keep everything contained.”

“Right.” Ben was still eyeing the small crawlspace. “Lead the way.”

Malcolm squeezed himself up and into the space, surprising Ben with the older man’s strength and speed. He followed behind, catching a face full of shoe rubber when he entered the shaft.

“Might want to wait until I get a little bit ahead.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Ben said.

They slid slowly through the shaft, crawling over lines of electrical and networking cables, PVC pipes, and other forgotten infrastructure. It was hot inside the tunnel, and they quickly worked up a sweat. “How much longer?” Ben asked.

“Not much farther. We can pop in and out of her room without anyone seeing us. Worth it.”

Malcolm stopped over a grate. “This is it. I’ll unscrew the panel, but I need you to hold it up. We can’t let it fall on her.”

Ben followed his instruction and slid up next to Malcolm’s legs. The man’s upper body was contorted and twisted back around, allowing him the freedom to work a small screwdriver while giving Ben room to squeeze up next to him.

Ben felt the grate pop with the last screw and held it in place. It was heavier than it looked, but it didn’t fall. Together, the two men turned the grate on its side and pulled it up through the ceiling. When it had cleared the hole, Malcolm pushed it up above his prone body, farther into the shaft.

A cool wash of air hit Ben, and he breathed it in. It made his skin itch, especially the area around his neckline, chest, and arms, right where the rash covered his skin. He popped his head through the open hole in the ceiling and looked into the room.

*Julie.*

She was there, eyes closed, on a bed in the center of the room. A few IV lines ran into her arms, and Ben could see the purplish rash on her skin, but she seemed otherwise unharmed. No one else was in the room.

He sighed in relief and looked back at Malcolm. “Give me a hand when you’re down there, I’m not built for this.”

Malcolm nodded and swung his feet down and through the hole. He dropped gracefully from the ceiling catwalk and into the room. “Ready,” he called up.

Ben dropped through the hole until he felt pressure on his feet. He lowered himself slowly, letting Malcolm help him down. When his feet hit the hospital room floor, Julie’s eyes fluttered open.

“Ben?”

“Julie! Hey, how are you feeling?” He rushed to her side.

“I—I’m good, I think,” she said. “A little groggy, but I’m okay. It’s mostly the drugs. The rash—is it gone?”

Ben looked at her. She had been changed into a light blue hospital gown and placed under a bed sheet, but her neck and arms were outside the blanket. The rash was now purple, deepening into the start of boils and blisters just under the surface of her skin.

“Uh, yeah. You look great,” he said, smiling.

“You’re a jerk,” she said. Her voice was shaky, but she seemed to be more alert. “Get me out of here.”

“Julie, we can’t. I’m sorry—you’re not strong enough...”

“Knock it off. Look at you. If you can get in here, I can get back out.” She sat up a little and started pulling at the IV lines in her arms. “What are these, anyway?”

Malcolm stepped forward. “They’re keeping you sedated,” he said.

She frowned, trying to remember where she’d seen him.

He reached out a hand and placed it on her shoulder. “My name is Dr. Malcolm Fischer, remember? We met when you were brought here.”

She nodded, slowly.

“I met your friend here a few moments ago in a janitor’s closet.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Finally came out of the closet, eh, Ben?”

“Really? Right now?”

She laughed, turning again to the IV lines. “Well I appreciate your grand plan to come see me, but you honestly thought you’d just waltz in here, say ‘hi,’ then leave?”

He was stumped. What *was* his plan?

“You’re the one who wanted Livingston’s help,” Ben said.

“Not like this,” Julie replied. “They started treatment on the plane, but... it seemed wrong. As if they were testing something else, not actually trying to heal me.”

“But you’re alive,” Ben said.

“For now. Get me out of this hospital, take me somewhere we can talk, and you,” she pointed at Malcolm, “tell me what you know.”

Malcolm smiled. “I like a girl with spunk.” He nudged Ben and winked. “Sounds like a plan.”

Julie pulled out the two needles from her arm and sat up higher in the bed. Ben hoisted Malcolm up and into the ceiling vent hole and turned to help Julie. She was standing now, gaining her balance. Her hair was a tangled mess, and her eyes were sunken. She ran a hand through her hair in vain, then gave up and turned back to Ben.

She stepped in front of him, her bare feet lining up directly in front of his shoes. Standing there with no shoes on, a head shorter than Ben, wearing only a hospital gown, he noticed just how *small* she seemed. She looked up at him with her big brown eyes.

“What are you waiting for, ranger?” she asked. “Let’s do this.”

She grabbed his hands and placed them on her sides. He felt his face flush.

“You got a crush on me, ranger? Stop freaking out. This isn’t your middle school dance. Lift me up.” She cocked her head to the side, waiting.

He swallowed hard. “That gown doesn’t cover much. I’m going to get a real good look.”

She blinked, bit her lower lip and stared at him, letting him stew in his own embarrassment for a few seconds.

He tightened his grip on her sides, preparing to launch her upwards, and...

She leaned forward and *kissed* him. Long and slow, the type of kiss he'd never experienced.

His ears suddenly felt hot. She pulled her head back slightly but slid her body closer to his. Then she leaned in, close to his hot ears, and whispered.

“Enjoy the show.”





As Ben withdrew his foot from the hole in the ceiling and went to replace the air vent panel, he heard someone open the door to Julie's room.

"Code zero! We've got a breach in the quarantined sector!"

No one needed to speak paramedic to crack that code. The whole place would be on lockdown now. They needed another escape plan.

"They'll figure out where she went pretty quickly," Ben whispered. "It's not like *Die Hard* is a secret. Malcolm, is there any other way out?"

"Sure, but we'll have to unscrew the grate again, like we did for Julie's room."

"Do it."

Malcolm didn't stop shimmying moving forward until he'd reached a ceiling grate over another hospital room. Julie slid up next to him to help, but when Malcolm had unscrewed two of the four screws holding the grate in place, he apparently changed his mind.

"Slide back a little. I'm going to do this the fast way." He slid forward, over the grate, letting his shoes come to rest directly over it. He lifted his foot as high as it would go in the small space and slammed it down.

Ben could see the grate twist and fall through the hole, one of the remaining screws having popped under the force. The fourth and final screw was all that was holding the grate in place, but Malcolm bent it out of the way and hopped down into the room.

Julie and Ben followed.

"They're going to search each room, but they'll probably be slow since they need to put on the suits and keep things contained," Julie said. "They won't take that chance."

The two men nodded and looked around. They were in another hospital room, as small as Julie's, but this one had two beds—both empty. Apparently, 'quarantine containment' didn't mean the same thing as 'luxury quarters' to the hospital staff.

Ben rushed to the door and opened it a crack. "There's no one out there yet."

"They'll be coming, though," Malcolm said.

They followed Malcolm out into the hall. A set of double doors stood at the end of the long hallway. They sprung open and three men in containment suits and two others wearing tighter, clear protective suits over their normal clothes came bursting through.

They were armed.

"Stop, or we'll shoot!" one of them yelled.

Julie immediately turned and ran the other direction. Malcolm and Ben had no choice but to follow. Ben waited for bullets to slam into their backs, but they didn't come. Instead, he heard heavy footsteps as they ran after them.

"Sir, should we engage?" one of the men asked.

"Negative. Only if there's danger of a breach," another answered.

Julie ran for the single door at the opposite end of the hallway. Malcolm pressed the horizontal bar to open it. It pushed in, but the door wouldn't budge.

"Of *course* it's locked," he said, cursing.

"In here!" Julie shouted from the right. Ben turned to see where she was and found her inside a large office room, full of cubicles and computer stations. The men followed her in, and she closed the door behind them.

“It was cleared out when they quarantined this whole area,” Malcolm explained. “There’s another entrance a little ways back. We’ll need to block that door, too.”

Julie ran to the other end of the room and Ben came over to help her. While they slid a couple of the tall filing cabinets against the door, Malcolm did the same at the entrance they came through.

“What about this door?” Ben asked, pointing to a third exit.

“No idea,” Malcolm said.

Ben didn’t wait around. Marching over, he hammered on the horizontal bar. Locked. “Well, there goes that option.”

From a speaker on one of the desks a soft, reassuring voice, sounding like Alexa’s long-lost cousin, suddenly announced, “*Nine, Nine, Two, Eight, Five. Black. Nine, Nine, Two, Eight, Five. Black.*”

“It doesn’t matter, now,” Julie said. She slumped down into an office chair that had rolled into the gap between two cubicles.

*99285. Black.*

“What does that mean?” Ben asked, frantic.

“It means we’ve defaulted to another protocol.”

“What other protocol?” Ben said.

*99285. Black.*

“It means they’re operating according to CDC Threat Assessment standards. If there’s a possible breach in a contained facility—like this one—they move to contain the threat. If they can’t, or they believe the threat to be ‘imminently plausible,’ as it’s written, they move to *eliminate* the threat. Since these doors probably lead outside, they’ll move to close down our escape routes.” Julie explained, exhausted.

“In other words, those guys are going to start shooting us as soon as they get these doors open?” Ben asked.

As if on cue, a pounding bounced through the small office.

“Yes,” Julie said. “I’m a threat. And now you two are risk vectors.”

It was a tough reality to accept. Ben suddenly took a serious interest in their defensible position. “There has to be *something* in here we can use as a weapon.” He looked around but couldn’t find anything worth trying. *Computer mice, keyboards, monitors...*

“Okay,” Malcolm noted. “They’ll probably split up—five in all, three armed. So expect one, maybe two guys with guns to come through each door.”

*99285. Black.*

The pounding intensified, now coming from behind each of the two hallway doors. Ben stationed himself near one door, with Malcolm and Julie close to the other. Julie reached up and flicked the light switch, plunging the room into almost complete darkness.

When his eyes adjusted, Ben saw his door bow and buckle. The filing cabinets edged back until—The door crashed open and one of the men in hazmat suits fell through.

He didn’t see Ben.

*That’s my edge,* Ben thought.

The man’s suit blocked most of his peripheral vision.

Ben snuck around the filing cabinets, stopping when he was almost behind the open door. The man recovered his balance and brought his gun up, searching for a target as he stepped through...

...Just as Ben smashed the door forward as hard as he could with a solid kick. The door rocketed back, catching the man in the hazmat suit in the back of the head. The man grunted, dropping his gun

and falling to the floor.

A second armed man lunged forward, but Ben had the drop on him. He stood up just as Ben pointed his gun back at him.

“Stay there, sir. I will shoot you.”

The man’s eyes were visible through the suit, and Ben focused on them. He steeled himself, not daring to flinch. The man finally relented, dropping his gun on the floor and raising his hands above his head. Ben heard another crash behind him—the third gunman had broken into the room.

The man in front of Ben flicked his eyes up and away from Ben, then back.

*Shit.*

Ben anticipated the shots, not a moment too soon. He dove toward the unarmed man in front of him and fell to the side, just as two shots rang out behind him.

“Ben!” he heard Julie yell from the other side of the room.

He was on the ground, groping around in the dark, looking for the gun he’d felt slip out of his hands. The second man was on him in a heartbeat, wrestling Ben to the ground.

Helpless, Ben felt like a turtle on his shell. The man on top of him was larger, heavier. He wrestled Ben’s hands behind his back and grabbed a fistful of Ben’s hair.

Another gunshot.

Ben flinched, but the man’s hand released his head, and he felt the weight lifted off his back.

He rolled over, raising his arms to defend a blow he knew would come, but instead he heard another gunshot.

This time, a cry rang out from the third gunman who’d entered, and he watched as the man fell to the ground. A third and fourth gunshot sent Ben’s wrestling partner into the filing cabinets against the wall.

Ben looked up to see Julie standing over the third gunman’s body, her jaw clenched in rage, holding a gun.

“You okay, ranger?” she asked.

He did a mental check of his muscles and bones. Finding everything to be in working order, he sat up and nodded. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks.”

“No, thank *you*,” she said. “And thanks for throwing the gun my way. Good thinking.”

He stood. “Uh, yeah. No problem. Where’s Malcolm?”

“The door hit him when that guy busted it open. I think he just got knocked out.”

“Same thing happened to this guy. He’s probably going to wake up soon, though. We’d better get out of here before he does.” Ben counted the bodies sprawled on the floor. “I count three. What happened to the other two?”

“We have to go after them,” Julie said.

“Are you crazy? We’re leaving. Now.”

“Didn’t you see who they were?”

“No. I didn’t. Let’s go.”

“Ben,” Julie snapped, enraged. “It was Livingston. *And* Stephens.”



They checked into a hotel near the hospital under the name ‘Roger Ebert’ and paid cash.

It was Malcom’s idea and elicited only a shrug from him. “I always thought his reviews were terrible anyway,” he said.

Their plan was to stay there until they formulated a better plan.

Malcolm and Ben stared across the table at Julie.

“We need to get a bomb crew out to Yellowstone,” Malcolm said.

“Whatever other departments are on this have most likely already done it, so it would be a waste of time to try to call it in and set one up ourselves,” Ben said. “Julie can call and make sure on the way.”

“On the way where?” she asked.

“We need to get you help. Obviously, we can’t go back to that hospital, but there has to be somewhere else that’s set up a quarantine.” He rubbed his forehead. “And someone is going to have to come here and hose this room down now too, I’m guessing.”

“You need help too,” she said, flatly.

Ben thought about feigning ignorance, but what was the point? He pulled his shirt sleeve back and scratched his forearm. “How did you know?”

“It’s crawling up your neck.” Julie looked at Malcolm. “Hey, what about you?”

Malcolm blinked. “What about me?”

“You’re fine. No virus, no rash. Why?”

Malcolm sighed. “Yes, you are correct, Ms. Richardson. I have no rash, and I won’t get it. I believe the virus, while highly contagious, is non-recurring.”

“Non-recurring?”

“It means it won’t come back,” Julie said. “Like chickenpox.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “I know what it means. I want to know *how*...”

“I’ve already *had* the virus,” Malcolm explained. “I believe I was subjected to the virus a year ago. I believe I contracted it and they used me to test a treatment. I’m not sure they succeeded, but I did overhear them say the virus had ‘run its course through my system,’ and that I was immune.”

Julie was bewildered. “What are you talking about? Yellowstone only just happened.”

“Well,” Malcolm began, “about a year ago, I was on a research trip with some students from my university, up in the Northwest Territory—”

“You’re *that* professor!” Julie said. “Those students that went missing...”

“Yes. The team disappeared, and news agencies rode the media wave for months after we disappeared, but no one from the expedition was ever found, as you recall.”

Julie’s eyes were wide as Malcolm continued. “It wasn’t an innocent accident, like many thought. We didn’t fall through a frozen lake or get eaten by bears. My students were murdered.”

This revelation took Ben by surprise. Appalled, he asked, “Murdered? Why?”

Malcolm swallowed, trying to summon the words. “We made a discovery. An important one. I’ve since come to believe that one of the students may have been working against me. They must have alerted these *murderers* to our location. A helicopter came. It was... horrific.”

“What did you find?” Julie urged.

Malcolm tensed as he recalled the archaeological site. “Some kind of shrine. A place of some religious significance. There were offerings. Coins. Strange coins we’d never seen before. My guess

is that they were tokens of some sort given to the indigenous tribe from that area, likely the same people who created the powder. The powder,” Malcolm added, “was the *real* discovery. White. Sandy. We assumed it was some medicinal herb offered to a god of some kind.” Malcolm looked her directly in the eye. “It was no such thing.”

“What was it?” Julie asked.

“The remnants of a native plant, dried leaves that had been left to decay before being ground in a pestle to form this powder. After so many years undisturbed, I believe it served as an incubator...”

“You think it’s somehow related to the virus?”

“I believe it *is* the virus, or at least the medium in which the virus was able to grow,” Malcolm said.

Ben recalled the news stories as well, vaguely. “No one mentioned a dig site on the news. They said you went looking and wound up lost.”

“Yes, because whatever company massacred my team did a good job of cleaning up after themselves. They staged our tents and equipment miles away at a different location. They left nothing that would have pointed to any suspicious activity.”

“But the whole thing *was* suspicious,” Julie said. “It was a big deal. Every news outlet in the country was reporting on it, and there were conspiracy theories about it too.”

“I know, I know. But like I said, the company did their job well.”

“You keep mentioning a company,” Ben said. “How do you know?”

Malcolm nodded. “They took me somewhere that had state-of-the-art medical facilities and questioned me. They didn’t torture me, as I doubt they thought I would ever leave the facility, but they weren’t satisfied that I knew next to nothing about this powder. They put me in a medically-induced coma, only bringing me out of it after months of being under.”

“My God,” Julie whispered.

“I did have plenty of time to think—it was odd, being in that state. I could sort of form thoughts and run through the things that I could remember, though it was a slower process than if I had been lucid. But it was when I was awake, or at least mostly awake, that I tried to piece together the information. The doctors working in my room each wore the same logo on their coats, and they worked in regular shifts—a large operation. Eventually, I caught a glimpse of the company’s name. ‘Drache Global.’”

“Drache?”

“Yes,” Malcolm said. “Drache Global. A pharmaceutical company based in Canada. I’d never heard of them, but I promised myself that I would get out of there and figure out who they were. I had plenty of time, remember, as I was lying on a hospital bed for months. I formulated a plan, and I got out one night.” Malcolm looked at the wall, examining the lattice-shaped wallpaper.

Ben could tell there was more to the story behind the man’s escape, but he didn’t press him about it.

“I got out, and I ran. I ran for my life. I wanted to hide, but I wanted more than anything to right the wrongs done to my students and their families. I had to figure out what Drache Global was.”

“What did you find?” Julie asked. Ben noticed she had placed a hand on Malcolm’s forearm on the table.

“That this hospital you were brought to, Julie, is part of it. Drache Global, like the hospital, is owned by a group of shareholders. It’s a corporate conglomerate. Publicly listed, but not easy to piece together who the *real* owners are. I researched and cross-referenced as many of their board members as I could manage, but found very few promising leads.

“I spent many hours in the depths of libraries and scouring the web, and all I was able to figure out was that they’re semi-legitimate, at least on the surface. They’ve worked on countless grant proposals, major nonprofit medical research projects, and more public goodwill campaigns than a politician. But I think there’s a simple thread connecting them to some other organizations with bipolar personalities.”

“What thread is that?” Julie asked.

“They have the same names,” Ben said.

“Yes,” Malcolm said, smiling. “Very good. Dragonstone, Drache Global, Drage Medisinsk. They are all very similar, using different languages that all mean ‘dragon.’”

“Why would they broadcast that? If they were trying to operate under the radar, why share a common name?” Julie asked.

“Plenty of companies borrow that name. It’s not particularly unique, even within the medical and pharmaceutical research industries. And I believe it’s more like a calling card. A *brand*, if you will.”

“So, you think this ‘dragon’ company is working across its sister organizations to create some worldwide virus?” Ben asked. He scratched his forearms. While still somewhat itchy, it did in fact seem like the virus had slowed to a halt. *Weird*.

“No,” Malcolm answered. “I believe it’s the work of a handful of people, not a worldwide corporate effort. Secretive or not, I cannot believe something that large-scale could go unnoticed by world governments. I also believe they aren’t targeting the entire world, but the United States. Through the spreading virus, the bomb at Yellowstone.”

“For what purpose?” Julie asked. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

It made sense to Ben. “To sell a cure.”

“By using a bomb at Yellowstone as a delivery method for the disease? That’s insane,” Julie objected.

Yet there *was* virus. And there *had been* an explosion. Those were indisputable facts.

Ben shrugged. “Yet here we are.”

Malcolm nodded. “I think it’s worse than we’re contemplating.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yellowstone is the largest *active* volcano in the entire world.”

“He’s right,” Ben agreed. “The Yellowstone caldera lies directly underneath the park. That’s a fact. It’s a supervolcano. We’ve been arguing about it exactly when it’s scheduled to erupt again for years. If there were a bomb placed at just the right spot, underground, anywhere in that area, and it went off..”

Julie thought about this for a moment. “What would the blast radius be?”

“The last time it blew, it shot ash about twenty miles into the air, and was around 1,000 times more powerful than Mt. St. Helens. It would instantly wipe out half of the United States. Followed by a volcanic winter for years afterwards.”

Julie went pale. “Total destruction.”

Ben nodded. “*Total* destruction.”

Julie whistled. “So, we’ve got a mystery organization trying to blow up Yellowstone and half the United States, while *also* working on spreading a virus to the *rest* of the United States.”

She had summed it up pretty well. Malcolm nodded. “It’s the destruction of an entire nation, within the span of mere days. Possibly the collapse of society as we know it.”

“And you think Stephens and Livingston are somehow involved?” Ben asked.



“I don’t know. They were just following protocol back there. Trying to keep it contained. But Livingston’s actions from earlier—blocking Stephens’ emails from getting through, preventing me from getting them altogether—*that* doesn’t sit well with me.”

“You did say he’s a bit paranoid.” Ben said.

“He is,” Julie answered, “but he’s not *crazy*.”

The two men shared a glance. “Julie, how well do you know him, really?” Malcolm asked.

Again, she paused before speaking. When she did, her jaw was set and her eyes steady. “Not well enough, I guess.”

Her phone vibrated on the table in front of her. *Unknown*. She frowned but answered it anyway.

“Hello?”

She waited.

“Randy! My God, are you okay? I’ve been trying—”

She turned on the phone’s speaker function so Malcolm and Ben could hear.

“—*Fine. I didn’t want to call on my phone in case it’s being tracked. I saw an email thread between Livingston and Stephens. They said you were in a hospital. Are you okay?*”

“I’m okay. It’s the virus, but it seems to have slowed down for the moment. I’m with Ben...” she wasn’t sure how to explain Malcolm’s presence, so she moved on. “Listen, Randy, I—I don’t know for sure, but I think Livingston might be involved in all of this somehow.”

No response.

“I know you’re already under fire for this, but I really need eyes on him. And keep sending me anything you find on Diana Torres and what she was working on.”

“*Got it.*”

“I owe you one.”

“*You owe me more than one.*”

She hung up.



David Livingston flicked off the 95-inch curved television in his living room. Brand new and still priced like the novelty it was, the Samsung was his pride and joy, at least for this month.

He had satellite and cable television, Netflix, and an action movie collection of over one-thousand titles, and he still couldn't find something to watch. He tossed the remote control to the other side of the couch. Unsure of how to satiate his desire for entertainment, Livingston sat in silence for a minute.

*Juliette's involved in this*, he thought. He *knew* it. It was stronger than the standard pang of paranoia that constantly plagued him about each of his employees; this was *real*. He had proof.

Stephens believed him. Both men had been at the hospital, planning to interrogate her after she'd failed to turn over the information she'd acquired during her "stint" in the field. And after Livingston had discovered that Randall Brown, his own IT technician, had *helped* Julie, it was enough for Livingston to convict her.

He didn't know exactly how, or why, but he knew Juliette Richardson was involved in this mess. He'd spent enough time in government to know that careers were made or broken by the men who went the extra mile to prevent mutiny within their ranks.

And his career would be *made*. He just needed a little more proof, and a motive wouldn't hurt, either. He had ordered Randall Brown to record and send over to him any conversations Julie had with him, but he'd also placed a few IT bugs of his own on Brown's network. Any calls the IT tech made or received would be immediately recorded and emailed to Livingston.

It was these types of plays that Livingston knew would eventually get him noticed in Washington. He wasn't naive enough to think that those in power got there by cashing in on their good deeds.

He rose from the couch, pacing before heading to his office. The foyer of his house was immaculate, smaller than he would have liked but impressive nonetheless. He paid a few hundred dollars a month to a maid service to keep the place clean enough to meet his standards, and another couple hundred on the side to the maid herself for "on the side"-type activities. It had taken a few months to find a woman agreeable to his terms, but as he'd discovered in his own career, a little cash went a long way. The companionship did nothing to satiate his loneliness, but it helped make his large house feel more like home.

He entered the great office at the front of his house, admiring his decorating job. A huge bust of an elk or moose—he wasn't sure which, and he hadn't shot it anyway—smiled down at him from the far wall, hanging directly above a large fireplace with an ancient-looking mantle. He'd placed a few picture frames, the stock photos still inside, on the mantle and around the room on floating shelves.

But his prize possession, the *pièce de résistance*, was the huge Scottish coat of arms hanging above his desk. The placard was enormous, stretching almost four feet across and six feet tall. It was red, yellow, and green, and didn't match anything else in his house. But it was *him*. His history, his name, his origins.

It represented him, and all that he stood for, and he stood a moment in front of it, admiring the wooden shield.

He walked behind his desk, grabbing the decanter of whiskey and pouring himself a glass. He stood face-to-face with the coat of arms for another moment, enjoying the warm liquid. Finally, he sat.

And saw a man standing in the center of the room, staring at him.

Recognition washed quickly over Livingston, but he was angered that the man had caught him by surprise.

“Oh—my God,” Livingston said, nearly dropping his glass of liquor. “You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing here?”

He made a mental note to call his security company to set up perimeter alarms. The HD motion cameras were enough to turn over footage to the police after a break-in, but they obviously weren't meant as an early-warning system. He grunted and sipped on his whiskey.

The man continued staring.

“Well, what do you need? You seemed to enjoy sneaking up on me. What is it?”

The man finally looked Livingston up and down and shook his head. Livingston sat down behind the desk, acting preoccupied with a stack of papers. As he picked up the stack and began to rummage through them, he heard a clunk on the desk.

At the edge of the desk, Livingston saw a small, compact 9mm revolver. His visitor had placed the gun there, and now stepped back from the desk to the middle of the room once again.

Livingston felt his blood run cold. His nostrils flared, and anger flashed through his body. Still, he was calm. He took another sip of whiskey, this time deeper, letting the heat sting the back of his throat.

“Trying to intimidate me?” he asked.

“Is it working?”

Livingston snorted through a mouthful of liquor. He swallowed and blew out a breath of alcohol-laced air.

“This is a waste of time,” Livingston said. “I don't know anything, or anyone.”

“I didn't say you did,” the man replied immediately.

“You want answers, talk to Julie, or that thug she's running around with.”

“I don't need to.”

Livingston's anger grew. “What the hell are you here for, then?”

The man blinked.

Livingston looked down at the pistol, then up at the man, catching his eye. He looked to the large bust of the moose-elk, across the mantel at the pictures of someone else's family, and then back down at the gun again. He picked it up slowly, delicately.

He'd actually never held a gun before.

It was heavier than he'd imagined, surprising for its compact size. He examined it. The barrel, trigger, and hammer—*is that what the back thing is called?*

He felt its weight beneath his fingers. The man didn't say a word as Livingston pressed the safety release back and forth, locking and unlocking the gun's firing pin.

Livingston wasn't going to let himself be intimidated. He wouldn't be humiliated, especially not in his own home. He felt his lip turn upward into a slight sneer. *This asshole.*

He stood up, gaining confidence. “Get out.” The words were cold.

The man didn't move.

“*Get out,*” he said again. He lifted the gun quickly and pointed it at the man's chest. “Don't make me repeat it.”

Still, the man didn't speak. His expression was stoic, but Livingston could see a glint of something—amusement?—in the man's eyes.

He felt his right arm shaking, and he tried to force it to stop. He aimed the revolver and closed his eyes just as he pulled the trigger.

He heard a tiny *click*.

That wasn't right.

He tried again.

*Click.*

*Shit.*

He looked down at the gun, as if silently arguing with the metal contraption, but nothing happened. When he looked up, the man standing in front of him was shaking his head.

"You're too predictable, Livingston. Always have been. All of you."

Livingston frowned, but the man was already moving. He closed the distance between them in less than a second, and Livingston saw him pull his arm back.

He smashed his fist into Livingston's face. Livingston felt his hands open, dropping the empty gun and the glass of whiskey. They both tumbled and fell to the top of the desk. The glass shattered, whiskey and shards of crystal exploding around him. He was immediately in a daze, his mouth opening and closing as his brain tried to offer some sort of help.

The man, however, didn't stop to wait for Livingston to recover. He grabbed a wad of Livingston's thick, dyed hair and yanked up on it. He met Livingston's eyes for a brief moment, then slammed Livingston's head down on the top of the desk. Hard.

Livingston's face and ears exploded in pain, only to be followed by a much more penetrating ringing pain that lanced through the inside of his mind. He felt as if his entire head had been lit on fire from the inside out.

He flailed his arms wildly, but the man was still in control. Once again, he brought Livingston's head up, held tightly by the tufts of hair, then smashed it back down on the desk.

Livingston groaned, and his body went slack. His eyes were blurry, but he was still conscious. He felt a trickle of drool escape the corner of his mouth, but he made no motion to wipe it away.

He collapsed downward, his rear end somehow finding the chair as his torso and upper body sprawled forward onto the desk. He lay still, wondering why he hadn't already blacked out.

"You've been a cancer to this organization for years, Livingston," the man said. Livingston heard a scrape and felt the desk vibrate slightly. He turned his face to the side, trying to will his eyes to focus.

The man had picked up the gun and was now reaching into his jacket pocket. He withdrew something—something small, shiny.

A bullet.

Livingston was unable to panic, or perform any other voluntary function, but alarm sirens erupted in his brain. Or was it still the pain? He was unsure—everything was blurred together, one giant smear of pain and confusion.

"You're predictable, useless, and spineless. I can't think of a greater waste of air than the breath you breathe."

Livingston was surprised to discover he was still capable of feeling anger. He relished the anger, though he was unable to act on it. He grunted again.

The man loaded the bullet into the chamber and Livingston heard a succession of clicks.

"This has been a long time coming, Livingston. Sorry it had to be this way, but like I said—you're predictable."

Livingston didn't hear the explosion of the bullet as it raced out of the barrel and found its target.



Julie was adamant. “Go! Stop being ridiculous—I’ll be fine!”

Ben shook his head, planning to stage a resistance. Malcolm grabbed Ben’s arm and pulled him out of the hotel room. “It’s fine. We’ll only be gone for a few minutes.”

She had insisted that the two men go pick up some supplies and takeout Chinese for the three of them. After a few minutes of arguing back and forth, Julie had prevailed, and the two men left for the F450 parked outside.

When they were gone, Julie opened her laptop. She initiated a few searches, first inside the SecuNet database and the rest of the private CDC intranet, then through Google. She tried numerous combinations. *Livingston CDC, David Livingston, David Livingston CDC*, and more, but each result was merely a bare-bones biographical entry that was obviously written by Livingston himself.

*David Foster Livingston is a successful leader and proven manager in many corporate settings. He is currently head of the Biological Threat Research division of the Centers for Disease Control. A growing list of Livingston’s accomplishments include successfully restructuring the BTR division for efficiency and efficacy, increasing employee retention, and streamlining data systems for cost effectiveness at BetaMark, Inc., where he was previously employed. He has one daughter and resides in Minnesota.*

Julie saw the same paragraph pasted onto every page that referenced Livingston. Each of the surrounding articles only mentioned the man, too. A project he co-sponsored, a few articles written by a team Livingston had served on, and a few shots of the man on a company softball team years ago. Livingston was certainly paranoid, as the verbatim biography on each site suggested that he’d been successful in forcing each of the article’s writers to update his information with the same paragraph.

She shook her head and reached for her phone.

“Hey Randy, it’s me again. Anything yet?”

“Julie, it’s been like ten minutes. Are you serious?”

“I know. I’m getting a little antsy.”

“I get it. What do you want now?”

“I’m trying to find something on Livingston—just in case.”

“Don’t bother,” Randy said. “I already tried. It’s pointless. The man’s got the PR team of a celebrity.”

Julie laughed as she read the first line of the Livingston biography. “David Foster Livingston is a successful leader and proven...”

“...Manager in many corporate settings,” Randy finished. “Ugh. You’ve got to be kidding me. What a joke.”

“Okay, well, thanks for checking. Let me know if you come up with anything else.”

“Will do—.”

“Hey, one more thing,” Julie said into the phone.

“What’s that?”

Julie paused. “Uh, don’t worry about it, actually. Let me see if I can dig something up first.”

She hung up the phone and woke up her computer’s screen. She started a new search and began browsing through the results.

Eventually one result jumped out at her.

*Teenaged Hero Rescues Father and Brother* was the headline.

She clicked the listing and waited for the slow hotel Wi-Fi connection to load the advertisement-riddled page. It was a newspaper article that had been scanned and transcribed for the news site's archives, dated thirteen years ago.

*"...The Bennett men were camping in a southern region of Glacier National Park when the youngest Bennett, nine-year-old Zachary, wandered to a clearing where he accidentally stumbled between a mother grizzly bear and her cub..."*

*"Johnson Bennett ran to his son's aid, but the mother grizzly struck Johnson, knocking the man unconscious..."*

*"...Shooting the larger bear first with two rounds from the father's rifle and scaring away the cub. Harvey pursued the smaller animal and eventually shot it, bringing it down with one round..."*

Julie covered her mouth as she read the account.

*"...Zachary and Johnson Bennett were rushed to St. Andrews Memorial Hospital, where they were both treated for severe trauma, and the elder Bennett for a concussion. Zachary Bennett is expected to make a full recovery. Johnson Bennett is currently comatose in a stable condition, however, doctors are unsure of the possibility of recovery..."*

The door to the hotel room opened, and Julie quickly slammed the laptop shut.

"Julie!"

It was Ben.

Startled, Julie nearly tripped over the chair as she stood and turned toward the door. Malcolm Fischer entered the room just behind Ben, breathing heavily.

"Julie, I got an email from Randy. Just now."

Julie looked at him. "Randall Brown? My IT guy?"

"Yeah, he wanted to send it over directly, since he thought there might be an issue with your emails or something. But you should have gotten it too."

She started to check her email but stopped herself. "Okay, well what did he say?"

"It was a forward of my mother's email draft. She must have tried to send it, but it never went out."

Julie's eyes widened.

"It has information in it, Julie, about the virus. The night... the night she died, she must have been writing it. It's got everything she was working on, and everything she and her assistant discovered. For one, it's not a virus."

Julie narrowed her eyes. "Go on."

"My mother's research seems to prove that the virus is a mutated bacteria—"

"No, that's not possible. The contagious spread, the outbreak pattern, the—"

"It's a virus *inside* a mutated bacterial infection."

Julie's head snapped up. "Come again?"

"That's right, Julie," Malcolm explained. "Dr. Torres is postulating that the reason this strain has been so difficult to model is due to its uncharacteristic qualities. Map it as a virion, and it fails many of the chemical application tests. Map it as a bacteria and it doesn't appear to be *living*—immediately disqualifying it from the ranks of bacteriophages."

"Did she figure out a way to combat it?" Julie asked, hopeful.

Malcolm and Ben shared a knowing glance.

"No," Ben said.

"But," Malcolm added. "She did find that the infection will naturally die out, after running its course. It reaches a certain point and just *vanishes*."



“Not until after it kills its host,” Julie said.

“We’re not dead yet,” Malcolm said. “And I’m still here.” He stepped forward, his voice calm and steady, “We need to get to a research lab. If there’s any way you can find out exactly why none of us in this room are dead, you *must*.”

Julie started pacing. “We’re not going back to the CDC. Livingston and Stephens might be there.”

“What about the bomb back at the park?” Ben added.

“Can’t you call someone there? Someone who might—”

“Julie.” Ben’s voice was firm, but he looked her right in the eyes until she understood. “*There’s no one else.*”

She hesitated, thinking through it. “You’re right. There’s no one there who can help anymore. The government agencies involved are going to wait until they know it’s not dangerous to their staff. It’s what I’m supposed to do—wait until someone presents some compelling research as to why it’s safe for us to go in, then send a bomb squad in hazmat suits to find anything unusual.”

“That will take much too long,” Malcolm said.

“It will,” Ben answered. “But there’s a lab at the park—it’s not much, but it’ll have to do. I’m going back there, to figure this out.”

As if remembering the dire situation they were all in, Ben looked down at his hands and arms.

“Does it hurt?” Julie asked.

“No. It hasn’t really done much at all, and it’s not itching at the moment.”

“Neither is mine,” Julie said, examining her own arms.

“So,” Malcolm said, calling them to attention. “I guess it’s just us, then?”

“Dr. Fischer, you don’t need to come along,” Julie said. “If what we’re saying is true, we’re going into an infected quarantine, looking for a massive bomb hidden below the surface somewhere. It’s not exactly a risk-free project.”

Malcolm lifted his chin. “Julie, I understand that you are concerned. And you are right to assume that this is extremely dangerous. But I will not sit idly by and do nothing to right the wrongs done to me, or my students.”

His monologue over, he tensed his jaw and waited for the others’ response.

Ben looked over and shrugged. “I feel you, Doc. I wouldn’t make you sit on the sidelines.”

Julie smiled.

“Let’s get to Yellowstone.”

They sat down at the table in the small hotel room, ready to plan their trip back to Yellowstone, when Julie’s phone rang again. She grabbed it before it rang a second time.

“Randy—what’s up?”

As she listened, the muscles in her face tightened and her back became rigid. She swallowed a few times, her mouth suddenly dry.

When she hung up, Ben and Malcolm were perched in their chairs, awaiting the news.

She blinked a few times, as though suddenly embarrassed that she might cry.

“—Livingston,” she said. “He’s dead.”



“*Monsieur Valère, the conference is now available,*” the voice said. It sounded metallic and hollow, detached, yet it was the most lifelike computerized voice system Francis Valère had ever heard.

“*Merci,*” Valère responded. He waited for the computer system to check the Ethernet connection, test internet speed, and finally ping the waiting room of the online web conferencing service. Within seconds, the voice emanated from the walls of Valère’s office again.

“*Connection speeds are exceptional, Monsieur.*” The voice had an eerily attractive component to it, Valère realized, as he waited for the two other participants’ faces to appear in front of him. She had also been upgraded to a human-like level of what they were calling “AI hyperbole,” which was, as far as Valère could tell, just a library of phrases that replaced the usual metric and clinically precise statements that plagued most artificial voice systems.

SARA—Simulated Artificial Response Array—was the Company’s latest alpha release they were testing in their offices. At this point, it was nothing more than a computerized artificial intelligence, more advanced than anything on the market, but far from deployment-ready.

The plan was, Valère had been told, to get SARA to beta and then release the code and sound sample library, alone more than ten terabytes of information, to a few universities for further development and testing. Eventually, they would either use the application for internal purposes or sell the final design schematics to the highest black market bidder. As SARA’s development was about as removed from Valère’s professional expertise as possible, he wasn’t entirely sure what she would finally become. But if the previous applications their affiliates had released were any measure, SARA would be nothing short of miraculous.

Valère was involved in a number of startup tech and pharmaceutical businesses. He was independently wealthy, thanks to the benefit of a long line of rich relatives who’d left a startlingly large inheritance, as well as his own knack for choosing investment opportunities. A few had bombed, but he had invested far and wide, amassing a fortune of interests in just about every sector related to computer intelligence and medical advancement.

“Francis, are you with us?” a man’s voice spoke from inside his computer screen.

Valère cleared his throat. “*Oui*, I am here. I apologize for my tardiness—I have been following the latest developments in the United States.”

“As have I,” the second voice answered. The man’s face in front of Valère was enlarged on the gigantic screen. The sound emanated from the walls themselves. Audio-Enhanced Surfacing, if Valère remembered correctly. The walls of his Quebec office space were essentially made of thousands of speakers, each implanted with a computer chip that made them “intelligent”—allowing them to emulate a natural sound environment. He could play music that followed him throughout the room, providing a sonically perfect artificial surround-sound in an acoustically exceptional environment.

For now, the man’s voice, in crisp and clear stereo, was all Valère cared about. The man inside the window continued. “It appears as though our initial plan has been delayed. After your dismissal of Mr. Jefferson—”

“Nonsense,” Valère said. “Our placements were sound. Each of the departments is operating smoothly, according to their protocols, and taking no unnecessary risks or making any rash decisions.”

“Francis,” the first man, Emilio Vasquez, said, “while I admit our infiltrated agencies are doing exactly as we had hoped; you cannot deny the existence of a few rogue operatives. The CDC’s

department head has been removed, but it still seems as though a few members of its lower ranks are curious.”

Valère thought about this for a moment. “Do you honestly believe they have become a threat?”

“Hardly,” Emilio responded. “It is merely in our best interests to ensure that these possible threats stay just that.”

“And how exactly do we ensure that?” Valère asked.

The other man paused for a moment. “I believe it’s time for the contingency plan.”

“I—*we*—don’t *need* a contingency plan,” Valère responded. “This plan is sound—it always has been.”

“I’m not saying it hasn’t been, Valère. But there’s always room for improvement.”

“But these rogue operatives have been working *outside* of our target organizations. They are no more a threat to us than the local police.”

“But you’re wrong, Valère. They are *far* more of a threat to us, especially now. They are mobile, and we are still unsure of their capabilities. Borders mean nothing to them, nor do their organization’s standards. We’ve worked far too long on this project to lose the investment entirely.”

Emilio’s face was growing slightly red, though his voice betrayed no raise of emotions. Valère knew the man was moments away from growing indignant, but the man stopped himself just short.

Valère sighed. “These deaths are unnecessary,” he said. “They are inevitable, but must they come from our hands?”

“Valère,” Emilio said. “As you know, these deaths are *nothing* when measured against what we will accomplish.”

“I agree, but—”

“And their deaths will not be ‘by our hand,’ as you say. Far from it.”

Valère nodded.

“Let us see this through to the end, Valère. Let us complete our mission.”

He nodded again.

No one spoke at first. Finally, SARA’s voice boomed through the walls. “*We will need your verbal commitment, Monsieur Valère. Please provide verbal confirmation of your agreement to the chosen contingency.*”

Good Lord, she was remarkable. SARA had parsed, compiled, and transcribed the conversation, as she had been instructed, but she had also extrapolated from the silence that the other man was waiting for Valère’s confirmation, as per the contract, as well as the fact that he didn’t want to specifically ask for it.

*Technology. Incroyable.*

“Yes,” he stammered. “Yes, I confirm. We shall commence with a contingency that merely supports our overall direction, as discussed in previous communications. SARA, please transcribe, encrypt, and archive this discussion into your database, and remove all references therein.”

“*Oui, Monsieur Valère,*” SARA said. As Valère stood from his computer desk, the woman’s computerized voice followed the location of his head with pinpoint accuracy, causing Valère to feel as though she were *inside* his head, not just talking to it. “*I will alert you of any updates.*”

He nodded, knowing SARA could see that, too.



“We’re almost at the park border. Lab’s about another half hour,” Ben explained.

Julie sat with her feet up on the dash of her F450, focused again on her laptop. Malcolm sat in the back seat, reading a stack of papers Julie had printed at the hotel’s business center, all on infectious diseases, viral outbreaks, and bacterial infections—internal CDC documentation and reference material.

Malcolm was specifically looking for research into anthrax-type infections, where the originating material was powdery, dry, or airborne. A fast reader, he had almost made it through the entire stack when they finally reached the gates of Yellowstone’s northeast entrance, with nothing intriguing to show for his efforts.

Outside, the wooden Welcome to Yellowstone National Park sign drifted by, sitting atop a log display, surrounded by a freshly manicured garden of flowers, shrubs, and small trees. Behind it, the sprawling wilderness that drew three-million-plus visitors a year.

Except today.

The road narrowed, pointing them toward a service building where police officers and park rangers were operating a road blocking and turning tourists away. A white tent had been erected off to the side and Julie could see that it was meant for hazmat teams from her own organization for the mobile treatment of any infected individuals found inside the park.

“If they see we’re infected they’re going to pounce on us,” Julie warned.

“They may have been advised to watch for us anyway,” Malcolm remarked.

“Ten Most Wanted?” Ben said. “Great. That’s a comfort.” He fished his wallet out and held it up. “Well I’m still a ranger here. They better have a damn good reason to detain me.”

Ahead, one of the police officers had spotted their truck approaching and had walked into the road, standing in front of his police vehicle. He held up his arms and waved them down.

“They may not need a reason,” Julie muttered under her breath.

Ben slowed the truck to a stop and rolled down the window.

The police officer almost had to stand on his toes to see into the truck’s high window, but he removed his sunglasses and spoke loudly over the rumble of the engine. “Park’s closed,” he said. “No access in or out.”

Ben displayed his ID badge from his wallet. “I work here—”

“Doesn’t matter.” The police officer cut him off, curtly. “No one in or out. You can turn around right here, then head back on this road...” His voice trailed off as he pointed in the direction from which they’d come.

“Officer, I’m going to need to get into the park. We’ve got information on this virus, and—”

“Son, I’m not going to ask you again. Park access is *prohibited*. Go home, stay inside, and keep watching the news.”

Ben gritted his teeth and revved the engine. As the officer stepped backward, Ben spun the truck around him and accelerated onto the north-bound side of the road.

“At least he didn’t arrest us,” Julie said.

Malcolm called up from the back of the truck. “Now what?”

Ben didn’t answer. He drove another mile and turned left onto a dirt road leading back to the southwest, and sped up again. They bounced over the uneven, rocky road and swerved between trees that jutted out over their heads.

“Where are we going?” Julie, said, alarmed.

“Private access road,” he snapped.

“Won’t they still find us? There are probably hazmat and outbreak teams from every branch of government and local police forces inside the park.”

“Probably.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Malcolm answered. “They’ll know soon enough that we’re here, but if we don’t get to that lab and figure out what makes this thing stop, it will be too late anyway.”

As a confirmation, Ben poked at the radio until he found a news station. It didn’t take long—one station was playing a prerecorded commercial, but the second he tried was broadcasting a nationwide message. He turned the volume up as an anchor’s voice solemnly read the latest update.

*“...Reports are in that the viral outbreak has extended as far south as Albuquerque, New Mexico, and as far east as Wichita, Kansas. Experts from the CDC and other sources suggest that if the outbreak can be contained, the death toll will rise to around 10,000 people, but if not, that number could skyrocket to more than a million. Estimates predict that number to be far too conservative, especially if the trajectory of the disease places it anywhere near the western seaboard.*

*“As a reminder, please stay inside, try not to interact with anyone outside of your immediate family, and stay tuned to news and radio updates.”*

The anchor signed off, promising another update in an hour, and went to a commercial break. Ben punched the power button.

None of them said anything for a while.

The truck bounced over ditches and through a stream until, taking the short cut to another dirt road. Once on level ground, Ben smashed the gas pedal, sending the already fast-moving truck hurtling over potholes and bumps as if they were no more than pebbles on the road.

Minutes later, they reached the lab facility. A brownstone building, painted to blend into the surrounding forest and not stick out to any vacationers camped nearby. Ben pulled the truck into a spot outside the main entrance. The windows were dark. It appeared unoccupied.

Julie’s phone rang before they could get inside.

“Stephens? You want to explain to me what the *hell* happened back—”

*“Julie, listen. I’m sorry. That was Livingston’s decision, not mine. Just ask him.”*

But she couldn’t ask him. Had Stephens heard the news? It didn’t sound like it.

*“Where are you now?”*

“We’re at Yellowstone. We’re trying to—” She felt a hand rest on her arm. Ben was shaking his head.

*“Trying to what, Julie? What are you up to? You need to get away from there, before this gets out of hand.”*

Julie dithered, but Ben was insistent. Again, slowly, he shook his head.

“Sorry—Benjamin, I can’t. We’re close. I can’t give you an update right now, but I—”

*“Julie! You can’t afford to keep gallivanting around. If Livingston finds out...”*

The words tumbled from her mouth before she could control them. “Stephens, where have you been? What are you doing?”

There was a pause.

*“I’m—I’m... working on this, too, Julie. What do you mean?”*

She waited a moment, then said. “Don’t worry about Livingston. Listen, I need to go. I’ll check in tonight, after we leave.”

“Okay...” the voice was shaky, uncertain. “*Okay, you’re right. Keep at it, Julie. Let me know what you need.*”

She thanked him and hung up, then looked at the other two passengers in the truck.

“He doesn’t know already?” Malcolm asked.

“I... I guess not.”

Ben put the truck in park and opened his door, still shaking his head. When he caught sight of his hand on the door handle looked up sharply and caught Julie’s attention.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Look,” Ben said. He held out his left arm and pulled his sleeve up. The rash had disappeared from his exposed hand, and his arm looked almost completely normal, replaced by his natural skin tone. His right arm looked similar. Julie checked out her own rash and found the same to be true.

“It’s gone,” she said.

“Almost. Come on, we need to get in there. Whatever’s left of the virus in our systems is the only hope we have left to figure out what this is.”

“But why’s it going away? I feel fine, too.”

Malcolm jumped out to take a closer look too. “It appears to have naturally run its course. I think it’s dying out on its own.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Julie asked.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t know if I had a rash. I was sedated—comatose.”

Hurriedly, they head into the laboratory building.





“They built this place back in the ‘80s for onsite research,” Ben explained. “No one uses it much now. It’s not much of a lab but it’s all we’ve got.”

“Looks very, um, ‘high school,’” Malcolm noted.

“That’s why no one uses it much. It’s not specific enough to be considered a chemistry lab or a biology one. It’s also not quite big enough to be helpful for our geologists, geographers, or animal scientists. So, it’s a backup.”

Malcolm muttered something under his breath and continued exploring the small room.

Julie zeroed in on a collection of microscopes and immediately began preparing one, searching the drawers for glass slides. “It’ll have to do,” she said, setting up the standard issue compound light microscope on a table in the corner of the room. “Damn.”

“What’s wrong?” Ben asked.

““This is a compound scope, and there’s no way there’s enough power to magnify anything smaller than a bug. I wish there was a transmission-electron in here. Even an LVEM or something would be fine.”

Ben simply stared back at her.

“This will have to work,” she said. “It’s not going to get us all the way there, but it might be enough to measure chemical reactions and test for an antidote. Come here.”

Ben stepped forward, and she reached for his arm. He pulled back, reacting involuntarily.

“Chill. I’m not going to bite.” She rolled up his sleeve. “Dr. Fischer, would you mind helping me?”

Malcolm came over as Julie whipped out a strand of latex she’d found amongst the assortment of scientific equipment. She handed Ben’s arm to Malcolm, who held it precariously in front of him. As he held it, she tied the latex band around Ben’s upper arm, causing the veins to bulge as the blood became restricted.

Taking a small syringe, she poked it into one of the veins. The chamber began to fill with a deep crimson color.

“Geez,” Ben said. “You didn’t test it for rabies or anything.”

“Rabies is the least of your worries,” Julie answered, focusing on holding the syringe straight. “Besides, I doubt that would be the problem with these needles. God knows how long they’ve been here.” As a sort of flourish, she blew on the latex band and the syringe that was plunged into the vein. A thin veil of dust sprung from their surfaces, causing all three to blink and look away.

“Ah, right. Seems perfectly safe.”

She shushed him, and withdrew the syringe slowly from his arm.

“How much do you need? Seems like overkill,” Malcolm said.

“I don’t know how many units are left inside the bloodstream or if we’ll be able to see it at all. Plus, the virus is wearing off, as we saw earlier. I may not have time to extract more later, since the units might be working their way out.”

She placed the cap on the syringe chamber and loaded another. This one, she stuck into her own arm, not bothering to check for a vein or tie off her upper arm.

“Units?” Ben asked.

“Like chickenpox,” she answered.

Malcolm and Ben still didn’t understand.

“I’m developing a hypothesis about it, but it’s pretty simple. Imagine a kid has chickenpox—the *varicella zoster* virus—and has a birthday party. Some kid comes to the birthday party and gives the birthday boy one unit of the virus. That unit multiplies—as viruses do—to a certain point, until the virus has physically manifested itself in the host’s body.”

“Little red bumps all over his skin.”

“Yes, exactly. But that’s it. It doesn’t ever really get worse than the bumps, though as you might remember, those bumps are bad enough. The virus has reached its ‘critical mass’ in the kid’s system. The units have reached their maximum exposure ratio, and they won’t—can’t—proliferate any more. But he’s still very contagious, too. Since the virus is at critical mass, every kid who comes over will probably get it, right?”

“Unless they’ve already had it,” Malcolm said.

“And then they’ll do the oatmeal baths and stuff and eventually the virus goes away,” Ben added.

Julie nodded, removed the full syringe from her arm, and continued. “Well, this virus-bacteria is a bit different. Let’s say the kid was infected with a unit of this... *stuff*. Whatever it is. That one unit would reproduce and multiply into ten units, become contagious, and spread to other people, just like the chickenpox. They’d all get infected, it would grow to ten units in each of them, and they’d all be contagious—but still alive.”

“So far, so good,” Ben said. “Except for the life-threatening rash.”

“But, if the kid is infected with *more* than ten units initially, it’s over. He’s quarantined, but the effect is devastating—the virus is too much for the body to handle and will begin to shut down.”

“The body can’t handle more than ten units?” Malcolm asked.

“Well, ten is an arbitrary number, but in this scenario, yes. Whatever number of units our virus needs to reach critical mass is the amount of virus that can ‘safely’ infect a person. Anything over that, and the host dies. Below that—”

“And it reproduces itself up to that number but doesn’t go over,” Ben finished.

Julie nodded. “That’s my hypothesis. After that, the virus naturally works its way out of the host’s system, rendering them immune to further attack.”

Ben and Malcolm thought about this a moment. It made sense—hypothetical or not—and both men nodded their approval.

“I’m guessing that whenever we were exposed to the disease, it was only a small amount,” Ben said. “Less than critical mass. It’s run its course and is now working its way out.”

They heard the laboratory door slam shut, and all three turned to look. A tall, thin man stepped into view, smiling. “That’s exactly right, Mr. Bennett. What a precise deduction.”

“Stephens?” Julie asked, jumping up from her perch near the table and microscope. “What—how are you here?”

Benjamin Stephens drew closer. “I was already on the way,” he replied. “When I called, I was already in the area. I thought I’d check in with you in person, since our tech communication seems to be consistently ineffective.”

Julie didn’t respond.

“Don’t worry, Julie. Ben—” he turned to look at the third man in the room, hesitated for a split second, and frowned. “Mr.—I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met.” Stephens walked over to Malcolm and stretched out his hand.

“Dr., actually. Dr. Malcolm Fischer.”

“Right. *Dr.* Fischer. My apologies.” Stephens had the room completely focused on him, and he savored the moment. “Sorry for my intrusion. As I mentioned, I merely came to help. Julie, what can I

do?”

Julie thought about it for a few seconds. “You agreed with Ben when you walked in. Why? What do you know about the virus?”

“Well, for starters, as I’m sure you’ve already discovered, it’s not actually a *virus*. Or, to be specific, it’s not *only* a virus.”

“We’re past that already, Stephens,” Julie said. “How do you know that?”

“Julie, my job is to collate and organize information. Every disease prevention authority in the country is working on the same thing you are. I saw a report yesterday that confirmed your theory of a viral-bacterial strain.”

Stephens had stopped in front of a square table in the center of the room. He pulled out a folding chair from beneath it and sat down. He placed his arms on top of the table as he spoke. *Trying to appear submissive*, Ben noticed.

“I also found out where the strain originated.”

At these words, Malcolm stepped toward him, before stopping himself.

“The virus is the byproduct of an ancient extinct plant that was found inside Native American baskets in a Canadian cave. An unlucky Russian expedition found it and thus became the virus’s first modern casualties.”

“Who told you that?” Malcolm asked, his voice low, almost a whisper. Ben reached out and held the man’s shoulder.

“Again, it’s just some of the information that’s come across my desk.” Stephens turned and looked directly at Julie. “Julie, that’s why I’m here. I’ve been sending this stuff to you for days, but I know you haven’t been getting it.”

She shook her head.

“I sent it up to a lab, and they’ve been processing it with the CDC as well. From what we can tell, someone found that original strain, put some sort of protective ‘shell’ around it, and created the ‘super virus’ we’re now dealing with.”

Stephens stood up, and Julie saw Ben cross his arms.

“But like I said, I couldn’t get through to you. It seems like Brown found some sort of redirect on my account, but he didn’t set it up. Maybe Livingston—”

“Livingston’s dead,” Julie said.

Stephens was about to continue, but Julie’s words stopped him in his tracks. “Excuse me?”

“Livingston,” Julie repeated. “He’s dead.”

“But...”

“They found him at his home, in his office. Suicide.”

Stephens’ face seemed to scrunch a bit around the eyes, for the briefest amount of time. But as soon as Julie noticed it, it disappeared. She must have taken him by surprise.

“You—you can’t be serious,” he said.

“Why would I joke about this?” She watched Ben and Malcolm react. Both men stood still, stoically gazing toward Stephens. They were watching his reaction, she realized.

Stephens seemed to falter a bit, taking a step back. He grabbed the corner of a table and steadied himself. “But... but that...” his voice trailed off.

“Stephens.” Julie’s voice was strained, but she tried to pull him back in. “Benjamin. I know it’s insane, but we *have* to keep moving forward.”

He nodded.

“Can you tell us the rest? What else do you know about the virus?”

He swallowed, but began to speak. “Well, as you already know, our organization isn’t exactly swift when it comes to handling crises, but there have been a few departments that have had a little success modeling the strain and calculating its progression.” He walked back to the chair and sat back down at the table. Julie found a bottle of water and brought it over to him.

“They found out that the agent works by infecting the bloodstream, but also the air around its host. It sort of ‘festers’ inside the host, releasing particulates through the skin—likely the reason we see a physical manifestation in the outer epidermis.”

“The rashes and boils,” Julie said.

“Yes. It’s airborne—it doesn’t need direct contact with blood or fluids, just time and close proximity. Once it’s in the bloodstream, it moves to the internal organs, where it proliferates and reaches viral titre for contagion.”

“What’s viral titre?” Malcolm asked.

“Viral load. It’s like a concentration of the actual virus. The point at which the virus will infect enough cells to become contagious.”

“The critical mass,” Julie added, explaining it to the two men standing next to her.

“Exactly. The lab reported that anything below around 8,000 copies per milliliter of the virus is considered below the danger line. Above it, the host can’t contain the virus in its own body, and the strain tries to jump to another host within range. If it doesn’t jump and proliferate there, the initial host’s systems will shut down. If it *can* jump, it will, causing the titre to drop by half in both hosts.”

“Does proliferation continue from there?” Julie asked.

“It does, but only to that magic line of viral load—somewhere around 8,000 copies. If the load is higher than 16,000 when it jumps, though, both hosts have a concentration of higher than 8,000 cpm. The virus will continue to spread inside their systems, consuming cells and antibodies mainly, but also overloading vital organs.”

“So the answer is to find a *third* host?” Malcolm asked. Ben was nodding along, trying to piece it together as Stephens explained.

“Right. And then a fourth, fifth, and so on, until the virus has equally spread through these hosts and the titre count drops below 8,000 in each.”

“What happens then?”

“We don’t know,” Stephens said. “Initial tests have shown that it starts to clear up within a day or two, and works its way completely out an infected host within a week.”

“Ok, so we don’t have an antidote for it, yet. *But* we know that it goes away on its own?”

Stephens nodded. “It does, but like I said, only when the concentration in the host is low enough. Under load, it will increase to the point of becoming contagious to others, but then stop, immunizing the host.” His eyes flicked to Malcolm. “*Over* the viral load, however, and it will completely destroy the host’s internal system.”

“That’s good news, Stephens,” Ben said. “But we’re running out of time. This thing’s spreading around the country, and it’s not slowing down. Plus—”

“The bomb,” Julie finished.

“Right,” Stephens said, nodding. “The bomb. Any ideas as to where it is?”

“No, not yet.”

“Okay, well I can help. Julie, why don’t you and I—”

“You’re not going anywhere with her,” Ben said, stepping forward.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not leaving.” Ben said again.

“Ben,” Julie said, coming up alongside him. “What’s the deal?”

Stephens stood up from the chair again, frowning. He looked at Ben, scrutinizing him.

Before he could react, Ben took another step forward and punched Stephens in the gut, hard.

Stephens doubled over, trying to catch his breath.

“Ben!” Malcolm ran toward him, but Ben held up his arm to halt his approach.

“Stop—let me deal with this.” He turned back to Stephens. “What else do you do, Stephens?”

“Wh—what are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Who are you working with?”

Julie panicked, her attention shifting between the two men standing in front of her. “Ben, wait, just —”

Ben grabbed Stephens under the chin and hoisted him up straight. He delivered another blow to the man’s side. “It’s not just that you were suspicious of me from the beginning,” he said. “You came in here, somehow finding the road without, apparently, outside help. These back roads aren’t on *any* map, and we’ve specifically removed them from GPS data feeds to make sure wandering tourists don’t end up finding a back entrance to the park.”

Julie watched the exchange, mouth agape.

“I—it was the IT... Randall. He got me here. He helped me find—”

“That’s not true,” Julie said. Ben looked at her, surprised. “Randy didn’t even know we were coming here. I didn’t tell him where we were going, and even if he tried to track me through my phone somehow, he wouldn’t be able to do in time to send you our coordinates until we were *here*. You showed up *minutes* after we arrived.”

Stephens’ eyes grew wide. “Seriously? You don’t think—”

“Explain how you know so much about this virus,” Ben said. “You’re a research assistant, right? You collect research and deliver it to Julie?”

Stephens’ nostrils flared, and he gritted his teeth.

“*And* I saw the way you looked at Dr. Fischer when you mentioned ‘immunization.’ How did you know that he was immune?”

“I didn’t!”

“Of course you did. I saw it in your eyes. You knew exactly who he was the moment you walked in here, didn’t you? You’ve seen him before!”

Stephens’ eyes darted back and forth from Julie to Ben to Malcolm. Ben grabbed him again and started to swing his arm back. A slight smile escaped the side of Stephens’ mouth, and just as quickly, it vanished.

Ben stopped, shocked. “You *do* know something, don’t you?”

A look of anger washed over Stephens’ face. He spat.

Ben punched him in the jaw, sending the man’s head hurtling backward as it absorbed the blow. Ben winced in pain, opening and closing his fist.

Stephens didn’t react. He stared coldly back at Ben.

Ben hit him again. Julie ran forward and grabbed his arm, trying to stop the attack.

When Stephens’ head came back up this time, Julie saw a trickle blood dripping just next to his mouth.

His *smiling* mouth.

Stephens spat out a mouthful of blood. “You just couldn’t figure it out, could you?”

Julie was stunned. “What are you talking about?”

He laughed. A chuckle, slowly rolling out of his bleeding mouth. “It’s too late anyway. Too late.”

Ben looked at Julie, silently asking her what to do. She shook her head, and Ben dropped his hand.

“It’s too late. Too late—”

“Too late for what?” she yelled at Stephens.

“You can’t save them. *Couldn’t* save them. Diana Torres, Charlie Furmann, David Livingston. And the others. You can’t save them now.”

Ben took a step back. Stephens. It was him—the man who had killed them all. Including his mother.





Julie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Not just *what* Stephens was confessing to, but the unbelievable *scope* of what Stephens claimed he'd done. Following Julie's threads of evidence and research to Diana Torres' door, then to Charlie Furmann and Livingston. Anyone who'd gotten in his way had paid the ultimate price.

Not to mention however many others they *didn't* know about.

Julie was beside herself. She'd worked with Stephens long enough to trust him, to even grow fond of him. He was a smart kid, and he worked hard.

But he'd betrayed her.

He'd betrayed them all.

She didn't know how to respond. Malcolm was also shocked, still recovering from Ben's attack on Stephens. He slumped in the corner, leaning on the table Julie had been using as a lab table.

Ben, however, *did* know how to respond. Julie watched him as he laid into Stephens, landing punches as fast as his arms would allow. They weren't targeted well, and many brushed Stephens' head and shoulders. Ben lacked control, and he wasn't putting much force into the blows. It was an emotional reaction; one Julie and Malcolm were both astonished to see.

But it made sense.

The man in front of her had killed Ben's mother. He had been the cause of her infection and eventual death, all while Stephens led them through a dead-end maze.

*But why?*

The question nagged at her. She hadn't noticed it the first time, focused instead on overcoming the initial shock of Ben's accusation, and the subsequent revelation that he'd been right.

Still, the question was there, and she had to know the answer.

"Why?" she asked, softly. Then again, louder. "Why, Stephens?"

He looked up at her. Ben stopped swinging.

"Why?"

Ben stepped back, his breathing labored from the exertion. He looked at Julie.

Waiting for the answer.

But Stephens only laughed, gurgling blood that had filled his mouth. He spat, a wry smile on his face. "It's too late," he said.

"You mentioned that already. But I'll make that decision for myself," Ben said. "Where's the bomb, Stephens? I know it's in the park somewhere. In the caves, like you said on the phone?"

"You'll never find it," he replied.

"Stephens, please," Julie said. Stephens just shook his head.

"Like I said," Stephens said, looking at each of them in turn. "It's too late. America isn't united enough to save itself."

Julie cocked her head. Where had she heard that before?

"This country values freedom, but you and I both know that 'freedom' is a joke. We're somewhere between a third-world country with a corrupt government and an overbearing corporation on the scale of how free we really are. Americans now hold on to every scrap of 'freedom' they can find, including their own individuality—"

Ben stepped forward and punched Stephens again. "*Where's the bomb?*" he yelled.

Stephens staggered backward, nearly losing his balance. He seemed dizzy, but remained standing. Then he looked up sharply. He started to laugh as he withdrew something from his coat pocket.

A small glass cylinder filled with a liquid of some sort, and a large hypodermic needle. They glinted in the fluorescent light of the lab room.

Without warning, Stephens shoved the syringe into his own arm.

His eyes rolled back into his head, before eventually returning to their proper position. He sniffed, like a drug addict. “As I said, Harvey, it’s too late. America is not united enough to save itself. It doesn’t matter now, whether you find your bomb or not.” His mouth began to leak saliva, foaming around the edges. “I would leave, if I were you,” he continued. “This is a highly concentrated specimen of the strain, and I estimate there is less than a minute before I’m contagious.”

Julie winced as the virus visibly tore through the man’s body, ripping it apart at the cellular level.

Highly concentrated specimen.

Ben lunged forward, throwing Stephens’ back against the far wall. Even with the virus destroying the man’s body, he still didn’t fall.

“We’re immune, Stephens,” Ben said. “Remember?” He pulled the sleeve of his left arm up and held it up to Stephens’ face. “You took too long. The virus has already died out of our systems. We’re inoculated. And Dr. Fischer—” Ben nodded toward the professor. “He’s *been* immune, but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Julie watched the exchange, piecing everything together. She thought through Stephens’ explanations; she considered the specific words he’d used.

“Ben...” she tried to coax him backward, but Ben wasn’t listening.

“You led us here, to our deaths, for what? For your amusement?”

Stephens was smiling again. He reached back into his pocket. “No,” he whispered.

Ben frowned.

“It was an experiment. *My* experiment. I told them no one would be able to figure it out, and that it was an embarrassment on our part to accomplish something so miraculous and not have the satisfaction of watching it unfold. Up close.”

“So you let us figure it out?” Ben asked.

“There will be nothing left,” he said. “America will be a barren wasteland, Harvey. The end is justified, but what about the *means*? What about my reward, knowing that my role has been fulfilled?” The man’s voice began rising, his face showing more and more emotion. “I was groomed—*born*—for this role,” he continued. “And I must get the satisfaction of knowing it was foolproof. I had to finish it here, to watch you die, just like the rest will.”

Julie’s eyes widened as Stephens’ hand came out of his coat.

“And no one is immune from death,” Stephens said, holding a gun up to Ben’s chest. He flicked off the safety, staring into Ben’s eyes the entire time. “You’ve performed your role admirably, Mr. Bennett. Now let me perform mine.”

He pulled the trigger.

Everything became a blur. Julie felt herself brutally shoved aside as a dark form rushed past her. She stared, helpless, as Ben’s body flew sideways toward the tables in the center of the room. Nothing made sense. Instinctively, she screamed, rushing Stephens as he aimed the second shot directly at her.

She collided with Stephens headfirst, sending her forehead into the man’s sternum. She felt his lungs expand rapidly, involuntarily gasping for air. She kept moving forward, now back on her feet. She ran full-speed *through* the man’s slender body, lifting it off the floor and smashing it into the

wall. Glass vials and beakers, along with a stack of neatly filed papers, exploded from their location along the back table and down onto the hard floor. The sound of breaking glass and chaos almost blocked out the sound of her own screaming.

Almost.

She reared back with her fists and pummeled Stephens, who was lying haphazardly across the table. She aimed for the same spot Ben had hit him earlier—just below his eye where a gaping wound was forming. She punched, again and again, and he eventually stopped moving.

She took a step back, breathing heavily. Benjamin Stephens' skin had begun to stretch and rise, as if being filled with water like a balloon. She knew that the virus had moved completely through his body, but she was astonished at how quickly he'd reacted to it.

*There must have been a very heavy concentration of the virus inside that vial.* The realization terrified her.

Purplish welts formed on his exposed skin. Rapidly changing hue within seconds from from a purplish tint to a lighter red, until finally she noticed that his breathing had stopped. She waited another few moments and then checked his vitals.

Dead.



Ben heard Julie say his name from somewhere behind him.

“Ben...” it was forceful, yet hesitant. *A warning.*

Ben plowed forward anyway. He hadn’t felt emotions like these for over a decade, ever since his dad had been taken.

“You led us here, to our deaths, for what? For your amusement?” he asked the questions pointedly, as if he already knew the answer. *Did he?*

Stephens smiled. “No. It was an experiment. *My* experiment. I told them no one would be able to figure it out, and that it was an embarrassment on our part to accomplish something so miraculous and not have the satisfaction of watching it unfold. Up close.”

Ben asked the next question carefully. He wanted to get closer, to try to subdue Stephens. “So you let us figure it out?” He took a step forward. *Careful.* He treated the situation like his many encounters with wild animals. *Don’t approach directly when possible, but don’t move too quickly.*

Another step.

Stephens kept talking, but Ben had already tuned him out. He was focusing on the hunt, trying to sneak his way into Stephens’ personal space. He knew Stephens wasn’t an animal, but that was to Ben’s benefit. Stephens was acting emotionally, based not on animal instinct but human perception. Ben could rely on a slower reaction time from him because of that.

But as he planned his move, he caught sight of Stephens’ arm. It swung upward, cradling a weapon.

“You’ve performed your role admirably, Mr. Bennett,” he heard Stephens say. “Now let me perform mine.”

Ben tried to lunge forward, but he couldn’t get his mind to form the direction and send it out to his body. It was all happening so glacially, as if he were watching a movie in slow motion. He felt his feet move, imperceptibly at first, then more quickly.

But not quickly enough.

He’d never make it to Stephens in time. The gun rose a little more, now pointing at Ben’s chest.

He thought he saw the muzzle of the pistol flash, a small bristle of fire lancing from its barrel, but his vision suddenly went white. He felt something too, a crashing pain that hit him from his side, knocking him off his feet.

He was flying. Blinded and in pain, but he recognized the sensation of vertigo. He tried to reach his arms out to stop the fall, but he had no idea if his arms had registered the order or not.

Then he heard the explosion from the gun. It was louder than he thought it would be—he’d almost always been on the sending end of a gun barrel. It deafened him.

Blind, in pain, and now deaf.

And still falling.

• • • •

BEN HIT THE GROUND hard.

He felt another pain, similar to the first, shoot through on his arm and shoulder, and into his hip and leg.

*This can’t be right.*

It was a point-blank shot—how could Stephens have missed? Ben should have felt something in his chest.

*Right?*

He tried to blink, trying to convince his senses to return.

Nothing but pain.

A dull pain, admittedly—throbbing, but manageable. *What happened?*

He breathed, now realizing he'd been holding his breath. His lungs struggled with the weight, trying to push it off.

*Why was there a weight on top of him?*

His vision returned. Narrowly at first. The lights of the lab crept into his periphery, followed by a darker shadow.

A man's face.

*Malcolm Fischer's face.*

The professor was lying on top of him.

Ben gasped, pushing upward with his throbbing hands, trying to heave the weight of the man's body off to the side. He struggled until he was free.

Ben sat up, blinking.

When his vision fully returned, he found Malcolm's body lying next to his in a crimson pool of blood.

*No...*

Ben reached out and felt behind the professor's neck.

*Come on, he willed. Wake up.*

He noticed the professor's brown coat, wrapped around the older man, a ragged hole almost dead center in the man's back.

The exit wound.

Ben heard sobbing. In a daze, he looked up. Julie stood over him, tears falling from her face.

"B—Ben," she muttered. "I thought you..."

Her voice trailed off as she finally saw Malcolm lying next to him.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "He—he saved you."

Ben simply nodded. "Where's Stephens?" Anger flashed behind his eyes, and he stood.

He saw Stephens lying across a table against the wall, unmoving.

"I have his blood on me," she said.

Ben didn't care. He stepped over Malcolm's body and gently reached for Julie, pulling her close. He wrapped a hand around the back of her head and slowly pressed her to his shoulder. He stroked her hair while she sobbed.



The truck bounced over another pothole in the dirt road.

Julie again in the passenger seat, staring out the window, holding back tears that she knew would eventually come.

They'd left the lab a mess—two dead bodies, one extremely contagious, and both bleeding onto the white tiled floor.

Julie couldn't decide what had been worse. The true extent of Stephens' double-crossing, or the hard realization that nobody came to help. Gunshots had rung out in Yellowstone and the reaction had been silence.

*They were alone.*

Chaotic as it was, Stephen's execution to this point had been flawless. From the initial blast to the spreading virus, down to Stephens' own arrogant desire to watch it unfold from a front-row seat.

He'd told them everything. It was cryptic and difficult to understand, at best, but it was complete.

He'd wanted it that way—to watch them suffer through the pain of searching, only to see their helpless eyes as he unleashed his weapon.

His final move.

Checkmate.

She looked at Ben as he drove. "I can't believe he *knew*, Ben. The whole time."

Ben nodded slowly. She saw his knuckles turn white as he gripped the wheel. "I know," he said softly. "But there's still something I don't understand. The syringe—why'd he do it? I mean, inject himself with the stuff? He could have just shot us."

"No, that's just it." She said. "I figured it out right before he tried to shoot you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Ben—*he's* the endgame. He's the final piece."

"I know. He orchestrated the whole thing, and—"

"No, Ben—he is part of the bomb."

Ben didn't understand. "Say that again...?"

"Stephens had to make sure he was in the park because he's supposed to be the final piece of the puzzle. Remember what happened when the first bomb went off? It sent a payload of the virus into the air, which contaminated a lot of the area. But this *second* bomb can't carry that payload—it'll be too big. And if it's going to go off anywhere around that caldera—"

"Then the eruption from the volcano beneath us will more than eradicate the strain."

"Right," she said. "A bomb too small won't destroy the underground structure enough to cause an eruption, but a bomb too big will just incinerate the payload."

"So," Ben said, thinking aloud. "To make sure you get both the volcanic eruption *and* the virus to be spread, you have to place the viral payload far enough away from the initial blast that it's safe from that explosion, but close enough to the caldera that the resulting eruption will send the payload into the atmosphere.

"And Stephens *is* the viral payload."

Julie sighed. "Like I said, he's part of the bomb."

"Then *I* need to find that bomb," Ben said, "and you need to get out of the park." He pushed the accelerator to the floor, and the truck swerved, barely missing a deep hole in the road.

She looked over at him. "Excuse me?"



“You heard me. I’m not letting you get anywhere near that eruption.”

Julie stiffened her jaw, annoyed.

“Ben, listen to yourself,” she said. “You’re not making any sense. You explained it to me, remember? If that bomb goes off, it starts a chain reaction. There’s no place in *two hundred miles* that’s safe.”

Ben shrugged. “Still—”

“No, Ben. Stop. Forget it. Where are you going to drop me off? Ten miles from here? Twenty? How much time are you going to waste trying to get me away from the blast zone? And how long do you think you have before the bomb actually goes off?”

Ben wanted to answer but flipped the radio on instead. The news report was already in progress. He upped the volume. It was a computerized message, reading a pre-written response.

*“...Local police and SWAT teams on high-alert for riot activity, including looting. Please stay indoors, and remain out of contact with anyone outside of immediate family. Contaminated areas include as a southern border Las Cruces, New Mexico. Western border, Kansas City. Eastern border Reno, Nevada. CDC and FEMA have prepared quarantine stations at many metropolitan areas. Please visit [www...](#)”*

He yanked the volume down again as Julie spoke.

“It’s not true,” she said.

“What?”

“The report. The CDC can’t mobilize that many quarantines that fast. They’re just not set up for it. And FEMA... There’s just no way.”

“At least they’re doing something,” Ben said.

“What? What could they possibly be doing?” Julie asked, her voice growing emotional. “Stephens kept me in the dark the entire time, and he murdered the man who’s supposed to be at the front of this thing, keeping the investigation moving forward.”

“Okay, well what do you want to do, then?” Ben asked. He tapped the brakes.

Julie thought for a moment. “We’re it, Ben. We’re the *only* people close enough to do anything about it. We have to find that bomb, and fast. And don’t get any ideas about ditching me on the side of the road somewhere.”

Ben looked at her for a minute, considering the offer. He nodded, then sped up again.



Julie checked for updates on the spreading virus, and sent a few emails up the chain of command at the CDC.

It was a long shot, the CDC was already doing everything they could to stop the spread of the virus, and their ability to provide research support had been extremely stifled by Stephens' handiwork, but their options were limited. After a few minutes of clicking around, she closed the computer.

"Try calling again," Ben said.

"There's no point," she replied. "Anyone there is already deployed at a waypoint or helping with disaster relief. We need to get to an actual location—"

"Julie, we've talked about this," Ben said. "We don't have the time to drive all the way there. We have to get others involved *somehow*."

"I know, I know!" Julie snapped, exasperated.

"Think," Ben said, talking as much to himself as to Julie. "Where would he put a bomb that size and not be noticed."

"This is Yellowstone," Julie remarked. "All he has to do is zip it up in the right gear and looks like any other camper."

Ben shook his head. "Not camp grounds. No one just leaves their stuff behind."

"Not even a cooler?"

"Only if there was an accident and it fell of a boat into the—"

Julie squirmed in her seat. "In the lake?"

"Under the lake," Ben answered, his voice confident. As he said the words, a sign flew past on the right side of the road with the words "*Yellowstone Lake—1 Mile*" printed on it.

"Ben, Livingston's already checked there. Remember? He sent a team of geologists and excavators through most of the caves in the region, and found that tunnel. If there was something there, he would have—"

"Julie, Livingston didn't tell you that."

"He did! He called, an—" she suddenly remembered what Ben was getting at.

Livingston hadn't called—*Stephens* had.

She bolted upright in the seat. "Stephens called, not Livingston. He only *said* Livingston had sent the team in, and he didn't have any reason to be communicating with Livingston, which means..." She thought for a moment. "Which means he was lying. Ben, if he was lying, we could be heading in the wrong direction."

"But we're not. We're going exactly where Stephens told us to go. So far he's double-crossed us at every step, but it's been his information that's gotten us this far. He even told us *why*—he wanted to watch us try to figure it out." Ben looked at Julie. "If that bomb is actually somewhere in Yellowstone, we're going to find it exactly where Stephens told us to look."

Julie knew he was right—it *had* to be right. "Yeah, why *wouldn't* he just tell us exactly where it is? As insane as he was, he believed it was too late to do anything about it."

She hoped Stephens wasn't right about that.

"So where is this cave, anyway?" she asked.

Ben shook his head. "I don't know. But there's only one cave I can think of that's long and deep enough to be a good spot. It has to be close enough to the surface that an explosion would penetrate,

but deep enough to affect the magma area below the caldera. It's a few miles around the lake, once we get there, but the cave isn't terribly long."

"But he cut a tunnel into the side of it, right?"

"Right, and we have no way of knowing how deep *that* is. It's wide enough that we can crouch or slide most of the way through, and there aren't any major forks. We'll know right away if we see a manmade tunnel."

Ben pulled the truck to the left as the road took a dogleg turn, then he sped up again. This section of the road was considerably better than the one they'd been on, with a gravel base and fewer potholes and bumps. As he aimed the vehicle down the center of the one-lane drive, he couldn't help but notice the immense beauty of the surrounding country.

This land had been his only home for over a decade. Diana—his mother—had tried for years to bring him and his brother together again under one roof, but she'd failed.

Or, rather, he'd failed *her*.

After his father died, Ben did the only thing that felt right. He ran away. At the time it hadn't felt like running *away*, though, as much as it felt like running *toward* something. This something was staring down at him as he drove through it.

The trees, pine and spruce, scraping at the ceiling of the sky, their tops ripping into the vast blue and white. The forest floor, which had acted as his bed for so many nights he couldn't count them, and the soft prickle of the needles that littered the ground and crunched when he walked.

And the *smell*.

That forest, deep-green, fresh, *alive* smell.

The smell was the biggest reason he'd settled here, and he swore he'd never live another day without it. Whether it was a mountaintop in Colorado, the sweeping forests of Yellowstone, or his secluded cabin in Alaska, as long as that smell was there when he arrived, he could live anywhere.

And now this madman, dead as he was, wanted to take all that away?

This was his home and he was going to defend it.

*Home*.

He looked again at Julie and saw her gazing back at him.

*Something's missing...*

The question rose again.

*What's missing?*

He silently tried to answer it, to make it go away. But it didn't—it wouldn't. He tried again, and failed.

Ben suddenly realized it wasn't a question he was asking about his own life—that question had already been answered. Instead, this question was about the task at hand.

*What was missing?*

As he posed the question again, emphasizing different beats, different syllables of each word, the answer struck him at once.

*The reason*.

He turned his head sideways, chewing on that answer. *The reason was missing*.

The reason Stephens had done it. He wasn't being paid—he'd given his life for the cause. It couldn't have been about money, at least not for him. And he wasn't just a murderer, a basket case with a chip on his shoulder.

There was something more.

Something, Ben realized, they should have already figured out.

A chill came down the back of Ben's neck as he gripped the steering wheel tightly, all of the possible solutions to the problem suddenly pouring through his mind.

The plan was, Ben had to admit, all but perfect. If Stephens hadn't fed them every scrap of information they currently knew, they'd be no better off than the CDC and the rest of the population. They'd be lost, looking for a needle in a haystack.

No, they wouldn't even know to look—Stephens was the one who'd told them there was a second bomb. Why had he gone through all the trouble to stage a massive terrorist plot against an entire nation, to then simply die alone?

Even if he *was* working with a larger organization, as Malcolm had suggested, why make it a point to have witnesses for his suicidal last stand?

To simply die alone?

“Shit,” he whispered. He whipped the truck around, barely coming to a stop. Gravel flew out from the truck's tires, spraying the trees and bushes growing next to the road and sending birds clamoring out of the way.

The computer on Julie's lap slammed against the car door as she shrieked and grasped at the ceiling-mounted handle.

“What the hell?” she shouted, trying to fight the centrifugal force of the truck's rotation. “Ben, what's going on?”

*To die alone.*

That was the reason. That had always been the reason.

*No, the answer.*

That had always been the answer.

Stephens was talking to him, communicating to them still, from beyond the grave.

“Ben?”

He wanted them to feel his pain—the very real, human, pain. Isolated, gripping, terrifying pain.

*Alone.*



“*The lithosphere of the Earth, consisting of the Earth’s crust and upper mantle, is normally just under one hundred miles thick. The outer shell of crust makes up what our entire planet lives on, either on land, in the air, or beneath the sea.*”

The Indian man’s voice crackled through the station’s tube TV, the color long since faded. Officer Darryl Wardley wondered why no one had bothered to change it out, or at least have it fixed.

Could you even fix tube TVs anymore?

He thought about the question, finding it genuinely more interesting than this Dr. Ramachandran fella with his thick black glasses and even thicker accent, droning on about stuff Wardley hadn’t thought about since high school. He’d pulled the desk shift this evening, but with the mass hysteria keeping everyone insanely busy lately, it was a welcome rest. He blinked, once again concentrating on the TV.

*“This shell is typically between three and five miles thick beneath the Earth’s surface, and closer to thirty-five miles thick on land.*

*“The crust section of the lithosphere below the Yellowstone caldera in Yellowstone National Park is less than two miles thick, meaning that the upper mantle, full of molten rock and magma, is extremely close to the surface. This ‘hotspot’ is one of only a dozen on Earth, and means that the extreme temperatures found within the Earth are much closer to the surface.”*

Again, boring. He wondered if there was a game on—maybe baseball, since they always played. If not, there might be a decent hockey game rerun on ESPN, but he’d have to get up to change the channel. *Why can’t we afford a Universal Remote Control?* He’d been around long enough to know that it wasn’t anyone’s job, so it had probably just never gotten done. He made a mental note to pick one up at Walmart the next time he was there.

*“The last time this caldera erupted was over 640,000 years ago, and the blast was large enough to send ash as far away as the Pacific coast, some of the plains states, and even the Gulf of Mexico.”* As the professor spoke, the station had superimposed a slide showing a map of the western United States, covered by a red oblong shape—the volcano—and a lighter shaded section labeled “Ash Zone.”

*“Yellowstone has experienced a massive volcanic eruption just about every 600,000 years, and the prior eruptions—1.3 million and 2.1 million years ago, respectively—were even larger. Actually, because of this fantastically large land area, the Yellowstone supervolcano is considered to be the largest active volcano in the world.”*

Officer Wardley frowned. *Volcanoes were huge smoking mountains*, he thought. But as he considered the park’s many geologic features, including geysers, hot springs, and smoking fissures in the ground, he changed his mind. *Maybe there was a volcano under there after all.* His family—wife and three kids—and he had spent many summer vacations there, since it was so close. Only a few hours away, and they’d had numerous friends over the years to travel with.

Dr. Ramachandran continued explaining the seismic activity that could be found at the park. *“It was extremely lucky that this bomb went off where it did, and not closer to the caldera’s center, and that it was not larger. The right explosion could do more damage than a simple blast—it could potentially fracture the already delicate infrastructure of the plates holding the magma below at bay. In fact, since many scientists believe that Yellowstone is due for an eruption, a blast of a certain size could jumpstart this timeline.”*

Wardley sat up in his chair, no longer daydreaming. He saw for the first time another person on the television, this time a woman in a red dress, obviously the interviewer. She asked a few questions, which the man answered one at a time.

*“To put in perspective how large this volcanic eruption will be, consider the Mt. St. Helens eruption in 1980, which we no doubt all remember. Yellowstone’s volcano would be on a force magnitude of 2,500 times that size. It would send ash more than thirty miles straight up into the atmosphere, blocking out the sun and most likely causing the planet’s global temperature to plummet.*

*“But this ash would be a long-term problem. For the people within five to six hundred miles of the actual eruption, all life will be either incinerated instantaneously or consumed by pyroclastic lava flows that move at high speeds. The western half of the United States might simply cease to exist, but the effects to the global economy and that of humanity in general will be devastating.”*

The woman made a remark about the man’s dire explanation, calling into question the confidence he had in his prediction.

*“This is not speculation, mind you. It is scientific fact. Volcanologists and geologists have long been hard at work predicting not if this eruption will take place, but when. There is a strong possibility that we will be without an eruption for the next 1,000 years, and even 10,000 years, but there is no definitive way to understand the dynamics at play beneath the surface of the Earth.”*

The woman turned away from the man and spoke to the camera.

*“You heard it yourself. Dr. Ramachandran is an esteemed volcanologist and the author of numerous books on the subject. With the increased interest surrounding the explosion at Yellowstone National Park only days ago, and of course the terrible virus that is spreading throughout the United States that is believed to have been initiated by that same explosion, we wanted to bring you a special edition feature for tonight’s newscast that examined the Yellowstone caldera.*

*“In a moment, we will return to your regularly scheduled programming after a brief update from our disaster relief team regarding the Yellowstone Virus.”*

The show cut to a square-jawed cliché in his mid-fifties, with perfectly combed salt-and-pepper hair. He was smiling, but Officer Wardley had worked with people long enough to know the man on the television was holding onto a certain amount of fear. Maybe even panic.

*“The Yellowstone Virus is still eluding the nation’s best researchers, though we are told that a breakthrough is imminent. As you have no doubt already heard, please stay indoors, lock your house, and do not venture out for any reason. Stay isolated, and do not physically interact with anyone other than your immediate family...”*

Wardley scoffed at the guy on TV. The anchor was stuck at work, just like him. How many others were out there, stuck at their jobs, explaining their own demise to the rest of their species? Wardley had already fielded calls from three of his fellow officers—two accounts of looting and one small riot gang making its way up and down the main street of town. Even for a small city, the crazies somehow seemed to be the majority.

He got up to refill his coffee—he’d need another pot of it before the night was over—when the phone rang.

He growled and sat back down. “Officer Wardley, Sheridan County Police, how may I assist you?”

He frowned as he heard the explanation on the other end of the line. “Excuse me, you’re going to need to slow down. You said you’re *in* Yellowstone right now?”



The voice yammered on. “Son,” Wardley said, his voice stern. “You need to get out of the park. There’s a virus—”

But the voice continued. Wardley’s heartbeat rose slightly. He was not fond of being yelled at, especially by a civilian. “Listen, Bennett, I don’t care if you’re a park ranger or not—you need to get out of that area.”

He started to explain their protocol regarding a refugee from a disease-infected area as he pulled out a regional map that had the quarantine checkpoints and stations marked in highlighter, but the man on the phone interrupted him again.

He was starting to get *really* angry.

“Bennett, I’m not going to ask you—”

He paused.

“Sorry, *what?*”

Bennett spoke again.

“There’s *another* bomb?” He listened to Bennett explain, for the third time, what he wanted Wardley to do. “And you’re sure about that?”

Yes, apparently Bennett was decidedly sure, before he slammed the phone down onto the receiver.



Officer Darryl Wardley's police cruiser, a decade-old Dodge Charger, raced down the highway at ninety miles an hour. He would have gone faster if it wasn't for the handful of stray vehicles disobeying the now government-mandated house arrest for every citizen spread out on the open road.

Wardley's comm squawked out just about every excuse in the book as he'd listened in on his fellow officers' 11-95s. Most of the civilians were panic buying last-minute supplies, or checking in on family and friends who hadn't responded to their phone calls. One deranged individual even admitted he was on a joyride; he'd never seen so little traffic on the highway, and he wanted to take advantage of it.

Most civilians, with the exception of the wannabe race car driver, were let off with nothing but a warning and a stern reminder that they were supposed to be inside. The federal government, after all, hadn't issued a formalized process notice explaining what the local officers were supposed to *do* with 11-95s out and about against mandate. Wardley's comrades were driving blind, simply pulling people over, asking them for their license and registration—nothing but a formality these days, anyway—and then letting them go after they heard the driver's excuse.

Wardley was glad he wasn't on patrol duty tonight. Nothing but a bunch of crazies and nut jobs taking advantage of the fact that most of the United States government was busy trying to figure out this virus.

Still, driving ninety miles an hour down an almost-abandoned highway felt an awful lot like being on duty—holy crap he looked tired.

Catching sight of his own deep-set brown eyes, and eyebrows that could use a trim, in the rearview mirror took him by surprise. Whose face was that staring back at him? He looked so exhausted. And old. So old. He'd slept just before his shift, no more than five hours ago. But he felt physically, emotionally, and mentally drained.

He adjusted the mirror to remove his face.

After the call from Bennett at Yellowstone, he'd called a his superiors at the station, including two that were out on patrol already. He told them what he'd learned from Bennett, explaining that he had no proof that any of it was true, then waited for the inevitable tongue-lashing as his commanding officers showed him all of the reasons why the madman in the park was just looking to start a fight, and there was no bomb.

Surprisingly, Wardley met little resistance. It seemed as though the officers wanted to do something other than drive around the area, looking for idiot grocery shoppers and insane joyriders. They all agreed to meet him at the park, and one told him to place a general wide-band call to ask for even more backup.

*It must be the solitude,* Wardley thought. The virus was all anyone was talking about lately, and they all knew that driving around the area just outside the infection zone was the equivalent to suicide, whether it was part of their job description or not. Maybe playing a more active role in figuring out all of this mess helped assuage their fears.

Or maybe it was just their ego, their testosterone-laden desire to do *something*, even if that something was guided by a guy they never met, begging for help at a park they had no jurisdiction entering.

Five miles later, Wardley was entering that exact park. He slowed the cruiser a bit and caught up to another officer in his department, rolling down his window as he pulled up.

“Think we’ll get sick going in here?” Hector Garcia asked, before Wardley even stopped.

“If we were, we’d have gotten it thirty miles ago. The radius is growing, even this far north.”

“Yeah, so I heard. Crazy stuff, man. I hope this Bennett guy isn’t messing around.”

Wardley looked down the road at the park, wondering if Bennett was right. It could be that easy.

Wardley realized that an easy answer was probably the real reason his fellow police officers had jumped at the opportunity to get their hands dirty. They’d all signed on for different reasons, but one they all had in common was the simple desire to right wrongs.

And finding the viral payload delivered by a second bomb was certainly in the category of “righting wrongs.”

“I don’t think he is,” Wardley said. “I had Jones pull a background check on anyone matching the ID he gave, along with his job title at the park. It’s a long shot, but if the match he found is, in fact, our guy, he’s clean as a whistle. Pretty much off the grid as long as he’s been alive.”

“Yeah, I don’t see what could be in it for him, if there’s something else going on. I’d bet he’s telling the truth.”

“Let’s get inside, then. As crazy as it sounds, if what he said is true, we need to get moving.”

“Roger that. I’ll keep the radio open in case we get some more volunteers.” Officer Garcia paused, then met Wardley’s gaze. “If I don’t see you on the other side, man, take care.”

Wardley knew what he meant, but he corrected him anyway. “If we go anywhere, we’ll be on the *same* side, Garcia.”

Garcia chuckled. “Hopefully it’s the good side, then.”

Wardley rolled his window back up and accelerated. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Garcia do a quick cross sign with his fingertips, then pull out to follow on behind.

He hoped Bennett was right.

They needed him to be right.



“Ben, what are we looking for?” Julie asked. They’d now been in the truck for almost two hours, first heading toward the massive lake that made up the central area of Yellowstone National Park, then back toward the edge of the park where a string of campsites sat.

Julie’s back hurt. She shifted in the seat and tried, in vain, to get comfortable. She felt like she’d never spent so many hours in one place, much less in a vehicle. Every passing minute was excruciating.

She almost wanted the bomb to go off just relieve—

No. That wasn’t true. A little discomfort in exchange for fixing this terrible massacre.

It was a fair trade, she decided.

She watched Ben drive. That severe look on his face. What had gotten into him?

“Ben,” she said again. “What’s up?”

He finally glanced over, but only for a brief instant before the rough terrain forced him to focus on the road.

“Sorry,” he said. “I—It’s just...” His mood seemed to darken.

“What?”

“Nothing... I mean, I don’t know yet. I have a theory, but I need to check some of these campsites first.”

“I thought you ruled campsites out?”

“I know.”

He said the words flatly, almost commanding, as if he felt the conversation was over.

Julie felt the opposite. Why did they need to find a campsite? What was the theory? And why was it important enough to abandon their plan to find the bomb?

She didn’t ask any more questions. She’d never seen Ben focus so intently on his goal, and she didn’t want to distract him. She examined the man sitting next to her. His forehead glistened with sweat, bloodied knuckles over the steering wheel. As they drove, Ben pulled up an internal list of registered campers who’d booked a campsite for that week, using his phone. He scrolled through a few pages and clicked off the screen when he was satisfied.

They reached the first of the line of campsites spread around both sides of the road, each marked with a short driveway and a wooden sign with a number painted on it. These sites, Julie realized, were meant for glamping. People who thought roughing it meant sleeping in a pop-up trailer or RV, spending the evenings by a controlled fire inside a ring of rocks, with running water piped in through the park’s small but reliable water supply. Many of these sites even had electricity, meant to plug the RVs into a power source that didn’t need to run on batteries.

Julie wasn’t much of a camper, and it looked like it would have been rough enough for her, even with the RVs and pop-ups. Ben wasn’t like most people. He would have been happy sleeping on a bed of pine needles.

Ben slammed on the brakes in front of the first site and hopped out of the truck. The tree cover cast shadows over the road and campsites, making it nearly impossible to see far into the sites. He ran to the fire ring, spinning in a circle as he searched for whatever he was looking for.

Julie opened the door to help, but Ben was already running across the street to check the second site.

“Ben, what are you looking for?” she asked. She knew better than to expect an answer, but was surprised when he yelled back to her.

“Anything. I’m looking for anything that doesn’t belong. In these first three sites.”

She shrugged and ran to the third site. *I can find that.*

The third site differed from the first two, and she noticed it right away. Here, the driveway had tire tracks in it from a large vehicle. She wasn’t nearly good enough to tell what kind of vehicle, but she could easily see that the car or truck had exited the driveway quickly. The tracks widened as they hit the street, a sign that the vehicle had slid on the loose gravel as it sped up and turned. She turned to the rest of the site.

The ring of rocks at the center were a deep black, as if smoke had blackened them as a fire inside died out. There were no coals or bits of wood, but she thought she could smell the faint scent of charred ash from a recent fire. She walked over to it, examining everything in sight.

*There.*

“Ben,” she called out. She stepped around the ring and walked toward a picnic table that sat at the far side of the campsite, right where the site ended and the line of thick pines began again.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Ben running toward her. She pointed at the picnic table.

He nodded, continuing past her, and stopped at the bench of the table. Sitting atop the two planks of wood was a small picnic cooler.

“Were you able to talk to Randy?” he asked.

She was surprised by the question—they were searching for something in the campsites, and he wanted to know about Randall Brown? She’d called just after they left the lake and left a message.

“Yes, he sent me a text a few minutes ago. He said he’s fifteen minutes from here, and he’s got the maps.”

Ben whipped around to look at her. “What? He’s here?”

She nodded. “I guess he wanted to help...”

He stiffened a bit but didn’t say anything. Julie guessed the thoughts that were going through his mind—they were the same ones that she had been struggling with when she got the text. *Why are you coming to a highly contagious outbreak area, risking your life to find something we don’t even understand? Not to mention the bomb...*

But she knew Randy well enough to know that he couldn’t sit back and watch as the world came down around him. He’d stepped up before for far less important cases. Julie knew his wife would be beyond upset with his rash actions, but she also knew Randy wouldn’t take no for an answer.

If he said he was coming to help, they’d better be ready for him to help.

“You did say people would notice if someone left something behind like a cooler,” Julie remarked. “Well, I noticed.”

Focused on the cooler, Ben did not reply. Slowly approaching it, his chest rose and fell. His breathing sounded labored. Julie wondered if all the action had finally gotten to him.

“Ben,” she said, then stopped. What was she going to say? “Be careful?” What did she expect to find in the cooler? A bomb?

He ignored her. The cooler was like one of the small six-pack coolers that Julie owned, with a zippered lid and a few pockets around the sides.

Slowly, he unzipped the lid.

“It’s placed right where it needs to be,” Ben whispered.

Julie stared at him.

“Far enough away from the blast, but still close enough to be affected by the eruption.”

Julie looked down at the top of the cooler as Ben pulled it open.

He stepped back as a cloud of white powder rushed out of the vessel, filling the airspace in front of their heads.

“Shit,” she said. The powder—no doubt the contagion mechanism itself—packed inside the cooler, filling it halfway to the top. The dusty substance crept up out of the container, like smoke from yesterday’s fire.

“Yeah,” Ben said, closing the lid again. He stepped back another step and turned to Julie. “That’s what I thought. I’d bet there are more—a *lot* more.”

“Dotted around the other campsites...” she realized.

He nodded. “All around the lake, not to mention miles of open land for backpackers and survivalists to set up camp. I don’t know how much of this stuff they planned to release into the air, but I’d guess you’d want more than a half-cooler full to get the job done right.”

“And it’s far enough away from the bomb’s blast out here?”

“That’s my guess—leave the cooler here when you leave the campsite for the evacuation and...” He stopped to look back toward the road. “You can’t see it from the road, meaning my crew would have just driven past, not looking for anything but people and vehicles that stayed behind. You only found it, because we were looking for it.”

The picnic table would be all but invisible from the camp road, and even if you were looking for manmade objects like the cooler, it would be sheer luck to see it perched on the bench from the inside of a moving vehicle.

“I’m guessing when the bomb blows out the bottom of the lake and the top of the caldera, the eruption will pick up the coolers and spread the virus that way,” Ben said.

“Maybe,” Julie replied. “But a large enough eruption will incinerate anything within miles.”

“I agree. That’s why they packed it cooler insulation, just enough to keep the payload safe through the blast.” He picked up the cooler and zipped the lid shut.

Ben marched back to the truck, and Julie followed. “What now?”

“Tell the cops what to look for and make sure they don’t open the containers when they get here.”

Julie thought about their own situation. The virus had fully run its course through their bodies, rendering them both immune to its effects. But the police officers weren’t as lucky. They knew what they were getting into, and that it was likely a one-way trip for them.





They all met at the road that stretched between the lake and the campsites where Ben and Julie had found the first cooler. Five officers, Ben, Julie, and Randy. As they gathered, Ben introduced himself.

“Thank you all for being here. I won’t take any time to explain the dire situation, as I know you all are fully aware.” Nods all around. “Second, this is likely the end of the road for us. I’m not much of a speech guy, so I’ll just leave it at that. Feel free to turn around and head back the way you came.”

No one moved.

“Okay, then, here’s the deal,” Ben continued. “We found a cooler containing about two pounds of powdered viral agent under a picnic table at a campsite 17. Not far from here.”

Ben went on explain why they believed it was placed where it was, and why he thought there would be more around the park. “We’re dealing with a literal ticking time bomb, literally, and the largest outbreak of a deadly disease since the Spanish Flu. If you have anyone you can call for support, *get them here*. We need bodies, and we need them fast.”

Some of the officers were nodding in approval, and others were already taking their phones out of their pockets and preparing a string of text messages to their groups.

“Start with the list I emailed to Officer Wardley. It’s a list of the registered single campers and their designated sites. Julie and Randy will split up with two of you,” Ben said, ignoring Julie’s surprised and upset expression. “I’m going to find that bomb.”

Two officers spoke at once, suspicious. “You know where it is?”

“Nope. But I have an idea,” Ben answered. “Randy brought me some maps he pulled from our staff web access point of the underground cave systems below Yellowstone Lake and the surrounding area. Most aren’t very big, if I remember correctly, but a few could be deep enough and long enough to be a good spot to set up a bomb.”

“You know anything about bomb disposal?” Wardley asked.

“No.”

“So you’re just going to walk in there and switch it off?”

“No.”

“Then I think we need to go with you, don’t you, sir?”

Ben turned it around. “Do *you* know anything about bomb disposal?”

“No,” Wardley admitted. “But we’re trained for this sort of thing.”

“But not bomb disposal.”

“No.”

“Look,” Ben said. “I’m not here to disarm it. I’m not even going to touch. I’m going to find. *You’re* going to get someone here who knows how to take care of it. And in the meantime we need all hands on deck identifying these caches around the park. It’s a lot of land to cover—over one hundred individual sites, and I have no idea how much time we have left. If I can’t get to the bomb in time, this place turns into a lava field within seconds. We have to make sure that that’s all it is—not a contagious spawn point for a massive disease as well.”

Again, some of the officers nodded. “What do we do with the caches?”

Julie stepped in. “Don’t touch them. Keep your distance. Just call them in and mark them on GPS —”

Ben disagreed. “No.”

“What, do you work for the CDC now?”

“Dump them in the lake,” Ben insisted.

“But that’s ground zero.”

“Exactly,” Ben said. “If we can’t get this thing diffused, the least I can do is bring it up to the surface and drive it into the lake. That alone will lessen the impact and vaporize the viral agent.”

Julie stepped back, suddenly realizing the full extent of Ben’s plan. “That’s suicide.”

“Okay, that’s it. Keep your radios on and check in when you can,” Wardley said. Someone threw Ben a walkie-talkie, and he set it to their designated channel. “Let’s go!”

Immediately, the small crowd dispersed, each heading back to their vehicles. Randy tagged along with a short, portly officer and stepped into the man’s passenger seat.

“Ben, I’m going with you,” Julie said.

Ben was already walking the other direction, trying to ignore her. Her stubborn nature immediately sprang into life.

“Ben! I’m going with you,” she said again.

“You’re not.”

“I *am*. And if you try to stop me, I’ll—”

“What?” Ben yelled, whirling around to face her. His face was red, his eyes bloodshot. He looked a mess, and it stopped Julie in her tracks.

“I…” she started again.

Ben’s nostrils flared as he tried to control his emotions. He looked at Julie, a few inches shorter, standing in front of him. “What?” he said. His voice wavered slightly.

She didn’t speak.

Ben grabbed her by the arms and pulled her toward him. He leaned down and kissed her, not letting go. She stood dead still for a few seconds, taken by surprise, then gently fell into him.

She tried to say something, but he pressed his lips harder to hers. She felt warmth crawling up her spine, taking over the steel resolve she’d felt moments ago. He released her arms, and she quickly entangled them around his waist, hugging him tightly.

Finally, he pulled back and looked into her eyes. She saw tears forming in his, and he blinked them back.

“You’re coming back, Ben,” she said. “Understand? You’re coming back.”

He took one last look at Julie, then jumped in the truck. He revved the engine and drove away, leaving Julie standing in the road.

In the rearview mirror, he saw a police cruiser pull up beside her and wait for her to open the passenger door. As she got into the vehicle, she looked once more at the trail of dust behind her truck as it disappeared over the rise.



Ben reached the first cave on his list in record time. He wasn't sure anyone had ever driven that fast over the weathered roads crisscrossing the park. He sure hadn't. It was all he could do to keep the truck on the center of the road, hoping that no wildlife jumped in front of the moving battering ram.

The cave was off to his left, and he could easily see the markers from the road. A few stakes in the ground with brightly colored plastic strands marked the location as one of the park's future tourist attractions. It hadn't been fully excavated yet, nor had it been assessed by the park's surveying crews.

Ben didn't care about any of that. He needed to find the actual cave, get inside, and find that bomb.

What would it even look like? He wasn't sure he'd ever even seen a bomb in real life. And it certainly wouldn't look anything like they did in the movies. Would it? As he exited the vehicle, he grabbed a heavy flashlight he'd borrowed from one of the cops and tested it.

He found the entrance behind a large bush, and he brushed the prickly stems from his face as he crouched down and lowered himself into hole below the rocks. It was a tight fit. His large frame was going to have a difficult time navigating the cramped space, not to mention the sharp protrusions of rock he felt jutting out of the walls.

He sighed. *Julie would fit.*

He forced the thought out of his mind and slid through the entrance.

It was much tighter than he'd initially thought. His shoulders scraped against the rocks as he sucked in his gut and slid farther. He breathed in slowly, feeling the space narrow. When he exhaled, he slid once more, gaining another six inches.

*This could take a while.*

He repeated the inhale-exhale-slide process another a couple dozen times and suddenly found himself in a larger hole. Still small, but he now had room to maneuver through the cavern. Still, he found it hard to believe someone could cram a body *and* a bomb through this tunnel, but it didn't matter. He had to find it. If it could even possibly be in this cave, he would search the entire thing.

A few more feet and the space opened up again, this time large enough for him to crouch. He crawled forward on his hands and knees, careful to dodge the small rocks and sticks that had collected on the cave floor, ready to stab his knees as he slid past.

For an eternity, he slid, crawled, and hunched his way through the tunnel, hoping there were more than an eternity on its countdown clock.

"*Har— nett.*" The radio he'd clipped to the back of his belt crackled to life. "*—Ennett. Do— read, over.*"

He stopped, grabbed the radio and tried to send a response. "This is Bennett. You're breaking up, but I read you, over."

He waited for a response, but none came. Ben checked the radio for battery—less than a quarter remaining, but enough to receive and send a signal—and the antenna. Everything seemed to be in working order, so he clipped it back onto his belt and continued on down the gently sloping decline of the cave.

*If it's important enough, I'll hear it when I get back to the surface. We have to find this bomb.*

But another ten minutes of slowly moving downward proved to be useless. Eventually, the cave narrowed to a funnel shape, and he found forward motion growing more and more impossible.

*Shit*, he thought. *This can't be it.*

He'd wasted thirty minutes, at least, searching for this cave and diving down it headfirst. There was nothing in front of him suggesting that the roof had fallen in, nor was there any sign of prior human contact with the rocks and walls of the cavern. For all he knew, he was the first person ever to set foot in the place.

He shimmied backward, painstakingly moving uphill feet-first, waiting until the cave widened enough for him to turn around and exit.

It had been a massive waste of time. But worse than that, there would never be enough time to spend thirty minutes in each of the caves.

He couldn't hail the rest of the team and pull any of them off their search, either. If the bomb detonated, he had to hope the contagion would be close enough to the lake to be incinerated by the blast.



It took longer climbing back out of the tunnel than it did going down into it. Ben was exhausted, frustrated, and—a new feeling now began to wash over him—fear.

Fear of not getting to the bomb in time.

Afraid for the officers and volunteers racing throughout the park to find the virus caches.

Fear of losing Julie.

It was a thought that rattled through his mind like a runaway train.

There was something between them, but didn't know what to call it.

They were attracted to each other, obviously. But it felt deeper somehow. More important than lust.

Did she feel the same way? How could he ask her if he ever got the chance?

He'd had a few flings here and there, mostly with other park staff, many of whom were seasonal and changed every summer. None were serious, and none made him feel the same way Julie did.

*And what way is that?* he asked himself.

The shaft of sunlight leading to the surface beckoned up ahead. Pushing up off the rock floor he shimmied, trying to move faster. The radio broke his concentration—

*“—Bennett, report —Hear me?”*

Ben pulled the radio from its clip and answered. “Hey, I'm here—just finished exploring the first cave, and nothing.” He took a breath. “Over.”

*“You're cut— out...”* then, *“We've—three caches in about—sites.”* Ben resorted to interpretation. *They found three virus caches?* It was a start. More importantly, he was right about there being more of them in single-camper sites. This was no wild goose chase—they were on track.

Now, to find that bomb and clean up this mess.

He peered up at the lip of the hole and the surface beyond. Just a few more feet.

*“Ben, do you copy?”* It was Julie.

He immediately brought the walkie-talkie back up to his mouth. “I read you.”

*“Hey, I have an idea.”*

“I'm all ears,” he replied. They'd quickly abandoned the radio protocol of saying ‘over’ every time, and Ben didn't miss it.

*“Listen—I need to get with Randy to figure it out. Randy, if you're on this frequency, let me know...”*

*“Right here, Julie. What's up?”* Randy's voice sounded hollow on the police radio, and Ben wasn't sure if he was farther away from them or if the police officer was holding it up to him in the car.

“Guys, I need to get out of this hole. My battery's going down on this radio, too.” To be sure, he checked it. There was a light next to the battery charge symbol, and it was now flashing. *That can't be good*, he thought. “I'm going offline for a few, but I'll jump back on when I'm out. Try calling me on my cell if you can't reach me.”

*“Roger that, Ben. Stand by.”*

Ben spent the last few feet scraping his head and back against the jutting rocks until he was able to haul himself out of the hole. He rolled onto his back, sucking in a lungful of fresh air.

He checked the radio. The battery low indicator light was still blinking away. No telling how long he had left. He should have checked it before he set out. He clicked it on, just in time to hear a



broadcast from Julie.

*“—Back on? Ben, can you hear me?”*

“I’m here,” he said, winded. He stood, stretching to his full height for the first time in over an hour. He could feel the deep muscle pain in his lower back already beginning to creep over the area, and he made a mental note to himself to work out more often.

*“Okay, great. I’ve got something for you. Check out the cave on the northeastern side of the lake. There are a few, but the one farthest north should be right.”*

Ben reached the truck, simultaneously fumbling with the ignition and rifling through the maps spread on the passenger seat. The western side of the lake, with a few caves—including the one he’d just emerged from—No, not that one. He threw it back and grabbed the second map.

There. The blown-up view of the northern and northeastern sides of the lake, a dozen or so winding caves traced over. Larger lines extended into the body of water itself, signifying that at least a portion of the cave traveled below the lake.

“Got it,” he said as he put the truck into gear and sped up onto the road. He could already see the lake glistening back at him, catching light and bouncing it back into his eyes. He took a quick look back down at the map to confirm. “I’m looking at it. Seems to be one of the only ones that goes under the actual lake, and not just stop before it gets there.” He waited for a response, but none came. “How’d you find this one?” he asked.

Still nothing.

He held the radio up to examine it. No blinking lights. It was completely dead.

*Crap.*

He hoped Julie was right.



This cave was significantly larger than the last one. Thank God. Hopefully he wouldn't need to crawl around on his hands and knees this time.

He parked the truck, left the keys on the seat, and jumped down. He unclipped the radio and left it on the stack of maps on the passenger seat too—. It was dead weight now.

The cavern ceiling ran high enough that he had more than enough headroom as he followed its twisting curves. It descended much slower than the first, but he was able to almost jog through it, making up for lost time.

He kept the beam of the flashlight in front of him, avoiding pitfalls, rocks, and branches as he went. Yet still he completely missed the sudden step that almost swept his foot out from under him. His foot hit the ground hard and he almost bit his tongue.

“Goddamnit.”

He swept the flashlight over it. How had he missed that? He quickly moved on.

As the tunnel bottomed out, it grew wider, into a main artery large enough for two or three people to walk side-by-side, until it took a steep drop and the *real* descent began, forcing Ben to slow to a walk.

He calculated that this shelf must be the point where the cave twisted beneath the lake's bottom, a cavity carved from millions of years of water dripping through cracks and fissures in the ground.

The precarious drop shallowed a bit as he descended, and he was able to pick up the pace once again. After a while, he came to a fork, but barely slowed as he chose the left passage. It was arbitrary but there was no time to dither.

The right side was larger and seemed to continue beneath the surface of the lake, while the left was a bit smaller and had a shallower decline. But it was the way the tunnel had been *cut* that made it the obvious choice.

Instead of being smooth from years of water and weather, the left tunnel had an unnatural sheen to it, along with a rugged, scratchy look.

As if it had dynamited out like an old railroad tunnel.

All along the trail, he could see the slight hint of depressions in the rock, small half-cylinder horizontal pathways, dead straight and spaced out about two feet apart, up the wall and over his head. The spots where they'd placed the sticks of Nobel's fortune.

It would have been a low-grade explosive, with enough in each channel to blow the rock to bits and allow it to be cleared, but weak enough that it wouldn't cave in on itself.

Still, it was a massive amount of work, and Ben grew livid as he walked. *They did this right under our noses.*

Whoever “they” were, they had done a fantastic job, too. The lines were straight; the tunnel was well-defined and appeared stable. There were no support beams.

They had brought in their tools, dug this place out, cleared the mess, and no one knew about it.

Ben couldn't remember the specifics of the numerous park restoration and construction contracts he'd heard about over the years, but this one had to have been one of them. Most likely, this one had been part of a larger operation, masked as a standard safety excavation and then piled with paperwork to become lost in a bureaucratic mess.

Still, it had been done, and it had taken a long time—perhaps started before Ben was even hired on.

He stifled his anger, focusing instead on reaching the end of this manmade nightmare.

The tunnel bent to the right and down, and suddenly came to a stop. There, in the dim light of the flashlight's glow, Ben saw it.

The bomb.

It was... not what he expected. Then again, he had no idea what to expect. Not really. He remembered the newscasters explaining that the first bomb had been a... hyperbaric bomb? *Something like that. Is this the same kind?*

The device looked strangely like a beer keg, the kind he'd seen at a few of the park's staff parties at the end of their summer seasons. It was silver, and stood in the middle of the room. The sides bulged out, rounded, but the top and bottom were flat, perfect circles. It wasn't huge, maybe rising to his waist.

On top of it sat a tablet computer hardwired into the top of the barrel, a mess of cabling that Ben wasn't about to try and fiddle with.

He stared at the cold metal object, wondering what to do next.

*I don't really have a plan for this part*, he realized. He'd just assumed he'd find the bomb, take it back up with him, and throw it in the lake.

Or, he had secretly hoped it would be like an old western—a single fuse, lit and burning its way down the cable until it reached the payload. A simple *snip* with a knife or a deadeye shot with a six-shooter would have taken care of that.

But this wasn't the wild west, and Ben stood motionless for a few moments. *What now, genius?*

He stepped closer to examine the cables. All of them were black—no guessing “blue” or “red” and pulling one of them out. They were wrapped in a thick bundle with electrical tape after protruding from two sides of the tablet, and spread out again at the other end, before heading into the large metal canister.

As he examined the device, a plan began to form. It was primitive, but it was something.

*The bomb is cylindrical. Which means it can be rolled.*

He had no idea how heavy it was, or how delicate. But he was beyond waiting around for something else to happen—it was just him, a bomb, and not much time left.

Did it have a motion sensor? Would it blow if he moved it?

Only one way to find out.

He gently grasped the top lip of the barrel-like container and rocked it back and forth. It seemed heavy, which made sense, but not completely stationary.

It didn't blow. He was still here.

*This might work.*

He rocked a little harder, testing both for weight and, as he suddenly realized, to simply see if he could get it to explode.

*If I get out of this, there's no way anyone's ever hiring me to be part of a bomb squad.*

Trial and error didn't seem to be a factor in examining an explosive device, but then again, there was nothing else he could do.

Thankfully, no fiery blast wave ripped him to shreds as he played with the bomb-keg, so he continued with the plan.

*Rock gently. Rock a little harder. A little harder... harder —*

He lost his grip on the barrel, and the whole mess crashed to the floor. It clanged as it bumped on the hard rock and began to roll down the slightly sloping cavern until it smashed into the wall at the bottom of the chamber.

Instinctively, Ben cowered when it fell, as if holding his head in his hands back would have saved him.

Yet it still didn't exploded, and though he wouldn't purposefully repeat the experiment, he now knew that a little tumbling around wouldn't be enough to detonate it.

Ben calmed his nerves, breathing in and out a few times before stepping back up to the bomb and noticing a dim bluish light emanating from the barrel's top. He pointed the flashlight away and saw that the dim light remained.

*What the —*

The top of the barrel, now on its side, faced away from him. The light was casting shadows in the room, fighting with the beam of his flashlight. He walked around the device and saw the cause of the blue glow.

The screen.

The tablet computer was on, with nothing but a blue screen and white text scrolling around. It was code, no doubt some sort of computer program that the creators of this device had installed on it.

But at the top right of the little screen appeared a few strings of numbers as well, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what they represented.

A countdown.

Ben read the numbers, afraid of finally learning the truth. There were four two-digit spaces, and he assumed what each meant. Days, hours, minutes, seconds.

He felt a chill run down his spine as he saw that the first two places held only zeroes.

*00:00:52:37.*

*52 minutes, 37 seconds.*



52 *minutes, 36 seconds.*

If crawling out of the first cave had been exhausting, it was a piece of cake compared to this.

Like Sisyphus pushing his rock up the mountain, Ben rolled the heavy device with everything he had. Shallower parts of the cave floor were hard enough, but the steep sections were nearly impossible. Sweat dripped for him every pore, making his hands slippery and only adding to the challenge.

This thing had a weight a hundred pounds, easily. Maybe more.

Every bend and change in grade only exacerbated the agony. Ben couldn't help but wish that he'd taken someone—anyone—with him.

*Why was I trying to be such a hero?*

He knew it had been the smart thing to do at the time. Mitigate risk, spread out, stretch their resources to their capacity, and get as many people away from ground zero as possible.

But now, struggling to roll a tin can up a cave floor with wet hands, all while running out of energy and time, he was having second thoughts.

*Maybe I can leave it here, call for help, and then wait for someone to come by.*

He shook his head, reminding himself of his dead radio. Even his cellphone was worthless down here. He'd never had great service in the park, and certainly not in this area. The closest tower was near the ranger station and base areas, a small pocket of civilization in an otherwise vast—and remote—wilderness.

He'd found the blasted thing and he couldn't tell anyone!

So he kept pushing, rolling the device up and over sticks and rocks. Many of them were small enough that he could push the object over them without hesitating. Larger rocks forced him to hold the bomb still with a knee while he grabbed the obstacle and threw it to the side.

In this way, he'd covered most of the ascent. It was slow going, but he was making decent time.

Until he reached the step.

He'd forgotten about the step—the rock lip in the cave floor that almost wiped him out when he first entered the cave.

The first thought he had was that he was close to the exit. But that wasn't what mattered to him right now.

The cylinder bumped into the rock, and Ben crouched behind it, stuck, both supporting himself and trying to hold the weight of the rolling explosive device from plummeting back down the cavern.

So far he'd been able to work in the dark, keeping the flashlight in his back pocket. But now he needed a better plan. He reached around and grabbed the light, flicking it on and examining his predicament.

The ledge wasn't large, just as he remembered it, but it presented an extremely frustrating problem—the bomb would need to be lifted completely up and over the lip, then set back down on the cave floor above it, all without losing control of it.

There was no way around it, literally or figuratively.

Ben stuck his knee behind the bomb and flashed the light in a full circle around him just in case he'd missed something, his heavy breathing calming slightly as his body took advantage of the short break.

As he brought the flashlight back to his right hand and prepared to put it away, he felt his knee sliding sideways.

“Nononono—”

He shrieked at the metal cylinder, but still it rolled backwards. Ben fell on his rear, then on his side, panic suddenly setting in. His hands were no use, covered in sweat and sliding as easily on the smooth cave floor as they did on the metal surface of the bomb’s casing.

*This is not good.*

The bomb rolled faster, and Ben knew it was going to roll right past him.

It gained speed, and he did the only thing he could think of.

He stuck his leg out and shoved it in front of the runaway cylinder, praying it wouldn’t bounce right over and keep going. As it approached, Ben slid his upper body around quickly so that it was downhill, right in the path of the bomb’s getaway.

The heavy object rolled over his foot, and he felt its weight slam down on his shin. He roared in agony and instinctively tried to pull his foot back, but the bomb was already up to his knee. He could feel the pressure exerted by the weight, crushing as it sailed over him.

It slowed, the angle of Ben’s leg stalling it, and it rolled backwards. It bounced a little and then came to rest on his left foot, a crunching sound in his ankle causing Ben to gasp and almost pass out.

The initial impact of the device and the final crushing blow as it bounced and stopped on his foot rendered Ben completely immobile. He lay upside down, his head farther down the path and lower than his feet, one of which was pinned beneath the metal cylinder.

He groaned, pain lancing up his leg, as he tried to wriggle his foot free. He sat forward, resting on his elbows, so he could examine the situation. Every time he even thought about moving his foot, his brain seemed determined to disobey the order. Still, he struggled against it and tried to force the foot free.

It was no use. The pain was too much to bear, and the device wouldn’t budge.

He fell back.





37 minutes, 13 seconds.

*This is it. It's over. I'm going to die in a hole in the ground, waiting to blow up.*

Ben's foot was on fire. The pain had grown worse, surprisingly, and he was now nearly hyperventilating as he tried to breathe in and out, focusing his mind on other thoughts.

But the thoughts that came weren't helpful.

*I failed. I let everyone down, and I let Julie down.*

*I lost her.*

He tried again to force his mind to other thoughts, but the only other thing that came to mind was to check the time on the bomb. The screen hadn't shut off and as he slid sideways a bit he caught a glimpse of the countdown clock.

*36 minutes...*

He watched every second tick down, the display mesmerizing him, calming him.

*35 minutes...*

*This really is it*, he thought. The seconds ticked by, and all he could think about was the bomb, the countdown timer, and Julie.

*Julie, I'm sorry.*

He wished he had the radio and that it had a little battery left. Not to call for help, but to hear her voice again.

Just one more time.

"Ben!"

He shook his head. Great time to start hallucinating.

"Ben?!"

Not, that was real. As real as the screaming pain in his leg. He fell back to the floor, but managed a weak response. "I—I'm here!?" he cried.

"Oh my God, Ben! We're almost there! Don't go anywhere!" she called again.

It really was her. She was some ways off, probably at the mouth of the cave, but she was here.

"Wasn't planning on it," he said, trying not to burst into tears. Christ this hurt.

He could see a flickering light now dancing above him, casting shadows on the walls around him.

"I'm coming down—are you hurt?"

He didn't answer, instead waiting for her face to appear. *How do you explain an idiot move like this?*

"Ben! What happened?"

He wanted to yell *what do you think happened?* But he was just thankful to be found. "I got attacked by a barrel. Came out of nowhere. Like an ambush."

Julie did not look amused. "You think you're funny?"

"Funnier than you," he replied, the sarcastic twinge of his voice downplayed by the obvious pain he was feeling.

"Let's get this thing off of you." She examined the bomb, noticing the countdown timer, but not saying anything about it. "Hang on a minute."

Ben's eyes grew wide as Julie turned and ran back up the cave, leaving him and the bomb in complete darkness. "Hey!"

No response. Ben waited impatiently. A minute ticked by, then another. He wished he didn't have a way to tell exactly how much time had passed, but he did.

Three minutes, on the dot.

"I'm here," he heard her say. He saw the light again, and she raced around the corner and over the step, this time holding a large stick.

"It's not going to be strong enough to lift it all the way over—"

"It doesn't need to be," she responded, cutting him off. "Shut up and hold that thing steady."

He did as he was told, and Julie propped the end of the stick underneath its bulk, careful to keep it away from Ben's foot. She wiggled it deeper, pushing it around until it cracked a little. She met Ben's gaze. "Let's hope that was just the very end of it," she said. "Ready?" She reached behind her and grabbed a sizable stone lying next to the cave wall. She jammed it beneath the stick, right in front of the bomb, forming a lever.

Ben nodded, and Julie heaved downwards with all of her bodyweight. A strained noise escaped her mouth, and Ben couldn't help but notice how *cute* it sounded. Of all the the things to rush through his brain at a time like this—

He snapped his attention back to the situation at hand and placed his hands on the bomb's casing. He held it steady as Julie pushed again. The metal canister shifted a little, and Ben felt the immediate sensation of freedom. He ripped his leg back, the terror of having his foot crushed greater than the pain of moving it that quickly.

He put more weight on the bomb, and nodded. Julie took a well-earned breath and released the lever. The bomb slid back a little but stopped as it hit the rock and the force from Ben's hands.

"Okay, now what?" she asked.

Ben looked up at her. "You didn't think to bring any of those cops down with you?"

She shook her head unapologetically. "I didn't tell them I was leaving. A few of us met up, and I, uh, sort of borrowed one of the cars."

"You stole a police car?" Ben asked incredulously.

"You stole mine," she responded.

He almost smiled. "Whatever. I guess you get to help me with this. Here—" He moved his hands over to the side of the device, and she crouched down to help him, placing her hands on the right side. "My bum leg is going to slow me down," he warned.

"We can do this," she said, and started lifting.

Ben felt the bomb move a few inches up toward the shelf, and he struggled to keep up. He added his strength, and together the pair lifted the metal tube up the side of the short rock step, using the vertical section of rock as support.

With a final push, they lifted the barrel over the edge and onto the flatter section of cave above.

"Whew, how the hell did you get it this far," Julie said.

"I figured I'd go out on a limb," Ben said.

Together, they moved it along, hand over hand, inch by inch.

"That was funny," she said, breathless. "A real dad joke."

"I do my best work in caves" Ben shot back.

"Now I know why you don't talk much," she said, a smirk forming at the side of her mouth.

"You know I don't know what hurts more, the pain in my foot, or the pain in my a—"

"Uh-Uh. Don't go there. I can you leave you behind."

Ben laughed, forgetting momentarily not to put all his weight on his bad foot. "Jesus Christ!" he yelped.

“Probably a hairline fracture,” Julie surmised. “In my expert medical opinion.”

They reached the end of the cave and rolled the device over the grassy land between the cave and the truck. They stopped when they reached the road, letting the bomb come to a rest in front of the truck’s high tailgate. Ben sat down on the grass, letting his leg relax.

“Hey,” he said. He wasn’t looking at Julie, but instead up at the sky, which was growing darker as the sun prepared to set.

“What’s up?”

“Thanks for coming back for me.” He finally looked back down, turning his head to catch Julie’s eye.

“You knew I would,” she said, smiling, as she stood up. “Now let’s get this thing out to the lake.”



18 *minutes, 28 seconds.*

Ben sad he was shocked Julie even knew how to drive; she'd done so little of it. Julie told him to shut up and get his keys out. She drove the Dodge Charger police cruiser that she'd "borrowed" from the officer earlier, leaving Ben to drive her F450. He tested his leg, finding it in pain but not broken, and he walked in a few circles outside of the cave before continuing.

Together, they'd lifted the bomb up and over the tailgate of the truck and slid it against the cab, opting to stand it up on its base rather than leave it to roll around. Julie didn't have any tie-downs or rope in the truck, so Ben asked her to follow behind and make sure the bomb didn't fall over. If it did, and Ben couldn't hear or feel it himself, she'd agreed to flash her headlights a few times to let him know.

In the end, it didn't matter much. The road around the lake was paved and almost entirely free from potholes.

The plan was to find a spot to dump the bomb into the lake, trying to get it as far out onto the water as possible, and that meant they'd get to higher ground and find a hill or raised location from which they'd roll the bomb down and out over the lake.

As plans go, it was meager, but it was still a plan. Ben had been at a loss for what to do after he found the explosive device, and only after they'd secured the bomb in the back of the truck had he realized why.

He hadn't really expected to find it in the first place.

It was a miracle they'd stumbled across the bomb's resting place, and even more of a miracle that it hadn't yet detonated. Though he wasn't holding out hope that this next phase of their hacked together plan was going to work.

Still, he pressed on. *What good is a plan if it isn't tried?* he thought to himself. He wasn't sure if that was a real quote or just something that seemed to make sense, but he held on to it.

He now knew what it felt like to truly hope. Too long for something to happen; to wish with all he had to accomplish something.

He'd felt pangs of it when his father had been in the ER, and then later as they stabilized him, but he'd forgotten the feelings of hope, longing, and even true despair.

This, he knew, was desperate.

They were racing at a breakneck pace, carrying a who-knew-how-massive explosive device that was *guaranteed* to blow in a matter o minutes, trying to find a place to dump it in a lake.

In a lake.

The thought struck him as funny for some reason, and he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

*We're dumping a nuclear warhead into a lake.*

He didn't know if the bomb was *actually* nuclear or if it was something else entirely, but semantics didn't matter to him at this point.

*I've gone off the deep end, and I've taken Julie with me.*

But as soon as he thought of Julie, his mind seemed to relax just a bit. They were still on a mission that would change the course of their nation's history, but knowing that she was with him—even in a separate car—made him feel better for some reason.

He hoped they'd get through it.

Flashing lights in the rearview mirror snapped Ben back to the real world.

*Shit.*

She flashed the lights again, and Ben stretched up a little to try and peer out the mirror and window into the truck bed.

He slowed the truck, trying to get the fallen bomb to roll around. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, and he didn't feel anything bump against the sides of the bed.

*What's going on?*

He slowed further, rolling to a stop. Julie pulled the police car up beside him, and he pressed the button to roll down the passenger-side window.

"What's wrong? You okay?"

"I see a boat down there."

Ben hadn't been paying any attention to the water. "Where?"

"At the shoreline," she said. "Instead of rolling it in from higher ground, why don't we just dump it overboard?"

"I like the way you think," he said, chiding himself for ever trying to rid himself of her. "But this only works if we can get it running. We don't have time to start rowing."

She nodded, already trying to find a road that led down to the lake. "I'll bet there's a turnoff up ahead. Keep your eyes peeled."

Ben nodded and began to roll up the window.

"Hey," she said.

He stopped and looked over at her.

"What's the time?"

He'd almost forgotten he'd been tracking the bomb's countdown timer with his watch's built-in timer, and he suddenly felt a wave of anxiety wash over him.

*15 minutes, 14 seconds.*

"15 minutes," he called to the other vehicle. Saying it aloud made him even more nervous.

They'd decided that they would try to allow for a five-minute window before the countdown timer reached zero, as a "safe zone." It was an arbitrary number, but Ben didn't want to take any chances that Stephens—or whoever else was behind this—hadn't programmed the timer to detonate the bomb before it reached zero.

That meant they had about ten minutes to get the bomb out onto the water.

He pulled away from the police car, suddenly aware of the one-way trip they were both on.

They didn't have time to get to the boat *and* get to a hill or raised area over the lake.

If they chose the boat option, it was their only option. Either the boat had fuel in it or it didn't, and if it didn't...

He didn't waste energy computing the outcomes of that scenario. Ben focused on the road in front of him, watching for a left turn that would lead them to the lake.

*Another variable I've got to get right.*

They didn't have the time to search multiple roads.

Luckily, the road they wanted was the first one that appeared in front of them. Ben wasted no time turning the truck and bouncing over the dirt ruts, all the while accelerating as the truck sped up downhill. He barely even checked behind him for Julie's car—it wouldn't matter much now if she was there or not.

The road ended by the water's edge at the put-in.

Mud and rocks made up the bottom half of the ramp as the road disappeared into the gently lapping waves of the lake, and Ben made sure to stop the truck well enough in front of the ramp so as

not to have any trouble leaving the location when they were finished. Time was working against them, more than he'd ever imagined.

He hobbled to the small, green fishing boat moored at the shoreline. It has even smaller two-stroke engine and stick rudder attached at the rear.

At least that was good news. *Let's hope there's gas in it.*

He untied the boat, and immediately began pulling the cord to start the engine. Julie had parked her police cruiser haphazardly in a patch of mud on a steep incline off to the side, and she ran up next to him.

"Need help?"

"The keys are still in the truck!" Ben yelled over the sound of the sputtering motor. "Back it up here as close as you can."

She ran to the truck, and immediately kicked up gravel and mud when she threw it in reverse. Ben yanked the cord once more, hearing the engine cough to life. He just about had a heart attack when he looked up again. The truck was mere feet away and still moving quickly.

He jumped, ready to dodge the moving vehicle, when it stopped on a dime.

Julie stepped out and ran to him.

"Wow. You *can* drive that thing," Ben said.

"Who said I couldn't?"

"Here, help me get it off the truck." He released the latch of the tailgate and let it fall down, hopping onto it as soon as it lowered completely. He slid the heavy cylinder back to the gate and got back down, careful not to smash his injured foot into anything.

Together, he and Julie lifted the metal barrel, each holding the bottom with one hand and placing their other hand along its side, and set it on the boat's floor.

"I didn't realize that boat was so flimsy. I hope it doesn't fall through the bottom."

"Too late to worry about that now."

"How much time do we have?"

Ben glanced at his watch, then at the bomb's display screen. "I've got eight minutes, and that thing says thirteen."

She didn't respond. Ben understood what she was thinking. He was feeling the same way.

*Doesn't seem like enough time.*

"Ben! Look!"

Ben saw Julie pointing at a flashing set of police lights in the distance. The officer must have turned on the lights to ensure anyone around would see them coming.

"Get back in the truck. I'll be there in a sec," he said.

She seemed puzzled for a moment, but did as he said. Ben, meanwhile, aimed the boat at the center of the lake. He slid the bomb to the back of the small vessel. It would help get the boat on plane when it reached the proper speed, but he was more interested in steadying the rudder.

He made a snap decision and placed the cylindrical container on the left side of the rudder stick, preventing the boat from turning too far to the right. The way the lake was shaped, if he remembered correctly, was such that there was more open water to the left, where there was nothing but shoreline to the right.

Satisfied with his work, he took a final glimpse at the countdown timer.

*11 minutes, 4 seconds.*

He really hoped Stephens wasn't playing them for fools one last time.

He'd forgotten something.



The boat was, literally, dead in the water. He needed a way to hold the throttle down to get the motor to engage and push the fishing boat out onto the lake.

*Come on, Ben. Think!*

He pulled off his shirt and began spinning it into a long, spiraled rope. When he finished, he looped the shirt around the throttle section of the stick, careful to not cinch it tight just yet.

*10 minutes, 31 seconds.*

He ran one final check over their handiwork. The bomb was situated in the back-left side of the boat, standing on end and silently awaiting its detonation orders, and the engine was roaring, ready to engage. He had formed a loose granny knot with his shirt, now looped over the stick, and he abruptly pulled the knot tight. The tightening engaged the throttle, and Ben jumped backwards on the dock as the boat pulled away from its station. It accelerated, the small but powerful engine doing what it was made to do.

Ben watched the boat for only a moment before he turned back to the truck and police charger. Julie was already at the cruiser, and he yelled over to her.

“Get in the truck!”

He hobbled quickly back to the driver’s seat of the truck and slammed the door after he climbed in. Julie joined him on the passenger side, and he hammered the accelerator to the floor, hitting the top of the small ridge of the adjoining road and turning onto it without slowing.

The police cruiser’s lights receded into the distance, but Julie wasn’t watching them anymore. Instead, she was staring directly at Ben.

“I, uh, wanted to make sure we’d both be able to get out of here,” Ben said.

Julie looked at him oddly.

“You know—that police car... the way it was parked in the mud, and... I didn’t, uh, there’s a lot of mud, and stuff...” his voice trailed off as he realized how weak the excuse must have sounded.

*I wanted to be with you.*

“Whatever, Casanova,” Julie said, a hint of a smile forming on her lips.



*9 minutes, 11 seconds.*

Ben couldn't get a signal. Julie's phone was useless out here as well, but she had a radio that worked.

"This is Julie Richardson. Anyone copy?"

She asked again.

*"Officer Wardley. I copy. We've still got quite a few out and about looking for these caches, but there have been at least ten we've dropped into the lake already. Where are you?"*

Ben grabbed the radio from Julie and gave him the update. "Wardley, we're around the Butte Overlook, heading northeast. We need to get everyone out of the park."

*"Copy that, Ben. What about that bomb?"*

"Heading into the middle of the lake. It goes off in nine."

*"Nine minutes? Are you sure?"*

Ben didn't respond, instead switching the radio to another open-frequency channel he knew a few of the officers were on. He repeated the message, much to the same reaction. He handed the radio back to Julie, who immediately called for Randy.

"Randy. Randall Brown, you out there?" Julie asked.

*"Copy, Julie, I'm here. We're heading toward a rest stop a few miles from the lake. It's got a nice brick shelter and all, for what that's worth."*

She looked over at Ben. He simply gave her a quick update. "I know where that is. Probably get there in six or seven minutes."

"We'll be there in a few," she said through the walkie-talkie. Randy confirmed, and told her he'd continue to track down the others and corral them together at the rest stop. Julie thought about what he'd said. *That brick structure will be useless against a volcanic eruption.* She appreciated the man's optimism, however.

"If that bomb reaches the center of the lake, we should be fine," Ben said, somehow reading her thoughts. "It'll detonate at the surface, which will obliterate the shoreline, but it should otherwise go straight up." He stopped for a second before adding, "Assuming it's not, you know, a nuclear holocaust."

Julie spied Ben's watch showing his altered countdown at less than three minutes, and she hoped it was an unnecessary precaution to have subtracted the five minutes from what was on the bomb's display screen.

She also hoped that this was all some sick dream; that she'd wake up in bed with a headache and only fading memories of the nightmare that had unfolded. But she knew that was probably an even longer shot than getting out of this alive.

"How'd you know, anyway?" Ben asked from the driver's seat of the truck.

"Know what?"

"Which cave it was in. How did you just guess the right one?"

Julie paused a moment before answering. "That's what I worked out with Randy, right after you left the first cave. He got me a map of the seismic activity below the lake, and how the hotspot's moved every year."

"Moved?"

“Well, like less than a centimeter, but yeah, over the course of millions of years, the hotspot has moved slightly northeast. Or to be more specific, the plate we’re on has slid southwest, while the hotspot’s remained stationary.”

“And this hotspot,” Ben began, “is what’s caused all of the eruptions in the past, right?”

“Right. But it’s also the reason there’s a Yellowstone park at all. It’s the source, generally, of all of the park’s geologic activity. The Earth’s crust is very shallow directly above it, and the lake is over a portion of that section. All I did was find where the crust was thinnest, where there was a known cave through that area, and then mapped those variables on top of the hotspot.”

Ben nodded along, trying to follow her logic.

“I just figured that Stephens, or whoever he was working for, wanted to take the smallest risk of failure as possible, and that they’d want the location of their bomb to be directly above the most vulnerable section of crust.”

“Preferably underground, so no one would see it,” Ben added.

“Well, that, but also because the deeper it is, the more likely it’ll cause a fracturing quake that would rip up the crust and cause the volcano. It turned out to be the only reasonable option when I looked at all the data, so I sent you down there.”

“That all sounds pretty nerdy,” Ben said. He shot a quick smile toward her.

“Yeah, well, it saved your butt.”

Ben turned the truck onto a larger camp road, probably a main road toward the gate, and Julie saw him check his watch.

*1:30.*

*6:30, if the bomb’s countdown timer is accurate.*

She noticed the truck’s speed, how close they still must be to the lake, and wondered exactly how large this bomb blast would be.



2 minutes, 0 seconds.

“Everyone behind the wall!” Julie heard Officer Wardley shout.

There were seven others at the rest stop when they pulled up, including Wardley, Randy, and the officer he’d ridden with.

A few stragglers rushed way over to the rest stop’s building, a simple men’s and women’s restroom with an outdoor water fountain, covered by a slanted roof. A brick wall stood at the other end, forming a short breezeway that Wardley and a few other men and women were now huddling behind.

Ben followed Julie as she stepped up onto the concrete floor of the pavilion and restroom.

“Glad you made it, you two,” Wardley said as they approached.

*With two minutes left*, Julie thought. *Maybe less*. She wondered if it would have been wiser to just continue driving, see how far away they could get. But she knew it was irrational. Nothing they did at this point was going to change the outcome—either the bomb detonated with or without causing a cataclysmic eruption as well.

A few other officers were wide-eyed, as if they were staring at an apparition, and Julie knew they had questions—question about the bomb, where it was hidden, how Ben knew it would safely erupt over the water, and more. But Ben didn’t seem interested in entertaining questions. He waited for Julie to press in to the group and stood stoically right at the edge of the pavilion.

She moved back a few steps to join him, and her hand found his. He turned to meet her gaze.

“You think this will work?” he asked.

“Stephens—they—seemed to have it all pretty well figured out,” Julie said. “But I can’t imagine the bomb’s blast being enough to open a major fissure in the Earth’s crust. The water will absorb much of the downward blast. This place has been here for 600,000 years without a major catastrophe like that, so I have to believe it’s stronger than that.”

“Right,” was all Ben said.

“I have a question for you, now,” Julie said. She noticed a few officers, as well as Randy, slowly making their way over to the pair at the edge of the concrete step.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“How’d you know about the single occupant campsites? Why did it just suddenly hit you that Stephens or his cronies would be stashing the payloads at those sites?”

Before Ben could answer, Wardley spoke up. “Yeah, and why not just dump the powder in the woods, where no one would ever find them?”

Ben looked at each of the others in turn before he answered. “I took a guess.”

The reactions were incredulous. “That’s it?”

“You wanted more?”

Wardley shrugged. “Wouldn’t hurt.”

“Stephens was a loner. Livingston was a loner. Furmann was a loner. My mother, Diana Torres, preferred to be alone ever since my dad... left,” Ben said, his voice hitching in his throat. “Stephens used that fact to murder her.”

One of the officers stepped forward, looking confused. “That’s a pretty wild guess, Bennett. I don’t mean to sound accusatory, but I wouldn’t be able to stand trial with evidence like that.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response, as did everyone else, and Julie seemed surprised when he gave them one. “I thought about it long and hard, and the reason it was so compelling to me is that it lines up perfectly with my theory about this virus. About how to beat it.”

Everyone’s eyes, if they weren’t already, were now riveted on Ben. Julie stared at him, too. They all waited for him to reveal his theory, but he wasn’t given the opportunity.

A flash of light washed over Julie’s eyes, and she took a stumbling step backward. Through the white haze, she saw the treetops of the forest bend and crunch under some unseen force, followed closely by a massive shockwave of dust and debris.

She tried to blink the light away, but it was almost immediately replaced by the loudest noise she’d ever heard. The cracking sound was like standing on a lightning bolt as it ripped open the earth, but it lasted longer.

Eyes bled. Eardrums rang.

Yanked off her feet, she found herself careening backwards and smashed against the brick wall. The roof above her was gone in an instant, and she saw the blue sky above her head. Dust filled every bit of the empty air in front of her face, and she felt it mingle with the saliva at the back of her throat, causing her to hack and cough.

Still, the force beat down on them. The bricks at the very top of the wall were the first to go, then she watched in horror as a larger section flew away entirely, like birds fleeing from a predator.

And just as quickly as it had started, it was over. She felt a heavy arm covering her, and it relaxed a little as the owner also realized the blast was finished.

“You okay?” she heard Ben’s muffled voice whisper—or was he yelling?—into her ear. She nodded and stood up.

The others recovered from the shock quickly, and soon each of them were examining the wreckage and destruction. Julie struggled to her feet, looking in the direction from which the blast had come.

A large, blossoming, mushroom-shaped cloud, probably ten times the size of the one she’d seen only days earlier, had formed and was reaching up to the sky. It was a whitish-gray color, and she could see that toward the bottom of it, a layer seemed to be peeling off.

“It’s the water,” Ben said. He still had his arm around her and was now holding her close. “It probably offset a million gallons of water, but it doesn’t seem like —”

A massive tremble directly below their feet caused Ben’s words to be clipped short.

Julie panicked, running back onto the concrete slab, unsure of what to do.

“Julie—get away from the building!” she heard Ben yell. For some reason, she obeyed, though her mind felt like mush. She ran off the step just as the brick wall they’d been standing under collapsed.

And still the ground shook. She saw jittery images of a police officer screaming as the wall came down directly on top of him and another image of a stand of trees not a hundred feet from them simply disappearing into the earth.

The earthquake stretched on, growing more and more violent, but there was nowhere to go.

Ben held her, and together they waited out.

She thought every bone in her body was going to be shaken loose, and only then did she remember Ben’s leg injury. She glanced up to him and saw that he was clenching his jaw, trying to steady himself. He was leaning almost completely on his good foot, doing his best to ignore the pain.

And then it stopped.

Just like the bomb’s initial blast, the earthquake just *stopped*. It was as if the Earth was resetting itself, shaking itself off from a fight.

The entire brick structure was rubble, reduced to bits of brick and metal rebar. Trees had toppled; more felled there were still standing. A large crater had formed just on the other side of the road.

“Is it over?” she heard someone ask.

“No idea. I think if it was going to blow, it would have done so by now!” another voice yelled in response.

They waited for almost an hour, riding out the aftershocks.

And yet Yellowstone held.

Whatever was brewing beneath its surface had chosen not to incinerate life today.

As Julie and Ben headed to the truck, ready to return to civilization, a group of officers came over.

“Bennett,” Wardley said. “You mentioned something about figuring out the virus earlier. What was that about? Did you figure it out?”

“Once Julie’s hears back from her people at the CDC, I’ll let you know.”

Wardley’s expression softened. “Ben, you’ve gotten us through this far. You were right about the caches, and you were right about the bomb.”

Another officer standing nearby smiled. “Yeah. You know, you’re either working for the bad guys or you’re just smarter than you look. Tell us what you’re thinking, man.”

Julie saw Ben sigh. “Okay, maybe you can help me piece it together. Basically, Stephens—that guy we thought was on our side—had been leading us on this whole time. He wasn’t just doing his job, though. It was personal to him, for whatever reason. He had more investment in this thing than we know. I think he was trying to make a point.”

“What kind of point? That hates the United States? Point made, my friend.”

“That’s just it, back at the lab, I heard him say something like ‘America isn’t united *enough*...’

“...To save itself,” Julie finished. “I heard him say that, too.”

“I’ve been thinking about what it all *means*,” Ben continued. “We already know he wanted us to figure it out—he admitted that much himself. So I had to ask myself why he’d do it that way, when it would have been far easier to just blow the park and caldera silently, without taking us along for the ride.

“And that led me to thinking about the virus. Julie and I both had it—we were covered in the rash; they even put her in quarantine.”

“But it worked its way out of your system, right? After it killed itself off?” Officer Wardley asked.

“It did, but when Julie and I were *together*, like physically close to one another, it didn’t get worse. Only when we were separated was when it grew in each of us.”

Julie was now confused as well. “Are you saying this thing can be beaten just by getting people to stand closer together?”

Ben shrugged. “It’s worth looking into.”

For Julie, the answer was too simplistic to be possible. She looked around at the others, and many were nodding. But the science...

“So what do we do?” she asked. “Get everyone together in a room and hope that it spreads, like chickenpox?”

“Maybe. I’ll leave that up to your people,” Ben said. “But I’d bet it’s a start.”





Ben and Julie spent the remainder of the day quarantined inside a massive white CDC tent set up just outside Yellowstone National Park. Her email had reached the highest levels of government, and each of the departments involved with the investigation of the *Yellowstone Virus* weighed in, including the CDC.

In the end, Ben's ideas were deemed sound enough to be fully tested and researched, and new quarantine locations were launched and data was gathered. Across the United States, each zone was given an updated protocol that included instructions based upon Julie and Ben's findings, with the expectation that each area would send their research back to corporate headquarters in Atlanta.

The tent outside Yellowstone was no different, and Ben and Julie found themselves helping with anything and everything to get the station set up and prepared, only to become the first test subjects. They'd explained everything that had happened so far, including Stephens' involvement, how Ben and Julie discovered where the caches and the bomb were hidden, and what they thought might be the way to defeat the virus.

Each of them had been assigned a separate bed, but because of their discovery of the "close proximity" rule, each bed was arranged close to another bed, and all of the infected patients were placed into the same large room, allowing the disease to proliferate and spread among them. Within a matter of hours, the CDC confirmed Ben's prediction that the proximity effect had a massive impact on slowing the spread of the virus, and within another few hours, they'd all but confirmed the suspicion that extended exposure to the virus led to an eventual recovery and inoculation.

They were released shortly after verifying that they were virus-free, and the research continued, using patients gathered from cities and towns in the surrounding two hundred mile radius around the camp.

Within days, news of the virus's weakness spread to major media outlets over television, radio, and internet sources. The key was proximity, and "recovery stations" were set up inside or near every major metropolitan area, including parks, arenas, stadiums, and larger government buildings. Smaller, more rural areas had similar stations, utilizing VFW posts, public meetinghouses, and judicial centers.

Large or small, the goal was the same: get as many people under one roof as possible, each with enough supplies to last a week. FEMA, Red Cross, and a dozen other agencies and organizations were simultaneously instructed to provide infrastructure support and training for the massive relief effort. And thanks to the efforts of large telecommunications companies, many of the relief locations were provided Wi-Fi access and secure data points, allowing work to continue without major conflicts.

Wall Street found little interruption in their operations, using mobile and wireless access points to continue trading and prevent any slowdowns in the US economy, and was able to ensure that losses in the major indexes were kept to a minimum. The government itself, operating for so long on pre-internet technology, seemed to be completely capable of keeping itself afloat without outside help.

Overall, the disaster relief efforts, while long and far-reaching, were successful. The nation watched as day after day, more public services were restarted, businesses were reopened, and municipal governments were resumed. Due to the staggering effect of healing the virus in phases throughout the population, as well as the increased desire to see America united again, many people

were faced with nothing more than a week or two of vacation time while they were immunized against the disease.

Within a month, the *Yellowstone Virus* was deemed to be ‘a minor threat’ by the Centers for Disease Control, citing the work done by Ben and Julie as well as the data gathered by each of the quarantine stations. The virus/bacteria was expected to reveal itself in less than five percent of the population over the coming year, and while an actual cure was still out of reach, plans had been made to control the infection by forced exposure and proximity, eventually leading to full immunization against the disease.



“Valère, what happened?” Emilio asked through the screen.

Valère paced around the office, the speakers broadcasting the other man’s voice directly to his ears, as if Emilio were not behind a computer monitor but instead right there in the room with him.

“I have sent over a detailed analysis of the events that transpire—”

“Not now, SARA,” Emilio yelled. “I know you ‘sent over’ your little AI understanding of ‘these events,’ but I’m not asking that. Hell, it’s all over the news! I know *exactly* what happened. I’m asking Mr. Valère.”

Valère looked up, his eyes narrowed as he focused on the monitor. “Mr. Vasquez, I apologize for causing you undue stress. I assure you, our investments remain sound, as does our plan.”

“Our *plan*?” Emilio shouted. SARA automatically reduced the sound level before it was sent to Valère’s ears, so as not to cause any undue auditory discomfort. “Our plan has failed *miserably*. This was supposed to *cripple* the nation, not create a more patriotic and united one!”

Valère let the man continue, uninterrupted.

“Stephens failed, thanks to that escaped *specimen* Fischer, and those two CDC—”

“One CDC agent, Mr. Vasquez. The other was merely a park ranger at—”

“SARA, enough!” Emilio yelled.

Valère turned to the screen, noticing the rage building in his partner’s face. He held up a hand just as Emilio was about to start again. “Please, my friend, give yourself room to understand the true depth of what we have accomplished here.”

Emilio sneered but remained silent.

“Our plans have failed, perhaps, when seen through the narrow lens of the project’s parameters. But the Company remains strong, stronger than ever, perhaps, and that is in no small part due to the events that have transpired in America.”

Emilio nodded.

“In addition, the Company has confirmed that research continues in Brazil, and preparations are underway in Antarctica. We remain beneath the radar and will continue operations while the governments involved clean up the mess.”

“But at what cost, Valère? We failed. There is *nothing* we have accomplished by—”

“By what?” Valère asked. He steeled himself, pushing down the creeping anxiety snaking upward through his body. “There is nothing we have accomplished by failing? That is true. But what, exactly, do you think we were *supposed* to accomplish?”

Emilio frowned.

“Your parameters and objectives were the same as mine, and according to them, we have failed. Stephens was a loose cannon, and we have shown a lack of control over many of our contingencies. But what do you think the purpose was?”

“Of the failure?”

“Of even the *success*, were we to achieve it?”

“I—I don’t understand where you’re going with this, Francis.”

Valère paused. “Of course you don’t, Emilio. You were tapped for this project, and this one alone. But the Company has other interests, as I’m sure you’re aware. So what could they *possibly* expect to gain from a project such as this?”

Again, Emilio frowned.

“Nothing, my friend. Nothing directly. This project is *busy work*. It was something that seemed large enough to matter, though not crucial enough to place the entire weight and infrastructure of the Company behind it.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, Emilio. The Company needed us to create a distraction. One that would raise few eyebrows, regardless of success or failure. One that required little in the way of resources and management yet caused all eyes to focus inward.”

“So the project—”

“The project was just that, Emilio. A *project*. A test, really. And we failed, but only in the sense of the direct mission. In this overall game, I believe we have achieved success. *Massive* success.

“Every eye in the developed world has been watching America, watching to see how they react. America is in fits, recovering, trying to stabilize itself. Whether it shall will be an interesting drama to watch. In any event, the Company was working on a much larger project when we discovered the enigma strain. The Yellowstone Virus is a side effect, a wonderful addendum to our research. I wrote the project’s overview and had it approved as a way to divert more attention away from their larger goal.”

“And may I ask what that goal is, Mr. Valère?” Emilio asked.

Valère smiled, his eyes heavy, as he reached for the control to switch off the monitor.

“No, Emilio. You may not.”



The cold had been creeping in for the past few hours, and Ben's jacket seemed to be doing no more good. He sighed, watching his breath hang in the air and crystallize, the tiny specks sparkling as they collected and fell to the snowy ground.

He raised the long-handled axe and swung it once more. A satisfying crack reverberated around the tall pines, eventually getting lost in the white landscape. The block of wood split down the middle, sending the two halves in opposite directions, where two piles already lay. Ben examined his work, before heaving the axe up onto his shoulder, and walked slowly toward one of the piles. He filled a wheelbarrow and rolled the heavy load up a narrow dirt path.

As he exited the thick stand of trees, the sight in front of him almost stopped him in his tracks. The deep mocha-colored wood of the cabin's exterior stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding forest. A thin chimney piped out a few wisps of smoke from a fire he'd left unattended hours ago, but he could still smell the faint odor of burning logs.

He started up the path again, stopping only when he reached the front door. He set the wheelbarrow down on its mounts and stacked the wood in careful lines on both sides of the door. As he worked, he tried to calculate the fruits of the day's labor. *Half a cord, maybe more.*

Not enough, but not bad either, considering how slow he'd been lately thanks to his healing foot.

Finished with the wheelbarrow, he leaned it up against the wall of the cabin and reached for the door handle.

It opened before he got a grip on it.

"Took you long enough—it's getting a little chilly in here."

He smiled as he tried to think of a witty response.

"You know what? Think about it over dinner. You'll freeze if you stand there and try to get that brain of yours working again."

He stepped inside, immediately wrapped in the warmth of the dry air, and shut the door behind him.

Julie just watched. "Slowing down a little in your old age? Yesterday you got more than that, and you were done by four."

This time he wasn't caught off guard. "At least I'm doing something useful. What was that you tried to feed me last night?"

Julie's mouth hung open. "Oh, really? Good thing you're cooking tonight, then. We'll see how *you* do."

He removed his gloves and scarf and was now working on his boots as Julie came over and sat down on the bench next to him. He took off one shoe. Felt her arm slide underneath his when he went to remove the other.

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he sat back against the wall. Ben felt her squeeze his hand, somehow causing the room to grow even warmer.

He smiled and closed his eyes.

Unfortunately, all he saw behind his closed lids was terror — the memory of what had happened in the United States, and the man behind it.

*No, he told himself. The company behind it.*

*Drache Global.*



Whatever it was — whatever they were doing — they were the *true* cause of the bomb and the virus that had killed so many. They were the reason Ben’s life was now *very* different.

And they were still out there, somewhere.

“You okay?” Julie asked.

He looked down at her, examining her eyes for a moment.

He nodded, slowly. “I’m okay,” he lied.

But he wasn’t. Not by a long shot.

He made a promise to himself, right then. A promise to find them — to find *Drache Global* and the people behind it.

He would find them, then bring them to justice.

Or he would die trying.

### *To be continued*

The rainforest has been hiding a deadly secret.

The saga continues in the next Harvey Bennett novel, *The Amazon Code*.

• • • •

[Click here to start the adventure!](#)

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

**NICK THACKER** is a thriller author from Texas who lives in Colorado and Hawaii, because Colorado has mountains, microbreweries, and fantastic weather, and Hawaii also has mountains, microbreweries, and fantastic weather. In his free time, he enjoys reading in a hammock on the beach, skiing, drinking whiskey, and hanging out with his beautiful wife, tortoise, two dogs, and two daughters.

In addition to his fiction work, Nick is the founder and lead of Sonata & Scribe, the only music studio focused on producing “soundtracks” for books and series. Find out more at [SonataAndScribe.com](http://SonataAndScribe.com).

For more information and a list of Nick’s other work, visit Nick online: [www.nickthacker.com](http://www.nickthacker.com)





SICK  
BY BRETT BATTLES

**Author's Rating:**

**Language: \* Sexuality: \* Violence: \*\***

**F**or your convenience, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

SICK Copyright © 2011 by Brett Battles  
Foreword copyright © 2011 by Blake Crouch  
All rights reserved.

SICK is works of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



# An Introduction by Blake Crouch

---



THE FIRST JOLT OF INTEREST was the cover...

Ominous gas mask, and the silhouette of a man running across a desert.

Then the title...SICK...one word, powerful, provocative, intriguing...

But it was those first pages that hooked me.

A man roused from sleep in the middle of the night by the cry of one of his children. What parent hasn't experienced that? And, while stumbling toward their child's room in that confused blariness between consciousness and dreams, who hasn't had that secret fear in the back of their mind, that maybe something is wrong? That maybe their son or daughter isn't merely coming down with a cold, or in the wake of a nightmare. But something much, much worse...

SICK didn't just hook me. It hit me with a devastating uppercut on every primal level as a parent, a father, and a human being.

Brett Battles has fashioned a blistering page turner that is destined to become a classic. This is a novel of paranoia, of fear, of a family blown apart by circumstances none of us could imagine, and ultimately, hope.

This is exactly the kind of novel I love to read, and it reminded me in the very best way of David Morrell's iconic TESTAMENT.

Trust me, you will love it, too.

SICK is absolutely unmissable.

Blake Crouch, April 2011





A cry woke him from his sleep.

A young cry.

A girl's cry.

Daniel Ash pushed himself up on his elbow. "Josie?"

It was more a question for himself than anything. His daughter's room was down the hall, making it hard for her to hear his sleep-filled voice in the best of circumstances. And if she was crying, not a chance.

He glanced at the other side of the bed, thinking his wife might already be up checking on their daughter. But Ellen was still asleep, her back to him. He'd all but forgotten about the headache she'd had, and the two sleeping pills she'd taken before turning in. Chances were, she wouldn't even open her eyes until after the kids left for school.

Ash rubbed a hand across his face then slipped out of bed.

The old hardwood floor was cool on his feet but not unbearable. He grabbed his T-shirt off the chair in the corner and pulled it on as he walked into the hallway.

A cry again. Definitely coming from his daughter's room.

"Josie, it's okay. I'm coming." This time he raised his voice to make sure she would hear him.

As he passed his son's room, he pulled the door closed so Brandon wouldn't wake, too.

Josie's room was at the other end of the hall, closest to the living room. She was the oldest, so she got to pick which room she wanted when they'd moved in. It wasn't any bigger than her brother's but Ash knew she liked the fact that she was as far away from Mom and Dad as possible. Made her feel independent.

Her door was covered with pictures of boy bands and cartoons. She was in that transitional stage between kid and teenager that was both cute and annoying. As he pushed the door open, he expected to find her sitting on her bed, upset about some nightmare she'd had. It wouldn't have been the first time.

"Josie, what's—"

His words caught in his mouth.

She wasn't lying in the bed. She was on the floor, the bedspread hanging down just enough to touch her back. Ash rushed over, thinking that she'd fallen and hurt herself. But the moment his hand touched her he knew he was wrong.

She was so hot. Burning up.

He had no idea a person could get that hot.

The most scared he'd ever been before had been when he'd taken Brandon to a boat show in Texas and the boy had wandered off. It took Ash less than a minute to find him again, but he thought nothing would ever top the panic and fear he'd felt then.

Seeing his daughter like that, feeling her skin burning, he realized he'd been wrong.

He scooped Josie off the floor and ran into the hallway.

"Ellen!" he yelled. "Ellen, I need you!"

He knew his voice was probably going to wake Brandon but, at this point, he didn't care. Josie was sick. Very sick. He needed Ellen to call an ambulance while he tried to bring their daughter's temperature down.

"Ellen!" he yelled again as he ducked into the bathroom.

Using an elbow, he flipped on the light then laid Josie in the tub. He wasted several seconds searching for the rubber plug, then jammed it into the drain and turned on the water, full cold. To help speed up the process, he pulled the shower knob and aimed the showerhead so that it would stream down on her and cool her faster.

Where the hell was Ellen?

He put the back of his hand on Josie's forehead. She was still on fire.

"Ellen!"

He was torn. He wanted to stay with Josie, but the pills Ellen had taken must have really knocked her out, so that meant it was up to him to get help.

"Hang on, baby," he said. "I'll be right back."

He raced into the hall and back to the master bedroom. The nearest phone was on Ellen's nightstand, next to their bed.

"Ellen. Wake up."

He shook her once, then picked up the phone and dialed 911. As he waited for it to ring, he glanced back at the bed.

Ellen hadn't moved.

"Nine one one. What is your emergency?" a female voice said.

He reached down and rolled Ellen onto her back, thinking that might jar her awake. But her eyes were already open, staring blankly at nothing.

He flipped on the light. The skin around her mouth and eyes was turning black, and there were dark drying streaks running across her face from her eye sockets where blood had flowed.

"Nine one one. What is your emergency?"

"Oh, God. Help," he managed to say.

"Are you hurt, sir?"

He touched Ellen's face. It was as cold as Josie's had been hot, and instantly he knew no breath would ever pass her lips again.

"Send help! Send help, please!"

He dropped the phone, not bothering to hang it up. It didn't even dawn on him that he hadn't given the operator an address. He was barely holding on to his sanity.

Back in the hallway, he tried to shove the image of Ellen's cold and lifeless body into the back of his mind. He looked into the bathroom. Josie was still propped up in the tub, the water now several inches deep. He knew he should go see if she was cooling off, but he had to check Brandon first.

He threw open his son's door and flipped on the light. Brandon had one of those beds that were raised in the air like a bunk, but instead of a second mattress underneath there was a desk.

Ash rushed over to the bed. His son was a long lump covered by a Spider-Man comforter. As was the boy's habit, even his head was buried beneath the blanket.

Ash could feel the muscles around his heart tightening. With the yelling and the running and now the light on in the room, he was sure his son should have woken, but Brandon hadn't moved at all.

He grabbed the comforter and pulled it back.

His son was lying on his side, his back to him.

*Just like Ellen. Oh, God. Please, no.*

Holding his breath, he put a hand on Brandon's shoulder and pulled him onto his back.

His son's eyes fluttered. "Dad?"

For the first time since Josie's cries had awakened him, Ash was unable to move.

"Dad, are you okay?"

Maybe this was the dream part. Maybe this was the final blow. Maybe in a few seconds he'd realize that Brandon's voice was only in his head, and his son was as cold and dead as his wife.

He touched Brandon's forehead.

Warm.

Normal warm.

"Brandon?"

"You're scaring me, Dad," his son said, inching back a little. "What's going on?"

Ash quickly pulled Brandon off the bed and held him tight against his chest as he ran out of the room.

"What's going on?" Brandon asked again.

"No questions right now, okay, buddy?" Ash told him, trying to keep his voice calm. "You're going to be fine."

It was a lie, of course. How would either of them ever be fine again?

He carried his son into the bathroom and sat him on the closed toilet lid.

"What's Josie doing in the tub?" Brandon asked.

"Not now."

The water was nearing the halfway point and was covering Josie's waist and legs. Ash touched the side of her face, hoping her temperature had come down a few degrees.

Not only had it come down, it had plummeted.

*No! No, no, no!*

He yanked her out of the tub without turning off the water, and began stripping off her drenched nightgown.

"Brandon, get some towels!" he yelled.

"Dad, what's going on? What's wrong with her?"

"Just get the towels!"

By the time Ash had her clothes off, Brandon had retrieved three towels from the cupboard under the sink. Ash used the first to quickly wipe off what water he could, then wrapped the other two around her. Though she was dangerously cold, unlike her mother she was still breathing.

"Get behind her," he told his son as he laid her on the floor. "Hug your body to hers. We need to help her get warm."

Brandon surprised him by not arguing. He stretched out behind his sister and hugged her tight. Ash did the same in front, creating a cocoon of warmth with Josie in the middle. It was the only thing he could think of doing.

"She's so cold," Brandon said.

"I know."

"What's wrong with her?"

"I'm not sure."

"Where's Mom? Does she know?"

"I let her sleep." Brandon would find out the truth soon enough, but at the moment Ash needed him to focus on helping his sister.

Though Josie's breathing was shallow, he could still feel her chest move up and down.

"It's okay, baby," he whispered over and over. "It's okay."

"She's not getting any warmer," Brandon said after a few minutes.

"Just keep hugging her."

They were still holding her like that when the front door of their house smashed open. Ash could hear people running into their living room.

“Who is it?” Brandon asked, fear in his voice.

“I called the paramedics before I woke you,” his father said. “Let’s just hold on to your sister until they tell us to move. Okay?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Ash expected the EMT crew to come into the bathroom at any moment. But when no one appeared, he yelled out, “We’re back here! In the bathroom! We need help!”

Footsteps pounded in the hallway, but still no one came.

“We need help! We have a sick girl here!”

Finally, he could hear them approaching the bathroom door. He tilted his head back so he could see into the hallway.

First one person appeared, then two.

But the relief he should have felt was overshadowed by confusion. The people moving into the bathroom weren’t dressed in EMT uniforms. They were wearing biohazard suits.

What happened after that was a blur of images.

His daughter rolling out of the house on a gurney under a plastic tent.

Ellen leaving, too, only the plastic that covered her was a black bag.

And people, dozens of them, all dressed in the same biohazard outfits.

He didn’t know how long he and Brandon had sat on the couch while all this was going on, but it seemed like hours.

Three things he did clearly remember from after that point.

He recalled being led with Brandon out to a truck that had some sort of isolation container on the back. As they crossed the front yard, he heard another cry, this one not of pain or fear, but anguish. Loud and uninhibited. Looking up, he realized theirs wasn’t the only house with an isolation truck out front. There was one parked in front of every home on their block.

The second thing he remembered came several hours later, after he and Brandon had been separated and he’d been put in some kind of cell.

“Captain Ash.” The voice came out of a speaker in the ceiling.

“Where are my children?” Ash asked. “They need me!”

“I’m sorry to inform you, Captain,” the voice said, still calm, “but your daughter died three minutes ago.”

“Josie?” he whispered. “Take me to her! Please, let me see her.”

There was no response.

“I have to see my daughter!”

When the voice next spoke several hours later, it was to inform him that Brandon had also died.

That was the third thing he remembered.



DR. NATHANIEL KARP stood with his arms crossed, watching the center monitor. There were three other people in the room with him: two technicians and a guard, all of whom had the highest-level clearances within the project.

The feed in the monitor came from cell number 57. Inside the cell, Captain Daniel Ash continued to pace back and forth, his temper seeming to swing from angry to desperate to devastated and back again with each crossing.

Overlaid across the bottom third of the monitor were Captain Ash's vital signs. Dr. Karp noted that the captain's heart rate was elevated, and that his temperature had risen half a degree, but that was understandable given the circumstances. What interested the doctor more was that the captain seemed to be showing no signs of the illness.

The doctor glanced at the other video screens. Seventeen additional cells were currently occupied by neighbors of the Ash family. When they'd first been brought in, they were all like the captain—agitated, but healthy. Now, though, every single one of them was displaying symptoms of infection.

Dr. Karp looked back at Ash's monitor.

*So what makes your family different, Captain?*

Ash had been as exposed as anyone else when the spray was released on the three streets that made up the Barker Flats Research Center housing area. But it had not affected him at all. Just like it had not affected his son.

*Brandon, was it?*

The immunity had obviously been passed down through Ash's ancestors, and not his wife's. Preliminary results indicated she was one of the first to succumb. Unfortunately, whatever gene was in play within the Ash family, there was an apparent gender component to it. The fact that Captain Ash and his son had remained immune, while the captain's daughter had not, was definitely something that needed to be investigated.

In many ways, the girl, Josie Ash, was the most interesting. By all accounts, she had gone through the same stages of the infection as the other victims, but not long after she'd been brought in, she had started to show improvement. And now, seven hours later, her temperature was almost normal.

Still, it bothered Dr. Karp. If the immunity affected the sexes differently, any vaccine they might be able to develop from the Ash family could potentially have the same drawbacks. He was sure the female population of the project would be far from excited if they had to go through the same hell the Ash girl had. There was also the very real possibility that, though the girl was now getting better, she might have suffered some internal damage to her organs while the disease had a hold of her. That would be unacceptable.

No, the gender component would have to be identified and eliminated. If that turned out to be impossible, then KV-27a would not be the answer and further testing would have to take place.

"Dr. Karp," one of the technicians said.

The doctor acknowledged the man with a look.

"We've lost the patients in cells 18 and 31. Five other cells are trending toward termination in the next thirty minutes, and the remaining ten sometime over the following two hours."

Dr. Karp nodded once, then looked back at Captain Ash. He was sitting on his bunk now, his head in his hands. His heart rate had come down a bit, and despite the fact they had been pumping the virus directly into his cell since he arrived, there was still no sign he was getting sick.

“Call me if anything changes,” the doctor said.

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Karp walked out the door and down the hallway toward the rooms where the children were being held.

As soon as the girl was stable enough, they would move the two Ash kids to a facility outside San Francisco, where observations could continue and the doctor’s team could do more extensive testing to determine the source of the immunity. A day, maybe two at most.

Their father, on the other hand, would not be making the trip. A team would continue to keep him under observation there at Barker Flats, waiting to see if the virus broke through and compromised his system. Dr. Karp was convinced it wouldn’t, but they had to do their due diligence. If in a week, maybe ten days tops, Ash was still healthy, he would be terminated and his body thoroughly examined.

Dr. Karp reached the boy’s room first. The guard at the door opened it without being asked, then stood aside.

Brandon Ash was sitting at a small table, an untouched bowl of cereal in front of him.

“You should eat,” the doctor said.

“I’m not hungry,” Brandon mumbled.

The doctor approached the table. “I have good news.”

Instantly, the boy brightened. “My father?”

“Your sister, Josie.”

“Oh,” the boy said, unable to keep his disappointment completely out of his voice.

“She’s getting better. You’ll be able to see her soon.”

“Good. I’m...I’m glad. But...” He hesitated. “What about my dad?”

Though the doctor was often short and gruff with those who worked for him, he knew how to turn on the bedside manner when needed. He knelt down next to Brandon and put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I’m not going to lie to you, Brandon, he’s not doing well at the moment. But we’re hopeful that he’ll be better soon, just like Josie.”

“Can I see him?”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea right now. There are a lot of doctors and nurses working on him, and I’m sure you don’t want to get in their way.”

Brandon looked down at the table and shook his head. “No. I don’t want to do that.”

“As soon as you *can* see him, I’ll let you know. Okay?”

Brandon tried to smile. “Thank you.”

Dr. Karp patted him on the shoulder again then stood up. “Now, eat your breakfast. We don’t want you getting sick, too.”





THAT NIGHT WOULD be burned forever in Ash's mind. He knew there would be no escaping it. His wife, his daughter, his son—all dead. But as utterly painful as that realization was, it was actually the good memories that made him want to curl into a ball in the corner.

Wrestling with Brandon in the backyard.

Reading to Josie as she leaned against him, hanging on his every word.

Kissing Ellen. Holding Ellen. Loving Ellen.

There was a trip they had all taken once that started out badly, but it turned out to be the best vacation they'd ever had. He'd been stationed at Fort Irwin then, outside Barstow, California—ironically only about a hundred miles south of Barker Flats. They'd meant to go to the Grand Canyon but only made it as far as Needles, California, when the van they'd borrowed from a neighbor broke down. Repairs would take several days, which pretty much ruled out sticking to their plan.

The owner of the auto shop was a former Marine. When he found out Ash was in the service, he made a few calls and was soon driving the Ash family the forty or so miles to a vacation house on Lake Havasu his brother-in-law owned.

They spent the days swimming in the lake, the evenings barbecuing, and the nights playing games. Ash became the king of Chinese checkers that trip, while Josie was crowned Miss Monopoly.

One day they even rented a Jet Ski, and Ash took turns taking the kids out on the water. Ellen was a nervous wreck every time she watched them head away from shore, but by the end, even she was smiling and laughing. Ash never did get her on that Jet Ski, though. She'd claimed someone had to stay on shore in case something went wrong, but he knew that wasn't the real reason. She had a fear of water, something she'd had since she was a kid.

He missed that about her.

He missed everything.

Over a week he had been in his cell, a week of talking with no one but the voice from the speaker, and not actually seeing anyone at all. When he woke each morning, he found a day's worth of food sitting against the wall. He tried pretending to sleep a few times so he could catch whoever was bringing it in, but he could never keep his eyes open long enough. He suspected they were giving him some sort of sleeping drug, either through his food or, more likely, through the air.

The cell that was his world consisted of a cot, a toilet, a sink, and four thick cement walls. The only door was opposite the toilet, but there was no handle on the inside, just a smooth metal surface.

He figured he'd been put in the cell on the chance he'd been infected. It was probably the nearest isolation room available. After all, he'd held his daughter in his arms. Brandon had, too. He'd been healthy when Ash last saw him, but he'd apparently contracted whatever it was before they were taken from the house. So, logically, Ash should be next.

Only, despite the fact that everyone he loved was dead, here he was still breathing.

He felt despair and guilt and loss, but none was as strong as the hatred he felt toward whoever had done this to his family, his friends, his country. There was no way he would ever believe this was not a planned attack. Someone had targeted American soldiers and their families. *Families, for God's sake!* Whoever it was needed to pay.

Perhaps they already had. But if that were the case, no one had told him. In fact, no one had told him much of anything.

Each day, the man on the speaker would ask him questions like: “How are you feeling?” “Do you have any pain?” “Headaches?” Or the voice would give him instructions such as: “Stand with your arms out, then raise them above your head,” or “Walk heel to toe across the room in a straight line.” He felt like a drunk.

But when Ash asked questions back, they were ignored, and the anger he felt toward the terrorist who’d perpetrated this disaster started to leak a little toward the voice in the ceiling. He just wanted to get out and bury his family. He wanted to sit by their graves and grieve. It was his right.

“Good morning, Captain,” the voice on the speaker said.

Ash opened his eyes. It was the beginning of his eighth day in the cell.

“Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?” the voice asked.

Ash looked up at the speaker. To him it had become the face of the voice. He could almost see eyes now, and a nose. And, of course, the big round mouth.

The speaker had become his own version of Wilson the volleyball from that Tom Hanks movie, *Cast Away*. Only Wilson had been Hanks’s friend. Ash wasn’t so sure the speaker was his.

He gritted his teeth. “How much longer?”

“Please answer the question.”

“Answer mine first. How much longer until I can get out and deal with my family?”

For more than a minute the cell was silent.

“Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?” the voice asked again.

“Go to hell.”

“Captain, you are not at liberty to choose whether you will answer the questions or not. It’s your duty.”

Ash rolled onto his side, as if turning away from the speaker would make it disappear.

As he lay there, he could smell eggs and bacon, and knew a tray with his breakfast was waiting for him by the door. It was the only hot meal he got each day. Lunch and dinner would be in boxes next to it. Sandwiches, most days.

“Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?”

The captain let out a snorting you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me laugh. “Unusual? Yeah, I’m feeling something unusual.”

“Please explain.” There was a note of concern in the voice.

Ash just shook his head. If the voice couldn’t figure out there was something unusual about his situation, he wasn’t going to enlighten him.

“What are you feeling?” the voice asked.

No response.

“Captain, please answer the question.”

Ash sat up, suddenly having the urge to eat. He retrieved the tray then returned to his bunk. In addition to the bacon and eggs, there was also a container of orange juice and a cup of coffee. He opened the OJ and downed the contents.

“Captain, if there’s a change in your condition, you need to tell us.”

Ash lifted the plastic top that covered his plate and picked up his fork. He was just about to scoop up some egg when he noticed a small, folded piece of paper tucked under the bacon. He hesitated for a moment, then placed the lid back down as if he’d decided he wasn’t ready to eat yet, and turned his attention to the coffee.

“Captain, are you going to cooperate?”

Ash took a sip of the coffee and made no indication he had even heard the question.

“Captain?”

It was another five minutes before the voice finally fell silent. Still, Ash waited, knowing that after a while their interest in him would wane, and those watching him through the surveillance cameras would no longer be paying as close attention as they had been.

Finally, he lifted the lid off the plate again. This time he grabbed both the piece of paper and a strip of cold bacon. He tucked the paper against his palm, then raised the bacon to his mouth and took a bite. While he chewed, he casually slipped the paper under the blanket.

He ate everything on the plate, even though the eggs had gone rubbery and the bacon had lost much of its flavor. When he was done, he set the tray by the door as he always did, and commenced his daily exercise program.

This consisted of push-ups, sit-ups and running in place, the perfect exercises for the confined man. Outwardly, he maintained an aura of blank detachment, but on the inside he could think of little else but the scrap of paper waiting for him in his bed.

After sixty minutes, he'd worked up quite a sweat. He removed his clothes, then used the cup the coffee had come in to give himself a sink bath. Still sticking to his routine, he toweled off with his shirt and pulled the flimsy cloth pants they'd given him back on.

For the next twenty minutes, he paced the room. This was his cool down, also part of his new daily habit.

As he walked back and forth he began to wonder if he was making a big deal out of nothing. Maybe the paper was just trash, something accidentally dropped there when his food had been prepared. If so, he was getting himself worked up over nothing.

Once his palm touched the concrete wall at the end of his last lap, he returned to his cot and lay down. After a few minutes he closed his eyes, then twisted around so his back was to the vent where he assumed the camera was. As he turned, he slipped his hand under the blanket and grabbed the paper.

Though he kept telling himself that it was nothing, he could feel his heart race as he silently unfolded it. Keeping it close to his chest, he held it out at an angle, lowered his head and opened his eyes.

In the center of the paper, written in pencil, was a single word:

TONIGHT



THE MAN RUNNING the show in Dr. Karp's absence was Major Frank Littlefield.

The major had left his previous posting three years earlier for a special assignment. After a year in which a whole new world had been opened up to him, the assignment became permanent. It was on that day that the Army—and the U.S. Government, for that matter—ceased to be his true employer. He was a member of the project now, and as such, that's where his loyalties lay.

Major Littlefield was sitting in his office sipping a cup of coffee. Via the monitor on his wall, he had access to all the same feeds as the observation room two doors down, but was limited to watching only one at a time. That wasn't such a big deal anymore since there was just one cell still occupied.

Cell number 57. Captain Daniel Ash.

The captain was taking what had become his usual post-workout morning nap. But this morning there was definitely a change in him, a defiance that had only been a spark in the previous couple of days.

As the major stared at the screen, his phone rang. He pressed the speakerphone button and said, "Major Littlefield."

"I just read your report." It was Dr. Karp. The major had been expecting the call, waiting for it, actually. "Has there been any change in attitude?"

"No, sir."

"What about physically? Still no reaction?"

"None whatsoever, sir."

The doctor was silent for a moment. "I had hoped to give it a few more days, but I think it's safe to assume the results won't change. Where are we with the current dosing cycle?"

"It's scheduled to complete at two a.m."

"All right, we might as well let it run. Once it's complete, pull the plug, Major."

"Yes, sir."

"I want the autopsy performed immediately. Once you have obtained all the required samples, and the body has been eliminated, you and your team are to report to Bluebird."

"Understood."

"Good," the doctor said, then hung up.

As Major Littlefield replaced the receiver in the cradle, his gaze returned to the napping form of Captain Ash.

"Enjoy it," the major said to the TV. "It'll be your last one."



TONIGHT.

It could mean so many different things.

Was it a warning? Was tonight the night they changed the sleeping gas to something stronger? Or was the sender going to try to contact him? *Or* was it just a joke and didn't really mean anything at all?

Ash wasn't sure if he should be looking forward to finding out or dreading it. But there was one thing he couldn't do—stop it from coming.

He kept to his schedule. Eating lunch when he usually ate, exercising again in the afternoon, then pacing until his stomach began to growl, signaling it was time for dinner. Twice the voice had asked how he was feeling, and twice he had ignored it.

When the lights flicked off then back on, he knew the wait was almost over. In ten minutes they would go off and stay that way until morning. Again, he did what he always did, brushing his teeth using only his finger and water from the sink, then relieving himself in the toilet. The only change was the ripped-up note he slipped into the bowl just before he flushed.

As he lay on the cot, he felt tense, suddenly sure the message had been a warning. He tried to stay awake, fearful that if he closed his eyes, he might never open them again. It wasn't that he was scared of death, or that the thought of being with his family again didn't appeal to him. But it was *because* of his family that he needed to live. He had to find who had done this to them. He had to make sure whoever it was had been properly dealt with, and if they hadn't, he had to do it himself. After that, he didn't care.

But then the gas must have come, because his eyelids grew heavy, and then the next thing he knew someone was shaking his shoulder.

“Wake up, Captain.”

The male voice seemed distant, as if it were coming from another room.

“Give him a second,” a second voice said, also male and muffled. “The shot takes a moment to kick in.”

*Shot?*

Ash peeled open his eyes, but could see nothing in the darkness. His hand slipped as he tried to push himself up and he fell back onto the bed.

“Easy there, Captain,” the first voice said.

Ash turned toward it. “What's going on?”

“Later. Right now we have to get you out of here.”

“Out of here? I'm...what?” He knew he wasn't making sense, but they weren't making sense to him, either.

“We can talk later. Right now you need to do exactly what we say and keep quiet.”

“I don't under...?”

What was this guy talking about? All Ash wanted to do was put his head back on his pillow and shut his eyes. But gloved hands were under his arms now, lifting him to his feet. As he staggered, someone grabbed him and kept him from falling.

“We'd love to give you a few seconds to wake up, but we don't have time,” the second voice said.

Ash looked to his right and could barely make out a dark shadow of an oddly shaped person. Suddenly, he felt an arm wrap around his back.

“Just hold on,” the man said, his voice still sounding farther away than it should have been.

They exited the cell into a dark hallway. That seemed odd to Ash. Surely, there should have been some lights on.

“Clear,” the first voice called out from the distance.

“We’re going to move fast, Captain,” the man at his side said. “So keep a hold of me.”

As Ash grabbed the man’s back, the material of the guy’s shirt confused him. It was thick and kind of rubbery. But Ash barely had time to register this before the man began half-pulling, half-dragging him down the corridor. It was all Ash could do to keep from slipping to the floor.

After what he guessed was probably thirty seconds, they mercifully stopped. He heard a knob twist, then a door open, but he still couldn’t see anything.

“Straight ahead a couple feet, then we go to the left,” his human crutch said.

As they eased forward, Ash asked, “Why are all the lights off?”

“Quiet.”

Once they’d made the turn, they picked up speed again, moving quickly down the new corridor and through another door.

“Can you stand on your own?” the man whispered to Ash.

“What? Uh, yeah. I think so.”

“Okay. Stay here.” The man let go of Ash and stepped away.

“Wait. Where are you going?” the captain asked.

“Don’t move, and you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you—”

A torrent of thick liquid engulfed him from every side, the flow so strong he could hardly breathe. There was also an overwhelming disinfectant smell, which didn’t help. He coughed several times and tried to step away.

“Don’t,” the first voice ordered. “You’re covered with the bug. It’s either this way or we will be forced to terminate you.”

*Terminate?* Ash stayed where he was.

Soon the spray stopped.

“Remove your clothes and throw them behind you.”

Ash hesitated for only a second, then stripped.

Once more the flow commenced, followed by a strong stream of odorless water.

As soon as it shut off, the first voice said, “There’s a wall three feet to your left. Follow that toward my voice about ten feet. There you’ll find a towel and some clean clothes. Please hurry.”

Ash did as instructed. As he was toweling off, he heard the sprays come on again. Judging by the sound, though, it wasn’t flowing over flesh.

Decontamination suits, he realized. Like the ones the people who’d come into his house—so long ago, it seemed—wore. That’s why the guy’s shirt had felt so strange.

The clothes waiting for him were not the flimsy garments he’d been given while in his cell. There was a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a pullover sweater, socks, and a pair of sturdy but flexible ankle-high boots.

“Ready?” the first voice asked a minute later, no longer muffled by what must have been the hood and mask of the suit.



“Yes,” Ash said. He finished tying his last shoelace and stood up. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?”

“Not until we get out of here,” the other voice said.

A door opened, but the lack of light remained unchanged.

The two men led Ash away from the room, one always keeping a hand on the captain’s arm.

They’d been fast-walking for nearly three minutes when the guy in the lead let out a very low “shhhh.”

They stopped in the middle of the hall.

“Over here,” the lead guy whispered.

Ash was ushered through a doorway, into a space that was barely big enough for the three of them. The door then clicked shut.

A moment later, the sound of a single pair of running footsteps rushed by outside without stopping.

“They’re going to find out he’s gone,” one of the men whispered.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll take care of it,” the other one replied. “You get him out of here. You remember the way, right?”

“Are you kidding? This place is a maze.”

There was silence for a moment, then, “Okay. I’ll show you, but then it’ll be up to you.”

They headed back into the hallway, picking up their pace to a near run. They passed through two more corridors and made a hard turn to the left.

After another few moments, the one in the lead said, “It’s just up—”

Without warning, the emergency lights kicked on.

The guy who’d been holding Ash’s arm let go, then ripped something off his head. Night vision goggles. Both of the men had been wearing them. With the lights on, they had become useless.

“Come on,” the lead guy said. “We’re almost there.”

He had a short military haircut and was wearing an officer’s uniform with no insignia. The man next to Ash was dressed in clothes more like the blue jeans and sweater he was now wearing, and while this guy’s hair was also short, it had a distinct civilian look to it.

They ran down the hallway, took a quick bend to the right, then the lead man skidded to a stop in front of a heavy-looking metal door. As Ash and the other man ran up, he pulled it open.

Chilled air seeped into the hallway.

“Quick, quick!” he said, then pointed at an angle out the door. “Head in that direction. It’ll get you to where we were earlier.”

“Maybe you should come with us,” his partner said.

The first guy shook his head. “I can do more here.”

“They’re going to know someone on the inside helped.”

The lead man’s face grew hard. “Go. Now. You don’t have time.”

He shoved Ash and the other man outside then shut the door.

Ash’s escort seemed disoriented for a moment, then he took a deep breath and said, “Keep low, and follow right behind me.”

He took off across a wide space of leveled dirt, not waiting for Ash to respond. Though he was tired of not knowing what was going on, Ash was smart enough to realize now wasn’t the time to push, so he headed after his rescuer.

The man led him into a narrow ravine that had been carved into the desert. It was deep enough so that they could stand up without being seen by anyone at ground level.

They followed it for thirty minutes, finally stopping when they reached a rocky overhang. There, the man fell to his knees, reached underneath, and pulled out a cloth bag. He unzipped it and removed something.

“Here,” he said, tossing it to Ash.

It was a worn-looking leather jacket with a padded lining inside, and a stocking cap and gloves in the pocket. While it was definitely a cool desert night, it wasn't that cold.

“Put it on,” the man said. “You'll need it later.”

“For what?”

“To stay warm. What do you think?”

Next he pulled out a messenger bag and slung it over his shoulder. He then shoved the empty cloth bag back under the overhang. “All right. Let's go.”

Ash didn't move.

The man took a few steps down the riverbed before he realized this. “Look, we don't have much time. If you miss the connection, you're out of luck. So let's move it.”

“No,” Ash said.

The man stared at him. “All right, fine. Then you can stay here and let them find you.”

“Why are you doing this?”

The man looked away, obviously not happy. When he turned back, he took a couple steps toward Ash. “If we'd left you in your cell, you wouldn't have woken up tomorrow morning. You were no longer any use to them alive.”

“You saved me because they were going to kill me?”

“We saved you because...” He paused, then took a deep breath. “Yeah. That's as good a reason as any. You can either trust me or not, but I can guarantee you one thing. Those people back there...” He pointed in the direction they'd come. “They don't care a thing about you. It's what's inside you that's most important to them. And they can't get to that while you're still breathing. Get it?”

He turned around and started walking, this time without looking back.

Ash stood where he was a moment longer, then followed.



**M**AJOR LITTLEFIELD WAS in the cafeteria when the power went out.  
“What the hell?”

He'd made himself a late-night sandwich as he waited for Ash's final cycle to complete. It was already obvious that, once more, the bug would fail to take hold. The captain was as immune to KV-27a as a person could be.

From Littlefield's understanding, the testing of the Ash children was proceeding slowly. But now Dr. Karp would have samples from an actual body he could take a closer look at and hopefully speed up the process.

The plan for that evening was simple. Once the cycle finished at two a.m. and the captain's vital signs remained unchanged, the air to his cell would be slowly cut off and within an hour, he would take his last breath. This method would eliminate any chance of contaminating the body with whatever poison they would have had to use otherwise.

But now the lights had gone off, and the stupid backup power had yet to kick in.

He pulled his radio off his belt. “Control, this is Littlefield.”

“Control,” a voice replied. It sounded like Brewer.

“What's your power situation there?”

There was a slight pause. “Sir, we're in the dark. Literally.”

“Backup?”

“No, sir. Nothing.”

Littlefield stood up. “All right, I'm coming to you.”

“Sir, where are you?”

“The cafeteria.”

“I think you're going to have a problem getting here.”

Littlefield pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, using it as a flashlight as he weaved his way out of the room. “Why do you say that?”

“When the power cuts off, the facility entrance automatically locks down until the electricity comes back.”

“Well, what about one of the emergency doors?”

“Those can only be opened from the inside.”

“Then get off your ass and go open one!”

There was no response for a moment. “The observation room door also locks down. Jones and I are, uh, stuck in here.”

“Jesus.”

Littlefield stepped out of the cafeteria and jogged quickly toward the entrance to the containment facility. There was absolutely no one else around. Not surprising since Littlefield had been left with only a bare-bones crew of five men including himself, more than enough to deal with the single person under their supervision. The rest of the team that had been at Barker Flats had either left with Dr. Karp and the children, or had relocated to Bluebird already. So with the exception of his team and Captain Ash, there was no one else anywhere on the decommissioned base.

“Are you telling me there's no manual override?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Well, where are Causey and Ellison? If they’re not in there with you, they must be somewhere in the facility. They can let me in.”

“Not sure, sir. I’ll try to locate them.”

Littlefield reached the main door. Sure enough it was locked tight. He made his way around, trying each of the three emergency doors, but they were sealed shut, too.

“Control, have you found Causey or Ellison yet?”

“No, sir. Neither is answering his radio.”

A sudden chill ran down the major’s back.

“What was the status of Cell 57 when you were last able to check?”

“The captain was sound asleep. Vital signs unchanged.”

“Are you sure he was asleep?”

“Absolutely.”

That was good, but it still wasn’t enough to ease Littlefield’s mind. “There’s got to be a way for me to get in. Something—”

“Sir?” a new voice came over the radio.

“Who is this?” the major asked.

“It’s Jones, sir. I believe if you go to emergency door B, you might be able to get in there.”

“I’ve already tried each of the emergency doors. No go. All closed tight.”

“Yes, sir, but...”

“What is it, Jones?”

“Sir, I believe...if I remember correctly, there *is* a manual override outside door B.”

“I didn’t see anything.”

“It’s...hidden, sir.”

Littlefield began running back toward emergency door B. “How do you know it’s hidden?”

There was a pause. “One of the other men, sir. He left with Dr. Karp last week. He found it and showed it to me. We’d used it when we needed a smoke.”

That was a potentially serious breach of security. Jones should have known better. It would have to be dealt with later but at the moment, the major could take advantage of the rule-breaking.

“Okay, I’m here,” he said half a minute later. “Where is it?”

“If you face the door, you’ll see a little panel low and to the right, about three feet from the entrance.”

“I see it.”

“Open the panel, sir.”

Littlefield did. There was a lever inside in the down position, and above it, a series of six tumblers with numbers on each barrel.

“Okay,” he said. “I see the lock. What’s the combination?”

“Are all ones still showing, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Then you just need to pull the handle, sir.”

“The combination is all ones?”

“I...think it’s just waiting to be reset when the next permanent operation moves in.”

*Good God.* How easily they could have been compromised if someone had snuck onto the base.

He pulled the lever and the door sprang open.

Inside the facility, he couldn’t see his fingers even if he tried to poke himself in the eye, so once again he resorted to using his cell phone as a flashlight.

"I'm in," he said as he took off running down the hallway. "I'm going for the emergency power first, then I'll check the cell."

When he got to the emergency panel, his worst fear was confirmed. This wasn't just a simple fault. Someone had tampered with it. Thankfully, it wasn't enough to put it out of action permanently.

He spent several annoying minutes getting enough of it back online so he could engage the backup system. The moment the emergency lights flared on, he began sprinting toward Cell 57.

His radio crackled. "Major Littlefield?" It was Brewer again.

Littlefield raised his radio without slowing his pace. "What?"

"He's not there."

The major didn't have to ask who "he" was. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. The emergency power gave us some limited camera access. Cell 57 is empty."

Littlefield nearly tossed the radio down the hall ahead of him. "Dammit!"

"Sir, where are you?"

"Approaching the cellblock-50 corridor."

"Stop, sir! Stop and get out now!"

The major skidded to a halt. "What is it?"

"The door to Cell 57 is open and the cycle is running again. The cellblock corridor will be contaminated."

The major stared ahead. Not just the cellblock corridor, he realized.

Fifty feet in front of him, he could see the open door to cellblock 50. Soon the whole facility would be contaminated. There was no question his own life was already over.

"Contact Dr. Karp. Inform him that the subject is missing, and that we are conducting a full facility search. Tell him upon completion we'll be initiating Protocol Thirteen."

"What? There's no reason for—"

"Can you access the camera outside cellblock 50?"

"Uh, I think so."

"You should look."

The pause that followed lasted about ten seconds.

"Dear God," Brewer said.

"The main corridor's your only way out, and it's been compromised." What the major didn't have to add was that the door to the observation room was not biosafe-rated. "We're dead one way or the other."

It was nearly half a minute before Brewer finally responded. "I'll call Dr. Karp."

Suddenly, Littlefield heard someone running farther back in the facility. Thinking that it might be Ash, he took off in pursuit, but whoever it was got out at one of the emergency exits before Littlefield could reach them. As much as he wanted to continue tracking the person into the night, in his contaminated condition it was no longer a possibility.

He spent forty minutes searching the building for Ash, but the only person he found was Sergeant Causey. He was lying unconscious in a supply closet near cellblock 30. The major decided not to wake him just to tell him he was about to die.

Ellison, though, was nowhere to be found, making it a pretty damn good bet he'd been involved in freeing Captain Ash. No matter. They'd both be tracked down soon enough. Dr. Karp would make sure of it. Littlefield was just disappointed he wouldn't be there to pull the trigger when it happened.

He walked all the way down to Cell 57 and sat on Ash's cot. He then had Brewer patch him through to Dr. Karp.

“I can’t say that I’m pleased,” the doctor said when Littlefield finished his report.

“I can’t say that I am, either.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then finish things.”

“Yes, sir. I will, sir. Good luck.”

Dr. Karp grunted a reply, then was gone.

“Brewer?” Littlefield said.

“I’m here.”

“Initiate Protocol Thirteen.”





FIVE MINUTES BEYOND the rock overhang, Captain Ash and his escort came to a tall chain-link fence. There were several rows of razor wire mounted to brackets across the top, meant to discourage anyone from climbing over.

His guide pulled a small, rectangular device out of his pocket and stared at it for a few seconds before nodding to his right.

“That way,” he said. “Seventy-five feet.”

As they walked along the fence, Ash caught sight of the building he’d been freed from. It was really no more than a distant, half-lit blob. That surprised him. He hadn’t realized they’d traveled so far.

What was even more surprising, though, was that there were no helicopters flying around looking for them, no vehicles racing across the desert hot on their trail, no apparent interest in them at all. Was it possible the Army didn’t even realize he was gone?

“Found it,” his guide said as he dropped to his knees beside the fence.

The man undid a couple of temporary ties from the chain-link fence then pulled open a slit that had been previously cut into it.

He shoved the messenger bag through first, followed it, then pulled one of the edges back as far as it would go. “Your turn.”

As soon as Ash passed through, the guy hemmed up the fence, then said, “Not long now.”

“And then what?”

Ash got no response.

The desert on this side of the fence was no different from that on the other, save for the fact that it wasn’t under direct military control.

They found another ravine, this one only deep enough to cover them from the waist down. They followed it for several minutes before they climbed out and veered off to their right. In the sky, there was definitely something brewing in the East that would challenge the night for control before too long.

They walked for five more minutes, then the guide said, “Wait here.”

A minute passed. Then two.

Ash was just starting to wonder if the guy was going to come back when—

Light flashed, and a tremendous roar raced across the desert as the ground shook for what seemed like several seconds, knocking Ash down.

He pushed himself up and stared, dumbstruck, toward the middle of the valley. The building that he’d been held in was gone, replaced by flames so bright, his eyes hurt looking at them even at this distance. Above the inferno, a giant cloud of smoke rose into the air, lit from below by the flames.

“You’ve got to go now!”

Ash whipped around. He hadn’t heard the other man return.

“Did...did you guys do that? Did you blow up the building?”

The man glared at Ash for a moment. “We were there to rescue you, not blow up anything. Whatever happened, they did it themselves. Now come on.”

“But why would the Army blow up their own building?”

“You think the Army did this to you?” He pointed toward the distant blaze. “The Army *didn’t* do that, and they weren’t the people who were holding you. You’ve gotten in a mess here you didn’t even

realize you'd been pulled into."

"What are you talking about? If they weren't Army, then I need to report in, let them know what's going on."

"You don't get it. Anything you report will get right back to the people who did this to you. You can strike out on your own and find out if I'm right, or you can take the help I'm offering and find out the truth." When Ash didn't immediately respond, the man added, "Don't forget, that guy who helped me get you out was still inside when we left. There's a pretty good chance he just gave his life to save you. So what's it going to be?"

It was all too much for Ash to take in. Not the Army? If not, who were they? And why would reporting in get him in trouble? Almost none of it was making sense. About the only thing he knew for sure was that the man and his partner had gotten him out of the building before it exploded.

Finally he nodded. He didn't have to trust them forever, but for now it seemed like the best option he had.

"Let's go, then," the man said. A few minutes later, they were standing at the edge of a blacktop road. The man pulled the messenger bag off his shoulder and handed it to Ash. "You'll find another change of clothes inside. There's also a driver's license and a credit card under the name Craig Thompson. Don't try using the card. It's just for appearances and won't work. But you'll be Thompson only for the next leg. When you transfer again, you'll be given a new ID. At that point, destroy these."

"Transfer again?" Ash asked.

"There's also two thousand dollars in cash," the guide said, ignoring his question.

"Two thousand?"

"It should be more than enough in case of an emergency along the way."

"Along the way to where?"

The man looked at him for a moment, then opened the flap of the messenger bag and pulled out a seven-by-seven-inches square, half-inch-thick package that had been wrapped completely in brown packing tape. "This is for your contact at your end station. He'll know what to do with it."

"Contact? End station? You're not making any sense."

The man stuffed the package back in the bag then pointed down the road. "A hundred yards that way you'll find an abandoned gas station." He looked at his watch. "In ten minutes, a car is going to stop there. The driver will ask you if you know where the nearest town is. You say it would be easier if you showed them. They'll agree and you'll get in."

"Who is it?"

"I have no idea."

"Where are they supposed to take me?"

"I have no idea."

"So I'm supposed to just trust them?"

"You trusted us."

"I didn't have a choice."

"Seems to me you don't have much of a choice now, either."

"Please. You've gotta tell me what's going on!"

The man looked at his watch again. "You're down to nine minutes. If you're not there when your ride arrives, they won't wait. Then you'll be on your own." He stood up and held out his hand. "Good luck."

Not knowing what else to do, Ash shook it, then watched the man disappear back into the night.

Finally he turned and started jogging down the highway.



JAMES ELLISON WAS a dead man, and he knew it.

After guiding Captain Ash and the other man—a man whose name he never knew—to the exit and making sure they got out, his plan had been to return to the supply closet where he'd left Sergeant Causey after he'd drugged the man's coffee. He had a second, weaker dose that he was going to take himself so that they'd both be found unconscious together.

He had been on his way there when he heard Major Littlefield's voice in the distance. He pulled out his radio and turned it up just loud enough so he could listen in on the conversation.

What he heard made his blood turn to ice. The door to cellblock 50 had been left open. He'd been sure he closed it, but apparently the lock hadn't engaged. It was his biohazard suit—it made it hard to hear the click of the latch.

Though Ash and the other man had still been in the facility when the emergency power came back on and the dosing cycle started again, they were so far away at that point, there was no chance the bug could have reached them before they got outside.

He, on the other hand, was toast.

He told himself the reason he needed to get out of there was because someone had to report in the fact that Major Littlefield was no longer in the picture.

His cell phone was in his bag in the observation room, and therefore permanently unavailable, so he would have to find an out-of-the-way pay phone. After he made the call, he could stumble into the desert and die, hopefully from exposure before the bug took him down. That was the best plan he could come up with.

But while the information about Major Littlefield was important, it would also be something the others would learn soon enough without him.

The coming Protocol Thirteen firestorm—*that* was the real reason he turned and ran.



THE GAS STATION was right where the guide had told Ash it would be. It was an old, adobe-style building with a low concrete pad out front where the pumps used to sit. By the look of it, it had been left for dead a long time ago.

Ash raced across the highway, thinking that whoever was going to be picking him up must already be there, perhaps parked out of sight. But when he got there, no one was around.

Had his ride already come and gone? Had he missed his opportunity to get away from the base? Or, he wondered, had the driver been scared off by the explosion? It certainly wouldn't be out of the question.

Just then he heard a whine, low and from the South. Tires on asphalt. It had to be.

He peered down the highway. Everything was dark. No headlights, no sign that anyone was coming, except the whine.

He didn't see the car until just before it turned off the road, its headlights off. He watched as it pulled in like it was going to fill up with gas.

For a few seconds, he considered making a run for the desert and disappearing. He had no idea who these people were, and had no clue as to why they were helping him. What he did know, though, was getting a ride in a car was considerably better than wandering through the desert.

He stepped out from the building and walked toward the sedan. As he neared, the driver's-side window slid down.

"Morning," a female voice said from inside. She sounded nervous.

Ash leaned down so he could see her. In the darkness, she wasn't much more than a shadow, with shoulder-length hair he thought was probably blonde.

"Could have sworn there was a town around here," she said. "Know of some place I could get a little breakfast?"

"I...I can show you."

His response was a lot less polished than her question, but it served the purpose of identification as her door locks clicked up.

"Hop in," she said.

He moved around to the passenger side. But as he opened the door, the woman shook her head.

"No. In the back."

He hesitated a moment, then shut the door and opened the one behind it.

"Lift the seat," she told him before he could climb in.

"What?"

She pointed at the seat cushion. "There's a latch in the back near the center. Pull and lift."

He did as the woman instructed. The only thing under the bench was the metal body of the car. He looked at her, confused.

She reached under the car's dash. A second later there was a dull thud, and the metal under the backseat popped upward several inches. Not needing to be told, he pulled it open as far as it would go, revealing what could best be described as a storage area. It was identical in length to the back seat, maybe a foot wider, and about two and a half deep.

"Get in," the woman said.

"You've got to be kidding me. I'm not getting in there."

“You get in there or you don’t get the ride.” She glanced toward the fire that was still burning in the valley. “You’re lucky I stopped at all. Please tell me you didn’t have anything to do with that.”

He started to speak, but she shook her head and held up a hand. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” She looked back at the secret compartment. “It’s vented, so you’ll get plenty of fresh air, and the lining’s padded.” She grabbed a water bottle off the front passenger seat and held it out to him. “You’re not going to want to drink this all at once. You won’t be getting out for several hours, so taking a leak can get a little messy.”

“I’ll just sit in the back seat if it’s all right with you.” He started to close the metal lid.

“It’s *not* all right with me!” she shot back. “I don’t know who you are, or why you need to get away from here, but I do know if we get stopped and they find you, I’m going to be in as much trouble as you are. Now you can either get in the hole or start walking. It’s up to you.”

She stared at him defiantly, the bottle of water still in her outstretched hand.

He looked at the compartment, then at the water, then at the woman. “I don’t know who you are, either.”

“And you won’t,” she said.

He stood there a moment longer, then took the water and awkwardly lowered himself into the hiding space. Once he was in position, the woman leaned back and started to lower the lid.

“I didn’t start that fire,” he said.

“I told you. I don’t want to know.”

She shut him in.

• • • •

FOR THE FIRST HOUR, he was sure they would be stopped at a roadblock and the car inspected. But as the road kept passing a few feet beneath him, he began to think they might have made it away undetected. Eventually, he dozed off.

When he woke again, he could hear other vehicles surrounding them—semi-trucks mostly, cruising at high speeds. He figured they must be on an interstate. Which one, he had no idea. Having just recently been transferred to the Barker Flats Research Center, he didn’t know this part of the country that well and had no clue which highways were within a few hours’ drive away.

Both he and Ellen had grown up in the Midwest—Ash in Ohio and his wife in Indiana. They’d met at college where he was going through ROTC training and working on an engineering degree, and she was studying to be an accountant.

For him, at least, it was one of those instant attraction kind of things. Ellen had always said it was the same for her, too, but he was never sure if she was joking with him or not. Their bond grew infinitely deeper after her father passed away from a heart attack while they were sophomores. Her mother was already gone—cancer. Several years earlier, Ash’s parents had also passed away. No diseases in his family, just bad timing with a tire blowout at seventy miles per hour. His brother was with them, too. Jeff didn’t die but, well, the condition he was left in often made Ash wonder if it would have been better if he had.

The fact was, Ash and Ellen really only had each other after that. They were married their senior year, and Josie was born exactly ten months later.

And now here he was alone again, his whole family gone.

He had no idea how long they’d been on the road when he felt the car ease to the right and slow down. Outside, the sounds of the other vehicles grew distant as the sedan came to a near stop, then accelerated again through a sharp right turn.



A couple minutes later, the car slowed once more and veered to the right. The now-familiar hum of tires on asphalt was replaced by the crunch of dirt under treads. Then the car stopped and the engine shut off.

Ash waited, anticipating that the woman would soon release him. A few moments later he heard the seat cushion being lifted above him, but as he waited for the hidden metal flap to open, nothing happened.

“Come on, come on,” he said under his breath.

He'd had enough of the secret compartment. It was small and cramped, and though he wasn't claustrophobic, he was starting to sympathize with those who were. It didn't help that since they'd stopped moving, the air seemed to be growing stale, too. He wanted out, and he wanted out now.

He thought about pounding on the lid and screaming, “Open up!” But he had no idea where they were or who might overhear him.

He twisted, trying to get more comfortable. As he did, his shoulder brushed against the lid. There was a click as the metal roof of his box rose slightly in response to the pressure.

*What the hell?*

He placed his hand on it and pushed upward. A thin seam of light grew along the length of the lid. Though it couldn't have been more than a quarter-of-an-inch wide, it was blinding after hours of pitch darkness. He blinked several times, then squeezed his eyelids together so that only a fraction of the light could penetrate them. Again, he pushed on the lid. The crack of light grew an inch wider, then two, then three.

He paused, listening for anyone who might be in the car, and letting his eyes adjust to the daylight. Finally, having heard nothing, he pushed the top all the way open and sat up.

For some reason, he thought he was going to find that they were parked behind one of those giant truck stops, and that the woman had just gone to use the facilities or maybe even grab something to eat. But there was no truck stop. In fact, there were no buildings of any kind, just wilderness, broken only by the distant ribbon of the interstate about two miles away.

The car appeared to be parked in a small valley. While there were a few trees here and there, most of the vegetation was lower to the ground. It was what his dad used to call high chaparral country.

A deserted, two-lane road ran out from the highway in his direction, passing the large dirt lot his ride was parked in and heading off into the hills. Apparently the woman had turned off on one of those exits only a handful of locals would use.

The most surprising thing, though, was that she was nowhere to be seen. Where she'd gone, he had no idea. But unless she was crouching right next to the car, he was entirely alone.

He pushed himself out of the box, threw open one of the doors and climbed outside. The air was cool, almost brisk. He reached back in and retrieved the jacket his guide had given him. He was tempted to pull on the stocking cap and gloves, but instead he just stomped around a little to warm up. Then, after a moment of unnecessary self-consciousness, he relieved himself behind the car.

Not knowing what he was supposed to do now, he decided to see if the woman had left the keys. Maybe the idea all along had been for him to take the sedan and get lost. Maybe that's what this had been all about. They got him away from trouble, and now he was on his own.

He opened the driver's door and leaned in. The keys weren't in the ignition, tucked above the sun visor, or lying in the seat. What *was* in the seat, though, was a white legal-size envelope with MR. THOMPSON typed on the front. It took him a couple seconds before he remembered that Thompson was the name on the false ID he'd been given earlier.

The flap of the envelope was only tucked in, so he flipped it out and removed a single sheet of paper from inside. Like his faux name on the envelope, the note inside was typed. It was short and to the point.

Wait here. Once it's dark, someone will come for you. Before then, burn this and your IDs. There is a lighter in the trunk, along with some food if you get hungry.

Good luck.

He read it twice. It was just another mysterious piece in his ultra-bizarre day. But the mention of food did remind him that it had been almost twenty-four hours since his last meal.

He pulled the trunk release, then moved around back and looked inside. In a brown paper bag, he found a couple of apples, a bag of trail mix, a few energy bars, and three bottles of water. Not exactly the juicy hamburger his stomach was hoping for, but it would do.

There was also one of those long-nosed lighters people used to light campfires and barbecues. But he wasn't really sure if he wanted to burn his IDs. He'd begun to entertain the idea of taking off on his own. If he did that, the IDs could come in handy. He decided to eat first, then figure it out after.

Within ten minutes, he'd devoured both apples, two of the energy bars, and a good portion of the trail mix. The remainder he wrapped inside the brown sack and slipped into his messenger bag.

He moved to the end of the car and stared at the highway for several minutes. At a fast walk, he could get there in no time then hitch a ride to the next town.

What then, though?

Go to the police? Back to the Army?

The man who'd gotten him out of the building had said if he went back to the Army, the people who'd held him would find him again. Ash wasn't convinced there were "people" yet. It still could have just been the Army doing what they thought was best for the greater good. But he couldn't deny something very strange was going on. And if he wanted to find out why Ellen and the kids had been killed, his best bet at the moment was to stay free until he had more answers.

His mind made up, he retrieved his fake IDs and placed them on the ground with the note and envelope from the car. They burned easily, and soon were no more than ash and melted plastic. He mixed what was left into the dirt, then climbed back into the car and waited for the sun to go down.



“HE’S OUT,” PAX said over the phone.

There was no need for anyone to reply. So far, this was only a one-way conversation.

“Grabbed his coat...taking a piss.”

Silence again.

“A lot of looking around...checking the car now.”

*This should be it, Matt thought.*

“He found the letter.”

*Yes. Good. Now what are you going to do, Captain?*

“He’s read it, and now is checking the trunk. Looks like he’s going to eat something.”

The silence stretched for nearly ten minutes.

“Looking at the highway again.”

*Are you walking or are you staying?*

“Still looking...still...wait. He’s going back to the trunk...got the lighter...he’s burning everything.

That’s a confirm. He’s moving back inside and...sitting in the car.”

“Janice, Michael,” Matt said into the phone. “Pickup is a go. Jordan, get ready to disable the satellite.”

*Welcome to the team, Captain Ash.*



THE WATCH ASH'S wife had given him on their fifth anniversary had been taken away the night he was put in the cell, so he wasn't exactly sure what time it was when he saw a pair of headlights exit the freeway and head in his direction.

As they neared, he realized they didn't belong to a car, but an old Winnebago motor home. It slowed to a crawl as it turned off the road, then stopped in front of his sedan.

After a few seconds the side door opened, and a man and a woman emerged. They looked maybe ten years older than Ash, and smiled as they walked in his direction. When they neared his car, the woman stopped several feet away, but the man came right up to Ash's window and leaned down.

As soon as Ash lowered it halfway, the man said, "Sorry we're late."

Ash made no reply.

The man rubbed his arms with his hands. "It's a little chilly out. So if you're ready to go, I'd love to get back in the 'Bago."

Ash hesitated a moment. The thought of going it alone once more passed through his mind. But the conclusions he'd come up with before hadn't changed, so he grabbed the messenger bag off the other seat and got out. Immediately, he pulled his jacket tight around his neck. Though it had been cold in the car, it was near freezing outside.

"We've got coffee in the motor home, if you'd like," the man said, then nodded toward the woman. "Janice just heated up a pot before we turned off. If you're hungry we can cook you up something, too. There's plenty of leftover chili from lunch. I'm Mike, by the way."

He held out his hand. Ash shook it.

"Coffee sounds good. My name's—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I already know who you are. You're Sam Wolverton. I'd recognize you anywhere."

Apparently Craig Thompson was out, and Sam Wolverton was in. It was as good a name as any, Ash thought.

Mike and Janice led him over to the Winnebago, then inside where the temperature was a wonderfully bone-thawing forty degrees warmer. Ash slowly stretched his stiff cold fingers then rolled his shoulders, trying to bring his muscles back to life.

Janice pointed at a table in the rear. "If you want to have a seat, I'll get that coffee while Mike gets us back on the road."

"Thanks," Ash said.

He pulled off his jacket and sat down. Between the heat and the feel of movement and the calm exuded by Janice and Mike, some of the tension he'd been holding on to began to ease away.

*It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay.*

The next thing he knew Janice was touching him on the shoulder.

"You all right?"

He jerked in surprise, then looked up. "I'm fine. Thanks. Just...trying to warm up."

She set a cup of coffee in front of him. "This'll help."

"Thanks again."

The coffee mug had a lid on top that allowed a person to drink without the liquid inside sloshing out while traveling. Ash took a sip. It was hot and delicious. In fact, it was the best cup of coffee he'd had in a long time.

The Winnebago took a turn to the right and began increasing speed. Ash could see they were transitioning back onto the interstate, but he missed the sign so he still had no idea which one they were on.

He took another, longer sip.

“Mind if I join you?” Janice asked from over at the stove.

“Not at all,” he told her.

She poured herself a cup of coffee then took a seat across the table from him.

“Do you...do this often?” he asked.

She cocked her head. “Do what?”

“Pick up strangers on deserted roads.”

A half-smile graced her lips. “You’re not a stranger, Sam. We’ve known you for years.” She lifted her cup and took a drink.

“But we just—”

“We just what? Pulled off the highway so we could stretch our legs?”

He studied her face for a moment. “Who *are* you people?”

“Mike and Janice Humphrey. Your old friends from college.”

“I don’t care about any cover story. There’s no one else around. I’d just like to know *who* you are, and why you’re helping me.”

“You sure want a lot for someone whose life is being saved.”

“How do you know that? I thought you didn’t know anything about me. How do you know you’re saving my life?”

“How do I know? I don’t. It was just an educated guess, and by your reaction, a fairly accurate one. And you’re right. We don’t know anything about you. But even if we’re not saving your life, we’re saving you from something. I would think you’d be grateful for that.”

“I am,” he said quickly. “Very grateful. I’m just...confused. I don’t know what’s going...what’s going...”

His vision suddenly blurred.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He opened his eyes as wide as he could, but was unable to focus on anything. As he raised a hand to rub them, vertigo raced through his head like a wave. He no longer knew which way was up and which was down. He reached out for the table to try to steady himself, but he missed and fell sideways, dropping onto the floor. Janice was immediately at his side, her hand moving under his head. But her touch seemed distant and disconnected.

“Relax.” Her voice was a million miles away. “You’re going to be fine. You just need a little sleep.”

He tried to speak, to tell her he wasn’t fine. That nothing was fine. But his lips refused to move.

A moment later, the unfocused world he’d been seeing turned black.





IF ELLISON HAD been in a humorous mood, he would have thought it ironic that the car he escaped in belonged to Major Littlefield, but he knew humor would never enter his life again.

The whole time he was hotwiring it, he was sure the major would come charging out and find him, then drag him back into the facility before initiating Protocol Thirteen. But the engine finally roared to life, and he sped away without seeing the major or anyone else.

Just before he reached the far end of the valley, the building exploded, lighting up the sky. Even though he'd been expecting it, it still caught him by surprise. He jerked the wheel to the right and nearly ran off the road.

At least the explosion meant that he was safe for the moment. With the major and the small team at Barker Flats no longer in the picture, anyone the project would send after him was at least a few hundred miles away.

All he had to do was find a pay phone before that.

And torch the car.

And die.

It was an easy enough plan in theory, but after an hour of driving through the empty desert, he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. He needed to get some rest. He couldn't afford to crash. Not only would he be unable to deliver the message, but anyone who came to his aid would be in danger of being infected.

Just a couple of hours—a nap, really—that was all he needed.

About five minutes later he spotted an old dirt road. He turned onto it and drove far enough that his car wouldn't be spotted from the highway, then crawled into the back seat.

When he woke, the sun was high in the sky. Panicked, he pushed himself up but immediately dropped back down. It felt like his brain was trying to push out of his skull. Even his eyes ached.

More slowly this time, he rose into a sitting position. As he tried to take a deep breath, it caught in his throat and he began to cough.

Ellison was not the kind of man who would delude himself. Sure, he could have pretended he'd only caught a bad cold or maybe the flu. But the truth was he was infected with the KV-27a virus, and unless he had an immunity that worked like Josie Ash's had, he was going to die.

He forced himself to get back behind the wheel. His time was severely limited now. He figured he had no more than two hours to find an isolated pay phone. If he failed to locate one in that time, he would have to forget about the call and concentrate on eliminating his chance of infecting anyone else.

“Should have stayed in the building,” the disease in his head said. “Should have let the fire take you.”

He ignored it and used every ounce of concentration to keep the car on the road. Even then, he often found himself veering dangerously close to the opposite lane and then overcompensating by weaving back the other way and onto the shoulder. God forbid he came across a highway patrol car. They'd pull him over for sure.

He passed a few possibilities, wide spots in the road with two or three restaurants and a gas station, but there were always too many people around. After ninety minutes, he started to think he would have to give up the idea of reporting in. But then he saw a little gas station along an otherwise deserted stretch of the highway.

Though it looked like it was open, there were no customers out front.

He slowed, then turned into the large dirt lot next to the building, his eyes scanning left and right, looking for...

*There.*

The pay phone was mounted to a wooden pole a good twenty feet away from the station.

He pulled to a stop and stumbled out of the car, then cursed himself for not having gotten closer to the phone. When he finally got to the pole, he leaned against it and caught his breath. Closing his eyes, he focused on the number, trying to make sure he remembered it correctly. His headache wasn't helping, but once he repeated the number several times, he knew he had it.

He fished some coins out of his pocket, then picked up the receiver and dropped several quarters into the slot on top. His strength waning, he punched in the number, making sure he made no mistakes.

One ring. Two.

Then a *click* and a *beep*.

"This is Ellison," he said. "Barker Flats blown. I repeat Barker Flats blown. Littlefield initiated self-destruct. When the power came back on, the virus they were pumping into the target's cell leaked into the rest of the building. Littlefield and three others eliminated with the facility. Target already freed at that point, but Littlefield discovered the escape and planned to report it to Karp. No confirmation if he was able to do that, but it seems likely." He paused. "I'm...I'm infected, so this will be my last message."

He hung up.

The phone was going to have to be destroyed, too, but that would be easy enough. He would just need to move the car right up against the pole before he lit everything on fire.

He went around to the trunk of Major Littlefield's sedan. Inside he found more than he had hoped for. Not only were there flares that he could use to help get the fire going, but there was also a hard plastic case containing a Colt .45 automatic pistol.

It was a lot more power than Ellison needed, but then again, it wouldn't matter when he pulled the trigger. At least he wouldn't have to crawl out into the desert now.

He stripped off his shirt, then fed as much of it as he could into the gas tank. Once he had the car in position, his plan was to use a flare to light the shirt on fire. He would then get into the car and throw the flare into the back seat to ignite the interior. As soon as he saw the fire catch, he would put the gun to his head and pull the trigger.

What he hadn't counted on were the three sedans that raced off the road and skidded to a stop twenty feet away, before he could get back behind the wheel and move the car into place.

Men jumped out of nearly every door, most with guns pointed directly at him.

"Stay right there, Mr. Ellison."

"They know who you are," the disease whispered in his mind. "They found you. See? You should have just stayed."

"Get back!" Ellison yelled at the men. "I'm infected. Doesn't matter if you shoot me or not. You come near me, your life is over."

None of the men flinched.

"I'm not going to be a problem," Ellison told them, then coughed. "Just let me take care of this, and it'll all be over."

He stepped around the back of the sedan and headed for the driver's door.

"Stop. Now!" someone shouted.

But Ellison couldn't stop. He had to finish.

"Stop!"

Ellison put his hand on the door handle and started to pull it open.

The first bullet caught him in the shoulder, knocking him into the car. The second went through his kidney and exited just below his ribs. He slipped to the ground, rolling onto his back as he did, and ended up looking at the group of armed men.

They parted in the middle, and two new men dressed in protective gear stepped through. Not biohazard suits, though—something different. Then Ellison saw the thin rifles in the men's hands, rifles with hoses attached to one end running around to tanks on the men's backs.

Not rifles. Flamethrowers.

*Oh, thank God.*

There was a *whoosh*, then short flames flickered at the end of each nozzle.

The two men took a few steps closer to the car and raised their weapons.

"The phone," Ellison whispered as loudly as he could. "Don't forget the phone."

But his words were lost as long streams of flames roared out from each weapon.

• • • •

"STOP THERE, STOP THERE," Chuck said, pointing down the road at the lonely gas station.

"Why?" his friend Len asked. They were supposed to be meeting some other friends for a couple nights of camping, but somewhere they'd made a wrong turn. Neither of them could get a signal on their cell phones so using their GPS wasn't an option.

"I gotta go."

"Again?"

"What do you mean, 'again'? That was like two hours ago. I've drank two sodas since then."

Len pulled into the station, figuring while Chuck did his business he could at least find out where they were. As he got out of the car he caught a faint whiff of barbeque. Maybe they were selling sandwiches inside. He could use something to eat.

Chuck raced ahead like his bladder was about to burst.

"Next time, don't drink so much!" Len yelled after him.

Without looking back, Chuck flipped him off as he entered the store. Len reached the door a moment later, and was starting to pull it open when his friend came running back outside. He looked at Len, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then quickly bent over and threw up on the asphalt.

Len jumped back. "What the hell? I didn't know you were sick." As soon as his friend seemed to finish, he said, "Are you all right?"

Chuck breathed deeply, but said nothing.

Len could see his friend's face was a mess, so he said, "I'll get some napkins." As he reached for the door, Chuck grabbed his arm.

"Don't go in there!"

"Why not?" Len asked.

"The guy's dead. Somebody shot him."

"What guy?"

"The attendant! He's slumped over the counter, blood all over the place."

"Is the person who shot him still there?"

Chuck's eyes widened. "I...I don't know. I didn't hear anybody. Jesus, do you think maybe he is?"

Len glanced around. The only other car he could see was an old truck parked against the side of the store, right where someone who worked there would probably park.

“I doubt it,” Len said. “I’m going to go take a look, okay?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Did you check his pulse to make sure he was dead?”

“No,” Chuck admitted. “But he looked dead.”

“We should check to make sure, don’t you think?”

Reluctantly, Chuck nodded.

“Why don’t you call the police while I go inside,” Len suggested.

“Okay. Good idea.”

Len pushed the door open with his shoulder in case there were fingerprints on the handle the police could use, and stepped inside.

Immediately, he covered his nose to block out the overwhelming smell of blood. The counter was just inside on the left. Lying face down across the top was a man with gray hair. There was no reason to check his pulse, though. He was dead for sure. Len could see two bullet wounds: one between his shoulder blades, and one in the back of his head. The cash register was open, and whatever money had been there was gone.

A robbery, out in the middle of nowhere.

“Len,” Chuck called from outside.

Grateful for a reason to leave, Len rejoined his friend.

Chuck held up his phone and shrugged. “I still don’t have a signal.”

Len pulled his cell out. No bars for him, either.

He looked back at the store. There was probably a phone inside, but chances were it was on the counter next to the body, which would mean stepping on the bloody floor to find it. Beyond the fact that doing so wouldn’t make the police happy, the creep-out factor was way off the scale, so as far as he was concerned, it wasn’t an option.

“We’ll have to go to the next town,” he said.

“And just leave him here like this?”

Len thought for a moment. “No. You’re right. We can’t do that. One of us should probably stay.”

“I ain’t staying.”

“Fine. You take the car. I’ll stay.”

Chuck didn’t look happy with that solution, either, but then he started rocking on his feet and said, “I gotta pee.”

He headed toward the side of the building.

“Where you going?” Len asked.

“I’m not going back inside!” Chuck disappeared around the corner. But it was only a couple seconds before he yelled, “Hey, Len!”

“What?”

“There’s a pay phone over here. If you have change you can call the police.”

“You don’t need change to call 911.”

“What?” Chuck’s voice had grown distant.

“You don’t...never mind.”

Len headed around the side of the building and saw that his friend had moved out into the desert. The phone was off to the right just a bit, hanging on a wooden post.

*Good*, he thought as he walked over. At least now he and Chuck wouldn’t have to split up.



**A**SH WOKE WITH a pounding headache.

He must have gasped or something, because a hand was suddenly on his shoulder, rubbing it softly. Then a voice said, "It's all right. You're okay."

It was a woman's voice, but it didn't sound like Janice's.

"My head," he grunted.

He tried to raise his hand to his temple, but his arm would only move a few inches before it stopped. He opened his eyes just enough to see what the problem was. There was a tube or something coming out of his arm, and what looked like a leather strap around his wrist.

He tried his other hand. It moved without opposition.

"Sleep some more," the voice said. "You've been through a lot."

"Are we stopped?" he asked, realizing he felt no motion.

"Stopped?" A pause, then, "Just sleep."

And as if it were a command, darkness overtook him once more.

• • • •

**THE NEXT TIME HE WOKE**, his headache was gone.

When he opened his eyes, he realized he was not, as he'd previously thought, still in the RV. Instead he was lying on a bed in a wood-paneled room, soft sunlight seeping in through the window on the far wall.

There was a dresser to his left and an armoire in the corner beyond the foot of the bed. Below the window was a writing desk. All the surfaces were empty.

He tried to prop himself up so he could look out the window and get a sense of where he was, but his right arm caught on something. No, he quickly realized, not caught. Restrained. Hadn't he been immobilized the last time he'd woken?

Around his right wrist was a padded leather cuff attached to the frame of the bed. The apparent reason for this was the IV line attached to his arm. His left, though, was completely free.

He had no idea what he was being fed from the bag hanging on the stand, but being both restricted and drugged did not appeal to him. He quickly worked the cuff open, turned the IV flow off, and pulled the tube out of the port on his arm.

His first stop was the dresser to see if there were any clothes to go with the T-shirt and underwear he'd been sleeping in. He found several pairs of jeans, more underwear, socks, and a whole drawer full of colored T-shirts. The bottom drawer even had two dark wool sweaters and a hooded pullover sweatshirt. The biggest surprise was that not only was everything new, it was all in his size, too. He got dressed.

Inside the armoire he found the boots he'd worn during his escape, and beside them, the messenger bag. A quick check of the bag showed that the only thing left was the money. What did he care, though? None of the contents had been his in the first place.

He pulled on the boots, laced them up, and walked over to the window. What greeted him was a surprise. It wasn't the chaparral country where the mysterious Mike and Janice had picked him up, or even the desert. Instead, there was a mix of grassy fields and groves of evergreens. In the distance was a row of mountains.

The only structure in sight was way off to the left and only partially visible. It was big, though. Maybe a barn or large equipment shed. No way to tell for sure.

As for people, he saw none.

*Where the hell am I?*

He walked over to the door, put his ear against the wood, and listened. In the distance, he thought he could hear a low muffled conversation but that was about it.

He glanced back at the room. He *could* wait until somebody showed up, but he was done waiting so he opened the door.

“Thought I heard you moving around in there.”

Directly outside was a hallway about as wide as the room he’d been in. Sitting on a wooden chair against the far wall was a tan-faced man with the gentle creases of someone who’d spent more than his fair share of time outdoors. He had a full head of salt-and-pepper hair and a short mostly-salt goatee. Ash guessed he was in his fifties, early sixties at most. He was outfitted in jeans and a green flannel shirt.

The man pushed himself off the chair. “So how are you feeling?”

Ash glanced down the hallway. “Where am I?”

“You’re safe, that’s where you are.”

“Yeah, that’s not really an answer.”

The man snickered. “No. No, I guess it’s not.” He paused. “You’re on the Hamilton Ranch. I’m Rich Paxton, but I go by Pax, mostly.” He held out his hand. “I help keep things running around here.”

Ash kept his hand at his side. “You’re the one in charge?”

Pax shook his head. “No, that would be Matt. Matt Hamilton. It’s his place. Well, his and Rachel’s.”

“I want to talk to him right now.”

“That’s convenient, because he wants to talk to you, too. Supposed to bring you to him when you finally got up. Which I guess is now.”

“Let’s go,” Ash said, ready to follow him.

Pax glanced down at the IV port still attached to Ash’s arm. “Should probably have Billy take a look at that first. Get that thing off you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sure you are. But Billy’s on the way, and it’ll only take a minute.”

Pax led him through several hallways, a large sitting room, up one flight of stairs, and past a dozen closed doors. Whatever kind of building this was, it certainly wasn’t small.

Finally, Pax stopped in front of an open door and stuck his head inside. “Billy?”

“Back here,” a voice replied.

Pax signaled Ash to follow him in.

The room was set up like a doctor’s office, complete with examining table, cotton swabs, blood pressure cuff, tongue depressors, and all the other medical items you’d expect to find. There was also a computer monitor and wireless keyboard on the counter.

A door on the left led into another room. Since there was no one in the room they’d just entered, Ash assumed this Billy must be in the other.

“The new guy needs his tube removed,” Pax said.

“I need a few minutes,” Billy called out. “Just have him sit tight, and I’ll be down as soon as I can.”

“He’s not in his room. I brought him with me.”

There was the dull thud of a stack of paper being set down, then the sound of footsteps. A second later, a guy a few years younger than Pax entered from the other room. He walked over to Ash, grabbed his arm, and looked at the port. "You shouldn't have done this by yourself."

"No one else was there."

"That's not the point. What about the fluid? Did you close the tube, or is it running all over the floor?"

Ash narrowed his eyes, not liking the tone of the man's voice. "I cut the drip before I disconnected it. I hope that's okay with you."

Billy frowned. "You should have just waited. You have no idea what was in the fluid. It could have been very dangerous."

"Was it?"

"No, but it could have been."

Billy got to work removing the dock from Ash's arm. When it was out, he used some gauze and a bandage to cover the wound. He then looked at Pax. "Can I get back to what I was doing now, or do you have any more emergencies?"

"Have at it. I think we're good."

Billy forced a smile then said to Ash, "Welcome to the ranch." With that, he headed back to the other room.

Ash half expected Pax to give him an excuse for Billy's behavior once they were in the hallway again, but, to his credit, Pax said nothing. He led Ash to a closed door at the far end and knocked.

"Come," a muffled voice said from inside.

Pax opened the door and let Ash pass through first.

It was a big room divided into two areas. The far end was dominated by a large oak desk with a matching credenza behind it, while the area nearest the door was set up with a couch, chairs and a low-lying table. There were several windows, but wooden blinds prevented any clear view of the outside.

The only person in the room was a man sitting in one of the stuffed guest chairs in front of the desk. He was probably about the same age as Pax, only with a little less hair on top and no goatee. Though the man was sitting, Ash could tell he was big. Long legs and a broad chest. Somewhere in his past he'd probably been a high school linebacker. The man had angled his chair so he could watch a TV hanging on the wall.

Ash glanced at the screen just in time to see the Prime Cable News logo in the corner before the picture went dark.

"Glad to see you're up," the man said, rising to his feet. He *was* tall. Six-foot-three on the low end, maybe as much as six-five. His grin was friendly and welcoming as he extended his hand to Ash. "I'm Matt Hamilton. Welcome to the ranch."

Ash hesitated only a second before shaking. "I'm..." He stopped himself, unsure what he should actually say.

"You're Captain Daniel Ash."

"Yes," Ash said with a sense of relief.

"Welcome, Captain. Why don't you have a seat?" He gestured toward the couch.

Ash held his ground. "Excuse me if this sounds rude, but I'd like to know what the hell's going on."

"Of course you would. I would, too, if I were you. What would you like to know first?"

"Let's start with why I am here."



Hamilton shrugged. "Easy enough. You needed someplace safe to hide."

"And what am I hiding from?"

"That one is not so easy."

Ash's nostrils flared as he drew in a long breath.

"Hold on, Captain," Hamilton said. "I'm not avoiding your question. It's just that there are several different answers, and I'm trying to figure out which is the one you're interested in at the moment."

"That's bullshit."

Hamilton said nothing for a moment, then looked at Pax. "Can you give us a few minutes? Maybe make sure the captain's quarters are ready?"

"You got it." Pax nodded to Ash and left.

Once they were alone, Hamilton said, "You can stand, but if you don't mind, I'm going to sit."

Hamilton favored his left leg as he headed for the couch. He caught Ash looking at it as he sat down.

"I'm told a knee replacement will take care of the problem," Hamilton explained. "Someday, I guess. When I have the time."

Ash walked over. He thought about remaining on his feet, but it seemed a pointless protest so he took the seat across from the couch.

Neither man said anything for several seconds. Finally, Hamilton leaned forward. "By all rights, you should be dead."

A faint sneer grew on Ash's face. "I'm having a hard time believing anyone was planning on killing me. I only went with your people for one reason—to find out who murdered my family and why." He hesitated, then added, "They did get me away from the explosion, so I owe you thanks for that."

"You misunderstood me," Matt said. "I wasn't talking about the fact the order had been given to eliminate you before you woke, which it had been, or about the explosion, which wouldn't have happened if you'd stayed."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"The disease. It should have killed you, too. But it's my understanding that you never showed any effects of the illness. There were seventeen families living at Barker Flats. Seventeen families, all recent transfers to a base that, until two months ago, had been in mothballs. Of the sixteen families besides yours, none had any survivors. So what made you different?"

Ash stared at Hamilton in shock. "None? They're all dead?"

A pause. "They are."

Ash began breathing rapidly, his anger boiling just under his skin. He pushed himself up. "How many people?"

"There were fifty-seven total in the other families."

"Fifty-seven?" With Ellen, Josie, and Brandon, that made an even... "Sixty total. My God." He turned to the television. "It must be all over the news."

Matt hesitated for a split second before saying, "It hasn't been all over the news. There's been no report whatsoever."

"What?" Ash couldn't believe it. He began pacing in the space in front of the door. Maybe the government didn't want to cause a panic. The country took a pretty big hit after 9/11. Sure, everyone had rallied together, but there'd been so much confusion, too. "Do they know who did it? Have they found them?"

Matt took a longer pause this time before answering. "Captain, I will always tell you the truth. That's the promise we make here. Sometimes, though, there are things that need to be held back. Perhaps someone isn't ready to hear it yet, or perhaps the information is just too sensitive. When these situations arise, we won't lie about it and try to cover it up, but the information will not be shared, either." He paused. "There are things you don't know and don't understand. As soon as we're completely sure we can trust you, you will be told. Just not now."

"Trust me?"

"Just like you're unsure whether you can trust us."

As true as the statement was, Ash didn't like hearing it. "What couldn't you trust me with?"

"Is that a trick question?" Matt said. "Okay. How about this? The truth about what happened at Barker Flats."

Ash stared at Hamilton. "Whatever happened *killed* my family! I have every right to know the truth!"

"I would feel the same as you," Hamilton said calmly.

"Then tell me!"

"When the time is right."

Ash stood motionless for several seconds then said, "Mr. Hamilton, I appreciate your hospitality, and whatever you did to help me get away from Barker Flats. There's money still in my bag. Yours, I assume. I'll leave it in the room. I don't have any of my own to cover whatever expenses you might have incurred. I apologize for that." He took a step toward the door. "If someone could show me the way to a main road, I'd be grateful."

Hamilton considered him for a moment, then stood up. "It's late. Spend the night and you can get an early start in the morning."

"You'll lock my door and keep me from leaving."

Hamilton shook his head. "No. If you want to leave, we won't stop you. But we also won't be able to protect you."

"I can protect myself."

Hamilton nodded. "I'm sure you'll do the best that you can. I only ask when they do track you down, you don't mention the ranch or any of us here."

"They won't track me down."

Matt remained silent for a moment, his expression blank. Finally, he said, "I'll have Pax show you to your quarters. If you decide to stay the night, you're welcome to join us for dinner at seven."

Ash answered with a single nod.

"One more thing," Hamilton said.

He limped back over to his desk and pulled a package out of the credenza. It was the same package Ash had been given in the desert. One end was open now. Hamilton reached in, pulled something out, then walked back over to Ash.

"I believe this is yours."

He held out his palm. In it was a watch.

Ash tried not to shake as he lifted it up. It wasn't an expensive brand, but it was priceless to him. He turned it over. Engraved on the back, just as he knew it would be, was:

Happy Birthday,  
All My Love,  
Ellen

He had assumed the watch was destroyed in the explosion. He had thought he'd never hold it again. "This was in the package?"

Hamilton nodded.

"What else is in there?"

"That was the only personal item of yours."

"Are you lying to me?"

"I told you, we have no room for lies here."

Ash stared at the watch a moment longer, then put it on.

For the first time since the night that life as he knew it ended, he cried.



**B**Y THE TIME Len and Chuck found their friends Jimmy and Walt at the campground, it was well after dark but they had the excuse of a lifetime.

They joined the other two at the campfire and recounted the afternoon's events. Chuck played it up to its morbid best, while Len exaggerated his friend's freak-out at finding the body.

"He threw up *everywhere!* If I hadn't jumped out of the way, I'd have been covered in it," he said. "Then he refused to go back inside, like he thought the guy was going to jump up and come running after him."

"Yeah," Chuck said, smiling. Jokes at his expense never bothered him. "Like a zombie, man. Hey, you never know."

Someone threw an empty beer can at him as the rest laughed.

By the time their fire died down to a few coals, they'd retold portions of the story half a dozen times.

"I'm beat," Len finally said, getting up. He swayed a little bit, and had to steady himself by putting a hand on Walt's shoulder.

"Whoa," Jimmy said, laughing. "Drink a little too much?"

Len scowled at him. "Ha ha."

He'd actually had only two, but it had been a long day—the driving, the dead body, the police—so it was a wonder he could even keep his eyes open.

"If you guys are going to stay up, keep the noise down," he said. "I want to get some sleep."

"No guarantees," Walt told him as he popped open another beer.

"You guys suck," Len said.

He headed over to the tent he and Chuck were sharing. As he unzipped the door, he coughed and then cleared his throat. *Stupid dry desert air*, he thought. He grabbed a bottle of water out of the cooler and crawled inside.

• • • •

THERE WAS A KNOCK AT Dr. Karp's door. Without looking up, he said, "Come in."

The door opened and Mr. Shell entered. He was a lean and muscular six-foot-two with sandy blond hair, and a nose that had been broken at least once.

Karp had been expecting him, so he waved to one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Have a seat." Once Shell was situated, he said, "Pleasant trip?"

Shell's mouth moved up and down in a quick smile. "Pleasant enough."

"Any further update on this afternoon's...action?"

Karp had to be careful in his phrasing and tone. Shell was not his subordinate, nor was he Shell's. They worked in completely different branches of the project, their jobs only overlapping when circumstances such as those that happened in the last eighteen hours occurred. Shell was part of the security arm, his specialty emergency situations.

"How much have you been informed of already?" Shell asked.

"That Ellison was neutralized by your team. And the scene was being staged."

"Then you know enough." Shell leaned forward. "What I'd like to do is talk about Captain Daniel Ash."

"Have you found him?"

“Not yet.” Shell paused, then set his briefcase on his lap and opened it up. From inside, he extracted a thin stack of photographs and set them on the desk.

“This is an enhanced thermal satellite image,” he said, tapping the top photo. “It shows a section of the road north of Barker Flats. It was taken fifty-seven minutes after the loss of power at the facility.”

Karp studied the image. There were only two things that showed heat, both very near to each other, and the rest of the image was basically black.

Shell pointed at a thick line just a half shade lighter than the surrounding area. “This is the highway.” He moved his finger to the larger of the two bright spots. “And this is a car. As you can see, it’s not on the road. We’ve been able to determine that it is in the process of pulling up at an abandoned gas station. This other bright spot is a person waiting by the building.”

He moved the picture to the bottom of the stack. The revealed image was similar to the first. The only change was that the car was now on the road.

“You’ll notice the person who had been waiting at the gas station is no longer there.”

“Ash?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know for sure?”

Instead of answering, Shell laid all the photographs out on the desk. There were eight total, including the two he’d already shown the doctor.

Shell touched the photo to the far left. “Here. That’s the Barker Flats facility, seven minutes after the power outage.”

There were two small, bright dots in the desert not far from the building.

Shell moved his attention to the next photo. The building was no longer in the picture, but the two dots were still there. “Fifteen minutes after. They’ve gone just over a mile.” The next photo was similar to the last. “Twenty-five minutes. Two and a half miles.” Next photo. “Thirty minutes. They paused here before moving on.” Next photo. “Forty minutes. They’re standing next to the road.” And the last photo. “They’ve separated here. One has stayed where they were, while the other is heading to the gas station.”

Karp stared at all the photos. He touched the solitary dot standing by the road in the last shot. “Couldn’t that be Ash?”

Shell shook his head. “As soon as Ash reaches the gas station, this person heads three miles south where he is picked up by a separate car forty minutes later. It’s clear whoever it was knew exactly where he was going. You had Captain Ash under your control for over a week prior to the breakout. Before that, records indicate that in the few weeks he and his family had been living at the base, they had yet to leave. Ash would have no knowledge of this area. The man picked up at the abandoned gas station had to be Ash.”

The logic was sound, but Karp didn’t like the accusatory tone Shell was taking. “Were you able to follow the car the captain was in?”

“Only as far as the Nevada border. It pulled into the parking garage of a casino there. Once it was out of sight, there was no way to know if it left again.”

“I thought these satellites are supposed to be good enough to make out the license numbers on cars.”

Shell said nothing for a moment. “In daylight, *if* the angle’s right. But it was still dark when the car entered the parking garage. Plus it was a Toyota Camry, the most popular car in the country. So no,

Dr. Karp. We lost it.” There was a pause. “What I need to know is how troublesome this Ash is. Could he be a problem? Or do we just let him go?”

“What does Bluebird think?”

Shell stared at him. “Naturally, Bluebird is concerned, but they’ve left it up to me to determine what happens next. So I need to know from you whether you think he *is* a problem, or just someone we can ignore.”

Karp thought for a moment, knowing he had to tread carefully. “I would prefer if he were eliminated, primarily because it would aid our research if we had his body. But is he a threat?” He shook his head. “Ash knows nothing that can hurt us.”

“Unless your man Ellison told him something.”

Though Dr. Karp knew it was true, Shell’s accusation annoyed him. “There’s absolutely no proof that Ellison had anything to do with Ash’s escape. He found out Littlefield was going to engage Protocol Thirteen and ran due to fear. He was found alone in the major’s car, for God’s sake, not some Toyota Camry. All that proves is that he was weak, not a traitor.”

Shell paused a moment before responding. “Doctor, your position within the project is safe. Your skills are needed and you are in no danger. So don’t embarrass yourself by ignoring the obvious. The only way Ash could have been freed was if he’d had help on the inside. There is no other way. You know it, and I know it. So drop the bullshit. Is Ash dangerous to us or not?”

Backed into a corner, there was really only one answer Karp could give. “Maybe.”

• • • •

WHEN LEN WOKE UP THE next morning, he was the only one in the tent. He staggered outside, his head pounding, and found the others sitting at the campfire.

“About time,” Chuck said. He stared at his friend for a moment. “How much *did* you have to drink last night?”

Len dropped into the only empty chair. “What time is it?”

“Nine-thirty,” Walt said.

“We’ve been up for two hours,” Chuck told him.

Len coughed a couple of times.

“Dude, are you all right?” Walt asked.

“I think I might be getting something.”

“Great,” Jimmy said. “I swear to God if I get it, too, I’m going to kill you.”

“Is there any coffee left?” Len asked.

Chuck poured him a cup and handed it over. “We were just waiting for you so we could hike the dunes.”

“I..I don’t think I’m up for it.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“You guys go. I’m just going to lie down.”

Chuck eyed him for a moment. “Maybe we should just head home.”

Shaking his head, Len said, “I don’t want to ruin your fun.” He tried to smile. “I’ll be fine. I just need to sleep it off.”

The others protested a bit more, but in the end they headed off for the dunes, and Len crawled back into the tent to rest.

When they got back four hours later, all three of them were more exhausted than they should have been, and two were already sniffling.

Chuck didn't even check Len as he climbed into the tent to take a nap. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Len had been dead for nearly an hour. Chuck would follow seven hours later, and Walt thirty minutes after that.

Jimmy was the only one still alive, if barely, when the Ranger service found them.

"I'm going to kill him," he kept whispering. "I'm going to kill him."

But, really, it was the other way around.





ASH'S NEW QUARTERS weren't quite as nice as the room he'd woken up in the day before, but they were more than adequate. All the clothes that had been in the other dresser had been moved to his new room, as had the messenger bag that surprisingly still had the money inside.

He had slept with the watch on, not a habit he used to have, but one he was determined to start. It had still been on California time when Hamilton gave it to him, but Pax had told him when he showed Ash to the room that it was an hour later here. Where "here" was, Ash still didn't know.

It was because of the watch that he skipped dinner. He was in too much of an emotional state, and didn't want to end up saying something he'd regret later. Pax had brought him a tray of food around eight p.m. and Ash surprised himself by devouring it all.

When morning came, the decision to leave didn't seem as clear as it had twelve hours before. Yes, the conversation with Hamilton had annoyed him, but there was too much he didn't know or understand, and it was clear that many of the answers could probably be found right there on the ranch.

Still unsure of what he was going to do, he packed a few extra shirts, some underwear, and socks into the messenger bag. He then left the bag in the room and went in search of breakfast.

The building he was in was a kind of dormitory just down a wide stone pathway from the main building. It was two stories and held maybe twenty rooms, but if anyone else had been staying there, Ash hadn't heard them. The outside of the building was stone halfway up the first floor, with wooden timbers the rest of the way to the top. It was definitely built to last, but while it had the appearance of having been built decades before, Ash got the sense it was actually recently constructed.

Heading down the path, he could hear birds chirping in the distance, and felt a breeze blowing softly through the tops of the trees. The tranquility of it all was almost overwhelming. It was so at odds with the turmoil going on inside him.

As the trail turned and went up a gentle rise, the main building came into view. It was an impressive structure—old and wooden and huge, with wide, sloped roofs and half a dozen chimneys. It looked like a ski lodge that should have been at the bottom of a hill rather than in a quiet clearing.

There was a workout area off to the left with pull-up bars, sit-up stations, and resistance-training machines. A woman was at one of the machines, using it to work her shoulders. She glanced over at Ash, then quickly looked away as if she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't have.

As Ash neared the main building, he spotted Pax on his hands and knees examining a set of stairs that led up to the wide porch surrounding the structure. When Pax saw him, he got to his feet and brushed off his hands.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning," Ash replied. "I was wondering if there was someplace I could get some breakfast."

"Sure, sure." Pax turned to the building. "That third door there, that gets you into a short hallway that'll take you into the kitchen. You'll find Bobbi in there. She can whip you up something."

"Thanks." Ash glanced at the stairs. "Is it safe?"

"What? Oh, sure. Just be careful on that second step. The backboard's starting to give a little. I'll have one of the boys replace it this afternoon."

Again, Ash hesitated before moving on. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

“What kind of business is this ranch in? Can’t believe you make a lot of money off of people like me.”

Pax laughed. “No, that would drive us broke, I think. We have cattle, beef mostly, and a small herd of buffalo.”

“Buffalo?”

“You’d be surprised at the size of the buffalo meat market. But Rachel wants us to keep them for historical sake, let them live out their lives here.”

“So you only make money off the cattle then.”

“When we need to.”

It wasn’t really an answer, but Ash decided not to push and headed into the house.

Bobbi was a tall woman with short red hair who turned out to be an excellent cook. In no time, Ash was sitting at one of the tables in the restaurant-sized kitchen, working his way through a large plate of eggs and sausage.

“Morning, Rachel,” Bobbi said several minutes later.

Ash glanced up. Another woman had entered the kitchen—Rachel, presumably. She was shorter and leaner than Bobbi, and had long silver-streaked blonde hair that was pulled back into a ponytail.

“How about a cup of coffee?” Rachel asked.

“You got it.”

While Bobbi filled a mug, Rachel walked over to Ash’s table.

“Mind if I sit with you?” she asked him.

“Not at all.”

She smiled, took the chair opposite his, then held out her hand. “I’m Rachel Hamilton.”

They shook.

“You’re Matt’s wife?”

She laughed. “Hardly. I’m his sister.”

“Sorry. When Pax told me this place was yours and Matt’s, I just assumed...”

“Don’t be sorry. A lot of people make that same mistake.”

Bobbi came over, set the mug in front of Rachel, then glanced at Ash. “And how’s your breakfast?”

“It’s good. Thank you.”

“If either of you need anything, just holler.” With that, she headed back to the prep table where she’d been cutting up vegetables.

Rachel took a sip of her coffee then said, “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine,” he said. “I appreciate you letting me spend another night here.”

“We’ve got the beds. Someone might as well use them.”

“You do have a lot of space, but I’ve only seen a handful of people.”

“It’s an ebb-and-flow kind of thing around here. Sometimes the ranch is packed, and sometimes it feels like just Matt and me.”

“Pax tells me that this is a cattle ranch.”

She took another sip, then shrugged. “Yeah, we have cattle.”

Like Pax, she seemed hesitant to get into the business of the ranch.

“I hear you told Matt you’re intending to leave us this morning,” she said as he put a piece of sausage in his mouth.

He shrugged.

“I’m sure you have a lot of things to do,” she went on. “Starting with trying to find out what happened to your family. If I were you, it would be the first thing I’d want to do.” She paused. “But before you go, there are a few things you need to know.”

“What?” he said.

“You finish your breakfast first, then we can talk.”

He swallowed the sausage, then pushed his plate away. “I’m finished now.”

• • • •

THE ROOM SHE LED HIM to was on the second floor near Matt’s office. It was a conference room decorated to keep with the mountain-lodge feel of the place—big pine table, wooden handcrafted chairs, and a fireplace at the far end. There was also a large television hanging on the wall that was currently off.

Ash hadn’t even sat down yet when the door opened again, and Matt and Pax walked in.

“Morning, Captain,” Matt said. “Trust you slept well.”

“I did. Thank you.”

Pax gave Ash a nod.

“Where’s Billy?” Matt asked.

Pax seemed to take this as his cue. He picked up the phone on a cabinet under the TV and punched in a number.

“Why don’t we sit?” Rachel suggested.

While Matt went around to the other side of the table, Rachel took the chair next to the one Ash sat in.

“So what’s this all about?” Ash asked.

Before anyone could answer, the door opened and Billy rushed in.

“Sorry,” he said. He made his way around to sit with Matt, and placed the notebook he was carrying on the table.

Pax hung up the phone the moment Billy entered, and took the chair next to Rachel.

Matt looked around at everyone, then focused his attention on Ash. “I’ll come right to it. We think it would be a mistake for you to leave right now.”

“If I want to leave, I’ll leave,” Ash said, suddenly wary. “You already said you wouldn’t try to stop me.”

“And we won’t,” Matt told him. “But I’m hoping what we have to say will convince you to stay.”

When he didn’t elaborate, Ash asked, “So what *is* it you have to say?”

Matt considered him for a moment before saying, “What happened to the families at Barker Flats didn’t occur simply by chance.”

“Of course it didn’t,” Ash said. “It was an attack. Some terrorist organization trying to stir up fear.”

Matt hesitated, then stood up. He began walking toward the far end of the room. “How well did you know your neighbors?”

“My neighbors? Not well. We’d just transferred in.”

Matt stopped near the center of the table. “Hadn’t everyone just transferred in?”

“Well, yes. The base had been closed for a while, and we were there to get it up and running again.”

Matt touched a finger to the table. Instantly, a wooden flap rose and disappeared into the surface edgewise, revealing a control panel underneath.

“You’re going to want to turn around,” Matt said. He hit a button and the TV came to life.

Ash shifted his chair so he could see the screen. Rachel and Pax did the same. The image remained black for a moment, then a picture of a family cut in.

“Do you recognize them?” Matt asked.

“That’s Manny...Captain Diaz and his wife. Carol, I think. I don’t remember their kids’ names.”

“They lived next to you, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

As Ash stared at the picture, he remembered the scream he’d heard that night while he and Brandon were being led away. It was Carol, wasn’t it? And now, if what Matt told him was true, Carol and Manny and their kids were all dead.

The picture changed to one of a man and woman.

“Lieutenant Cross and his wife,” Ash said without prompting. The Crosses lived on the other side of them.

Another picture, a couple and a teenage boy.

“The Parsons, I believe.” He looked at Matt. “What’s the point of all this?”

Matt nodded at the screen. More pictures came up. This time there was no pause for Ash to identify them, but he recognized the faces of many of those he’d seen around the base.

The last image was a collage of all the photos.

“These are the sixteen families that you lived with, the ones that were exposed to the same disease as you and your family. They all have something very important in common.”

“You’ve already told me they’re dead.”

“There’s something else.”

The picture of the Diaz family replaced the collage.

“Manny Diaz,” Matt said. “His father died when he was seventeen, and his mother a month after he received his commission. He was an only child. Carol Diaz, maiden name Yeager. Mother died when she was eleven, father two years later. She was an only child.”

The picture of the Diaz family was replaced by one showing the Crosses.

“Martin Cross. Parents killed in a car accident when he was a freshman in college. He was an only child. Emily Cross, maiden name Vernon. Adopted by an older couple, both of whom died of natural causes within one year of each other while Emily was in high school. She was their only child.”

Matt continued to go through the pictures, telling the basically same story every time. The final picture was one that hadn’t been shown before.

“Daniel Ash. Parents died in an auto accident when he was twenty. Not an only child, but his brother Jeff sustained brain damage in the accident and lives in a nursing home. Ellen Ash, maiden name Walker. Mother died of cancer when she was—”

“Stop,” Ash whispered. “Please.”

The screen went black, and the room fell quiet.

After a few moments, Rachel put a hand on Ash’s arm. “We know this isn’t easy. But we needed to show you the truth.”

“The truth of what?” he asked, shaking her off. “That everyone I used to live around lost their parents? It happens. It’s probably not as unusual as it sounds.”

“It’s not just the parents,” Matt said, still at the center of the table. He gestured at the screen. “None of your former neighbors had any close relatives at all. They were isolated.”

Ash gritted his teeth. “I have someone.”

“You do,” Rachel said. “But I think you understand the point Matt is getting at.”

He shot her a look, then let out a breath as his gaze fell to the table. “Okay. Fine. So we were all isolated. So what?”

“So that makes all of you the perfect test subjects,” Matt said.

“Test subjects?”

“If any of you died, it would be fairly easy to cover that up, don’t you think?”

“Wait. Are you trying to tell me what happened at Barker Flats was done to us on purpose *as a test*?”

Matt looked at him, saying nothing.

“That’s ridiculous,” Ash said.

Matt changed the picture on the screen. Now, instead of a photo, there was an online news article.

“This appeared on a local Ann Arbor, Michigan, news website five days ago,” Matt explained.

## LOCAL MAN, WIFE DIE IN HOUSE FIRE

First Lieutenant Martin Cross and his wife Emily were killed tragically last night in a fire that consumed their home. Army investigators at the base in South Korea where they lived believe the fire was started by faulty wiring, though an investigation is ongoing.

“South Korea?” Ash said.

Matt brought up two more articles, both for families that had been at Barker Flats. Their deaths were being called accidents, too. One family was said to have died in a car accident in Germany, while the other apparently had been caught in a storm while on a fishing trip off the Philippine coast.

“These are the only articles that have appeared so far, but we have no doubt that within the next three to four weeks, the rest of your neighbors will get their obituaries, too.”

“This isn’t possible. Someone’s playing a game here.” Ash shook his head at the screen. “These aren’t real.”

“They’re very real. If you want, I’ll take you to a computer and you can search whatever site you’d like.” When Ash didn’t say anything, Matt hit another button. “Do you recognize this man?”

Ash looked back at the screen. The photo that was now displayed was a head-and-shoulders shot of a man in his late fifties with thinning gray hair. He was wearing gold-rimmed glasses and didn’t look happy. It had obviously been cropped from a larger picture and blown up.

Ash’s first thought was that he’d never seen the man before, but there was just the hint of recognition—something in the man’s expression—that made him unsure.

“I...don’t think so,” he said.

“Not at Barker Flats?” Matt asked. “Maybe in the distance or in passing?”

Ash studied the photo again, but nothing new came to him. “I just don’t know. Who is he?”

“His name is Dr. Nathaniel Karp. He’s the man who infected your family.”



**J**IMMY WAS DOA when the ambulance arrived at the Sage Springs Hospital emergency room. The drive from the camping area at the dunes took nearly an hour, but Jimmy would have died even if the hospital had been right next door. Still, the two doctors who were on duty that night, Dr. Fisher and Dr. Morse, made a valiant attempt to bring him back, but to no avail.

Sage Springs boasted a population of only 12,347. And while the hospital was the best medical facility within a seventy-five-mile radius, it was by no means a top-of-the-line operation. That meant the staff it employed, while dedicated, often consisted of doctors and technicians who had graduated at the lower ends of their classes.

Drs. Fisher and Morse were no exceptions. That, of course, didn't mean they lacked the skills to do their jobs. They were intelligent, caring men who, on that night, made a critical mistake.

The assumption they made, based on the information radioed to them from the ambulance, was that the incoming patient was suffering from either a severe case of the flu or pneumonia. Unsure of how contagious the patient might be, they had ordered all staff that would come in contact with him to wear masks and gloves at all times. They couldn't have known it, but the bug was airborne and able to infect new hosts through eyes, ears, and any other entry point to the body, such as a cut. This was unforeseeable, and *not* their mistake.

Their mistake came once they'd pronounced Jimmy dead. Seeing how his body had been ravaged by the disease, and hearing from the ambulance attendants that others at the campground had reported Jimmy and his friends appeared fine earlier in the day should have made them realize something unusual was up. If they had recognized that, they could have immediately declared a quarantine on the entire hospital and limited the deaths to just those in the building.

But when the declaration finally came, it was several hours too late, and the town of Sage Springs paid a heavy price.

• • • •

**DR. KARP WAS SHAKEN** from his sleep at 5:26 a.m.

Standing beside his bed was Major Ross, the man who served as his military liaison.

"There's a problem," the major said. "We're set up in Conference Room D. Be there in five minutes."

"What is it?" Dr. Karp asked.

But the major had already walked out of the room.

The doctor pushed himself out of bed, swearing under his breath. Ross had never given him an order before. That wasn't the nature of their relationship. But an order was certainly what it had sounded like, and Karp didn't like it.

Just to remind the major who was in charge, he let seven minutes pass before stepping into the conference room. Given that Ross had said "*We're* set up," Karp expected more than just the major waiting inside, but no one else was there.

"What's going on that you couldn't tell me in my room?" the doctor asked.

"Dr. Karp?" The voice came out of a speaker in the middle of the table. The doctor immediately recognized it as belonging to the Project Eden Director of Preparation (DOP).

"Sir, I'm sorry," the doctor said. "I didn't realize you were involved in this meeting. Major Ross gave me no information."



“Because Major Ross has no information,” the DOP explained. “He was merely doing exactly what I told him to do.”

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Dr. Karp said, “Of course,” then took a seat a couple of chairs away from Ross.

“Major, have you been able to reach Mr. Shell yet?” the DOP asked.

“He’s on hold, sir. I can connect him now, if you’d like.”

“Please.”

Ross leaned forward and pushed a couple of buttons on the conference phone. “Mr. Shell, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Director, we’re all present,” the major said.

In the silence that followed, Karp wondered if the major had accidentally disconnected the DOP, but then the man’s scratchy voice came out of the speaker again.

“At 6:22 p.m. Pacific Time last night, park rangers serving the Mesquite Dunes Recreational Area responded to a call from a camper concerned that someone using the campground had overdosed on drugs. The party in question was seen stumbling through his campsite before collapsing onto the ground. As a precaution, an ambulance was dispatched to the scene. The rangers arrived first, though. What they found was not a camper who had OD’d, but rather one camper who appeared to be very sick, and three others who were lying in their tent, dead.

“The surviving man was rushed to the hospital in Sage Springs, but died before reaching the facility. At 2:37 a.m., two of the nurses on duty started to become ill. A check of the other eighteen people in the building revealed that all but three were experiencing similar symptoms. These included headaches, body aches, and a general sense of exhaustion. One of the nurses had been on duty when the dead man arrived in the ambulance. She was smart enough to put two and two together, and immediately made calls to her county health department and the Center for Disease Control.

“I received a copy of the alert the CDC put out thirty minutes ago. This is not a public alert, and no media has been notified as of yet. CDC officials are on their way to the scene. In the meantime, the hospital has put itself under quarantine.”

The doctor frowned at the speakerphone. “What are you trying to suggest, sir? That this illness has something to do with us? That’s not possible.”

Silence again, then, “The gas station where your man Ellison was found and eliminated is only thirty miles from the campground at Mesquite Dunes.”

That gave the doctor pause. “Still,” Dr. Karp finally said. “Mr. Shell’s team burned the body and the car he’d been in. There’s no way he could have been the source.” Then a terrible thought hit him. “Unless he talked to someone first. But I find it hard to believe he would have done that.”

“There is another way,” the DOP said.

“What?” Karp asked, not seeing what it could be.

“One of the victims at the campsite was a man named Len Craddock.” The DOP let the name hang out there as if it should mean something to the doctor.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“I do,” Mr. Shell said through the speaker, a hint of dread in his voice. “He’s the person who discovered the body of the gas station attendant.”

Dr. Karp could feel the skin tighten across his arms. The station attendant had been killed because he’d witnessed what was done to Ellison. His death had been made to look like a robbery and having someone find his body had been part of the plan.

“But it’s my understanding that precautions were taken,” the doctor said. “The car and the body were removed. There was nothing there to infect him.”

“Records indicate that the call Craddock made to the police was placed through a pay phone outside the station,” the DOP told them. “The only other call on that phone that day happened minutes before Mr. Shell’s team arrived on scene.”

“Oh, dear God,” Karp said.

“Mr. Shell?” the DOP asked.

Shell took a moment before he spoke. “There was obviously an oversight, sir. I will deal with it.”

“Yes, you will. You will also help ensure this does not spread. Dr. Karp, Major Ross, you, too, if necessary.”

“Perhaps it would be best for an immediate quarantine zone to be set up,” Major Ross suggested.

Dr. Karp frowned. “I’m not sure if that—”

“What?” the DOP asked. “Necessary? It’s an excellent suggestion, Major. Our people are already on it. We cannot afford mistakes. The only way we will succeed is to control events, not have them control us.”

“Sir, if I may ask,” Shell said. “Has anyone tried to trace the number Ellison called?”

“Why?”

“It could help in locating Captain Ash. Given this new development, I think it’s even more critical that we bring him in. He can link this outbreak to Barker Flats. And while a connection from that to Bluebird would be impossible, it could raise concerns and interfere with some of our future work, creating unnecessary delays.”

“Yes, Mr. Shell. We have discussed that here. In addition to helping with the outbreak, you need to continue hunting for Ash. Any additional men you need, please request from your department head and they’ll be immediately assigned to you. As for the phone number, it was to a disposable phone purchased in Milwaukee, and no longer seems to be in service.”

The doctor was relieved. He’d dodged a bullet with the outbreak, since most of the blame seemed to be falling on Mr. Shell. He was still vulnerable on the Ash issue, but there was a way he might be able to improve that situation, too.

“Director? I have an idea about how we might be able to flush out Captain Ash.”



**A**SH PUSHED HIMSELF out of his chair and moved over to the monitor, his eyes firmly affixed on the image of Dr. Karp.

In rapid succession, he asked, “Is he some kind of spy? Who does he work for? Does the Army know?”

“Dr. Karp is an American citizen,” Matt explained. “Until three years ago, he worked for the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. He was then transferred to a classified assignment. That assignment eventually brought him to Barker Flats.”

Ash looked at Matt, confused. “Are you trying to say that the U.S. Government did this to my family?”

“We’re saying that Dr. Karp and the people he’s involved with did this to your family.”

“But you just said he works for the Army.”

Matt paused, then said, “The Army pays him a salary, yes.”

“So you *are* saying the Army did this to us. There’s no way I’m going to believe that.”

“The Army didn’t do this to you.”

Ash stared across the table. “You’re not making any sense.”

“Captain,” Rachel said, her voice soft. “You have unfortunately found yourself in a situation that is much, much larger than you can imagine. We have been...following this for many years, and sometimes it’s too much for even us to grasp.”

“Oh,” Ash said, taking a step back from the table. “Oh, I get it. You’re one of those conspiracy groups, aren’t you? What is this? Some kind of indoctrination? Trying to recruit me? Well, thanks for your help, but it’s time for me to leave.”

He turned for the door.

“If you’d stayed in your cell in California, you’d be dead now,” Matt said. “That much you can’t deny. We got you out. We saved your life. The least you could do is give us a few minutes to hear us out.”

“I think I’ve already heard enough.”

Matt started to speak again, but Rachel silenced him with a look as she stood up and moved between Ash and the door.

“Captain, I understand your doubts and concerns. You *are* free to go, of course. But we don’t think that would be wise.”

“And staying here would be? With a bunch of crazies?”

She studied him for a second. “Just give me one moment.”

She walked over to a cabinet along the wall. From Ash’s angle he could see the envelope he’d brought from the desert sitting on the shelf inside. But if that’s what Rachel was retrieving, she didn’t get a chance to pull it out.

As she bent down, the door suddenly thrust open, and a man Ash hadn’t seen before rushed in.

“PCN,” he said quickly.

Matt touched the controls, and the television switched from the image of Dr. Karp to the Prime Cable News network. A Breaking News banner was running across the bottom of the screen, while the rest was taken up by a female anchor at the network’s New York studios.

“...confirm twenty-two deaths at this point. Roadblocks have been set up around the town, and no one is being allowed in or out.” The image changed to a shot of a desert highway. Parked across the

road about fifty feet from the camera's position were several military vehicles and a couple highway patrol cars. In the distance beyond them was what appeared to be the edge of a town.

"Residents of Sage Springs have been advised to remain in their homes until otherwise instructed. We're told that a first-response CDC team is on scene now, and that more medical personnel are en route. To repeat, there has been a report of a severe outbreak of what looks like a deadly version of the flu in the town of Sage Springs, California." The anchor put her hand to her ear. "All right. We have Tamara Costello now just outside the roadblock. Tamara, can you tell us what's going on there at this moment?"

The voice changed but the picture remained the same. "Catherine, we have just been asked to tell anyone who has been in the vicinity of Sage Springs or the Mesquite Dunes Recreational Area in the past twenty-four hours to call a special hotline the California Department of Health has set up. I believe that number should be on the screen now."

As if she were running the control room, the Breaking News banner was replaced by a new graphic that read *Crisis in the Desert* on one side, and had a phone number on the other.

"Though there has been no official announcement," the reporter went on, "speculation, confirmed by unofficial sources, is that this is not some naturally occurring outbreak, but has been caused by the deliberate release of a virus. One source I talked to believes this is a terrorist attack."

"Tamara, if it *is* a terrorist attack, why was it done in such an underpopulated area?" the anchor asked.

"Our viewers might be surprised to learn, Catherine, that this part of California boasts a lot of military installations such as Fort Irwin, the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station, and, closer to Los Angeles, Edwards Air Force Base. There was a report of an explosion two nights ago at a small military facility less than a hundred miles from here that we are checking out. I should stress, though, that event remains unconfirmed, and any connections to the outbreak are unknown at this point."

"Tamara, I understand officials are looking for someone in particular. Is that correct?"

The guy who'd come running into the conference room suddenly said, "Here it is."

"Yes, Catherine. That's correct."

Ash stared at the television, stunned, as the image of the desert was replaced by a photo of him.

"Daniel Ash is believed to be a carrier of the virus, though apparently immune himself. We're told that if anyone sees him they should call the hotline or their local authorities, but should not, under any circumstances, approach him."

"Is there any indication that Ash is one of the people responsible for releasing the virus in the first place?" the anchor asked.

"No one is saying that, at least not officially. They are only saying he is a person of interest and \_\_\_"

Matt turned the TV off.

"Thanks, Jordan," he said to the man who'd come running in. "Record it."

"Already going."

Jordan left.

Ash gazed at the blank screen, numb. *A person of interest?*

Rachel put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

He continued to look at the TV a moment longer, then turned to her. "I...I should turn myself in."

"That's the last thing you need to do."

Suddenly realizing her hand was still on his shoulder, he pulled back. "What if they're right, and I am contagious? What if I've infected all of you? Oh, God! And those people who helped me get out of

there, drove me here, they could be sick already.”

Billy leaned forward. “The incubation rate and course for this particular virus is extremely quick. From infection to death—anywhere from eight to twenty-four hours. The point is, Captain, if you were a latter-day Typhoid Mary, most of us would already be dead, and the rest dying.” He looked around. “Everyone looks pretty healthy to me.”

“How do you know that? How can you possibly know anything about this...this virus?”

“The only way we could have gotten you out of that facility was if we had someone on the inside,” Matt said. “The truth is, the only reason we even knew about you was because of him. The same person was also able to feed us information about the virus.”

The size of the rabbit hole Ash had fallen into was cavernous. If he were to believe they had a man on the inside, it would mean he had to accept the idea that what had been done to his family and his neighbors was perpetrated by this Dr. Karp, an *Army* employee, and that all the families had been moved to Barker Flats specifically for the purpose of testing this virus. It was ridiculous. Completely unbelievable. Yet, if he didn’t believe there was a man on the inside, then how did they get him out?

Finally, he said, “If you did have someone there, how did he let this happen? How could he stand by and watch all those people die? My family? Our neighbors?”

“He wasn’t aware there was going to be a live test until it was too late,” Matt said. “But don’t read too much into that. Even if he had known, he couldn’t have done anything anyway. He would have been killed, and stopped nothing. At least this way he was able to get you out before he died.”

“Died?” Ash said, surprised. Then he remembered. “The guy who stayed behind so we could get away. The one who got caught in the explosion—he was your inside man.”

“Yes. But the explosion didn’t get him. He fled before it was set off, so he could get us one last report. Only...” Matt paused. “He said he was sick, and that he didn’t have long. The phone he called from was thirty miles from...from Sage Springs.”

Ash’s eyes widened. “The outbreak. He’s responsible?”

“It would seem so.”

“Then I *must* be contagious,” Ash said. “How else could he have gotten infected?”

Billy shifted in his chair. “Your immunity was of great interest to those running the test. The entire time you were in that cell, they were bombarding you with the virus, trying to see if it could break through your system.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. Our man reported that when the power came back on in the building, the system spraying the virus into your cell started up again, and the bug leaked into the main corridor.”

Ash finally sat back down, the weight of everything too much.

“Under the circumstances,” Matt said, “I think we’re going to have to insist you stay.”

“You mean you *will* stop me.”

“No. But we won’t help you either. And we’re a long way from anywhere out here.”

Rachel took her seat beside Ash, shifting her body so they were facing each other. “You’re a fugitive now, Captain, and the whole country knows it. Within twenty-four hours, they will finger you as one of those responsible. I guarantee it. You won’t be able to go anywhere without someone recognizing you. You won’t be able to talk to anyone. Here, you’re safe.”

“I don’t care about my safety. I only care about making those who did this to my family pay.”

“That’s a goal we would be more than happy to help you achieve,” she said. “But you can’t just blunder off and think you’ll be able to deal with this on your own. Information is power, and at the moment, there’s a lot going on that you don’t understand.”

He was quiet for a moment. "You'll help me understand?"

"We'll give you what you need," she said.

He looked at the others, and they all nodded.

"Okay. I'll stay for now. But the minute you deny me anything *I* think I need to know, I'm gone."

"Fair enough," she said.

"Then let's get started," he said.

Rachel exchanged a look with Matt, then focused once more on Ash. "The first thing you need to know is about your children."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "What about them?"

"They're alive."





TAMARA COSTELLO WAS getting frustrated. The only new information she'd been able to find was that a food truck would be serving lunch about a mile back along the highway. Not very broadcast-worthy stuff.

Without anything new, her network, and all the other twenty-four-hour news channels, would just keep playing the same crap over and over, eventually venturing into areas of wild conjecture. It's what always happened, and even though she was a part of the system, she hated that. This was supposed to be the age of information, not recycled garbage.

That's why, after she completed her update with the brain-dead Catherine Minor at 11:10 a.m., she found a quiet spot and called her brother in San Francisco.

"Look at you getting all that air time," he said as soon as he answered.

She couldn't help but smile. "You've been watching?"

"Riveted. So, really, how bad is it?"

"No way to know for sure. They've got the whole town blocked off. I've tried to call people who live there, but all I get are busy signals. Even the cell towers are down. Thank God for my sat phone." The network gave all its field reporters satellite phones in case they found themselves in areas that weren't covered by mobile phone companies despite those fancy maps they were always bragging about.

"The whole town? Man, it must be bad. Gives me the creeps just thinking about it."

She snickered and shook her head. "What are you? Ten?"

"Seriously, Tam. Think about it. Something so small you can't even see can kill you just like that."

She thought she heard his fingers snap. "Look, Gavin," she said, trying to get back on track. "I was wondering if you could do a little research for me."

"Ha! I knew that's why you called. You want to know more about the flu? The town? Give me five minutes and I can pull together enough info to fill up an entire hour."

While Tamara had chosen a life in the spotlight, Gavin preferred one that was more private, and spent most of his time in his apartment doing freelance software programming.

"No. The network can find that stuff out on its own. I'm interested in this Daniel Ash guy."

"The man the CDC's looking for?"

"Yeah. Who is he? Why is he important? Where are some of the places he'd go? If you can actually find him, I'll owe you big for the rest of the year. An exclusive interview would be incredible."

"From a distance, though."

"What?"

"From a distance. I mean, if he's infected, you don't want to get anywhere near him."

"Right. From a distance." She paused. "Think you can dig up a phone number?"

"If he's got one, I'll find it," Gavin said.

"And anything else you can learn?"

"Sure, sis. I'm waiting to hear back from a client, so I've got some time."

"Thanks, Gavin. You're my secret weapon."

GAVIN COSTELLO HUNG up with his sister then sat back down at his desk. Most of his non-computer geek friends were surprised by his setup. They expected multiple monitors, couple of high-end tower computers, and peripheral hard drives and gadgets stacked to the ceiling. What he really had was a 13-inch PC laptop and a backup hard drive that ran automatically in the background over his Wi-Fi network. This gave him mobility on those rare occasions he worked away from his apartment.

Deciding to go the easy route first, he pulled up his current favorite search engine and typed in the name Daniel Ash. Not surprisingly, there was more than one. From the picture he'd seen on TV, the Ash his sister was looking for couldn't have been more than thirty-four or thirty-five, so that helped eliminate several of the possibilities. Then he tried to see if any of the remaining had a California connection. Two did, but the picture on the Facebook page that one of the links led to was definitely not the guy. The other lived clear up in Eureka and appeared to own a plumbing business. What would he be doing in the middle of the desert involved in a flu outbreak?

Gavin heard his sister's voice from his TV. The screen was placed so that all he had to do was swivel his chair around to see it. It looked like she'd moved to the opposite side of the highway, but what she was saying was pretty much the same thing she'd been saying most of the morning. Still, it always gave him a kick to see her work.

He grabbed his cell phone and typed in a text:

Maybe you should report from the middle of the road next time. HA!

He sent it to her, muted the TV, then returned to his computer.

Five minutes later, as he was still trying to narrow things down, his phone rang. Expecting his sister again, he answered the call without looking. "Hey."

Though the line sounded open, no one said anything.

"Tammy?"

Still nothing. He looked at the display. *Blocked*.

"Who is this?" he asked.

A click, and the line went dead.

"Whatever, man." He dropped his phone on the table and returned his attention to his laptop, all but forgetting about the call.

Forty minutes later, he hit pay dirt.

It was a picture of a group of Army officers in a Fayetteville, North Carolina, newspaper from a few years earlier. The officers were from nearby Fort Bragg and had given a presentation to the local high school. One of the men in the photo was identified as Lieutenant Daniel Ash, and the more Gavin looked at him, the more he was sure it was the same guy in the photo shown on PCN.

"Nice," he said, congratulating himself.

Several minutes later, he located information indicating that prior to being stationed at Fort Bragg, the lieutenant had spent a short time at Fort Irwin outside Barstow, California—less than sixty miles from Sage Springs. Where Ash had gone *after* Fort Bragg, Gavin wasn't able to discover yet. Still, he knew Tammy would want to hear what he'd learned so far.

He grabbed his phone to call her, but for some reason he didn't have a signal.

"What the hell?"

He *always* had a signal at home. It was one of the reasons he'd picked this apartment. In his business, he couldn't afford to live in a cellular dead zone.

He decided to copy the links into an email and send them to her. He wasn't sure if she could retrieve email on her sat phone, but she'd get it at some point. A split second after he hit SEND, he

got an error message telling him his cable modem was not currently connected to the Internet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Now he was really annoyed. He glanced at his TV. With the exception of a blue box across the center of the screen that read *Channel Currently Unavailable*, the screen had gone black. Apparently, the whole cable system, or at least the part that came into his building, was out of commission.

Just his luck that both it and his cell phone would go out at the same time. Maybe they were tied together somehow. A massive communications glitch. That should make the news. Well, if anyone was still getting a signal so they could watch it.

He set the email to send as soon as the connection returned, and got up to grab a soda out of his refrigerator. As he was deciding whether he wanted to make a sandwich to go with his Dr. Pepper, someone knocked on his door.

He was barely out of the kitchen when whoever it was pounded again, more urgent this time.

“Just a minute,” he yelled.

He looked through the security peephole in his door, but the person outside seemed to be covering it up. Had to be Dustin. He was always doing asshole things like that.

“Hilarious,” Gavin said loud enough so Dustin could hear him. Donning a reproachful smirk, he opened the door. “What the hell are you bothering me for at this—”

“Not a word.”

It wasn’t Dustin. It was a man holding a gun pointed at Gavin’s face.

“Sure,” Gavin said, then realized he’d broken the rule and added, “Sorry.”

The man stepped toward him, backing Gavin into the room. There were two others behind him, both big like the first man, wearing similar dark suits, and also armed.

Once everyone was inside, the last man in shut the door.

“Anyone else here?” the first guy asked.

“No,” Gavin said, shaking his head vigorously from side to side. “Just me.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’m not lying.” Gavin’s voice cracked a little, and he could feel his hands shaking at his side.

The two other men headed into the hallway that led back to the bedroom. They were only gone about thirty seconds before they reappeared.

“Clear,” one of them said, then stepped carefully into the kitchen with his partner.

There was another “clear” and they both returned.

“Your name’s Gavin Costello?” the first guy asked.

“Yes.”

The man touched a Bluetooth headset mounted on his ear. “We’re secure. You can release the building.” He looked at Gavin, then nodded toward the desk. “That your only computer?”

“What? Uh, no. I have a Dell in my closet.”

“Is the laptop the only computer you *use*?”

“Yes. Yes, it is. You want it? It’s all yours.”

Who the hell were these guys? If they were trying to rob him, they were the best-dressed home invaders in history. Whoever they were, though, if they just wanted his computer, great. They could take it and their guns and leave.

The main guy glanced at the other men. “Grab it.”

The slightly smaller of the two took the laptop from the desk. “Phone,” he said, then raised Gavin’s cell into the air so the others could see it.

“Bring it,” the main guy said. “That your only phone, Gavin?”

“Yeah. Yeah, only one. I don’t even have a landline.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

Gavin tried not to show his relief. They’d be gone in just a second. And he was going to be okay.

But then the man grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the door. “You, too.”

“What? Why me? What do you need me for? You got my computer. You’ll get good money for that.”

“No more talking or I pull the trigger.”

The man said this so matter-of-factly that Gavin bit his lip to keep from saying anything.

• • • •

THE MAIN GUY SAID, “We’re secure. You can release the building.”

Five seconds later, two doors down the hall, Mrs. McFadden’s cable came back on.

Good thing, too. One of the local stations showed reruns of Perry Mason every day at noon, and she hadn’t missed an episode in over a year. The moment the TV signal had gone out, she’d tried calling the cable company, but there’d been something wrong with her phone, too. Now all was right with the world again, and Perry would be on in just a few minutes to embarrass that stuck-up Hamilton Burger like he always did.

Of the eighteen other apartments in the building, there was only one additional person home, a man named Frank Bushnell. He worked graveyard dispatch for the police so he was sound asleep. The outage passed without him ever knowing anything was wrong.

In apartment 11, Gavin Costello’s apartment, as soon as the cable kicked back in, the laptop’s Wi-Fi reconnected with the Internet. While the main guy was telling one of his associates to grab the computer, the email program was going through its normal cycle. This time, after confirming that it was once more connected to the cyber world beyond Gavin’s walls, it sent off the single message waiting in the queue, finishing its operation just seconds before the associate slammed the screen shut.

• • • •

A FEW HUNDRED MILES southeast, Tamara Costello’s sat phone pinged with an incoming email. At that moment, though, Tamara was on camera and didn’t hear it arrive.



**T**HE MOMENT RACHEL said that Josie and Brandon were still alive, Ash's vision went gray. In his mind, he could hear Josie's cry, and feel how cold she'd been as he tried to keep her warm. He could even sense Brandon's fear as they were being led out of the house at Barker Flats.

But most of all, he could remember the numbness, the horror, the disbelief, and the total devastation he'd felt when the voice in the ceiling had told him his children were dead.

When he finally regained his senses, he was on the ground, one leg tucked under him, with no idea how he'd gotten there. Rachel was kneeling on one side, while Pax was doing the same on the other.

"Are you telling me the truth?" he whispered.

"Let's get you back in your seat," Rachel said.

She and Pax lifted him to his feet and helped him into the chair.

While they were doing this, Matt walked over to the cabinet and pulled out the tape-covered envelope. From inside, he removed a folded legal-size envelope and a thumb drive. He handed the envelope to Rachel, and took the drive over to the control panel.

"We've already watched these," Matt said. "They might not be easy to look at, but you need to see them, too."

He stuck the drive into a port and hit several buttons.

The television screen was black for a moment, then gray, then...

A room, not too dissimilar from Ash's cell at Barker Flats. Only this room had a door that was open, and a window that Ash got the sense didn't look to the outside. The shot was from up high and angled down.

Lying on the bed was Brandon.

Ash couldn't help but lean forward. Here was his son. He hadn't seen Brandon's face since they had been separated. He remembered now what he told his son at that moment. "Go with them. It'll be okay. You'll see me in just a bit."

He'd believed it then, because that's what they had told him. But it wasn't true, so the last thing he had told his son was a lie.

"I made some time notations on the back of the envelope," Matt said to Rachel.

Ash could hear her flip the envelope over, but he didn't look. He couldn't tear his eyes from the screen.

"Oh-six twenty-seven," Rachel said.

The image started scrolling quickly forward, then slowed back to real time.

"This is six-thirty in the morning, just a few hours after you were both brought in," Matt explained.

Brandon looked like he was asleep. Suddenly the door pushed all the way open, and someone in a biosafe suit came in. The person knelt down next to the bed and put something on Brandon's forehead.

A few moments later, a voice said, "Temp, ninety-eight point five."

Ash thought back. Six-thirty meant he'd been in his cell for at least four hours. By that point, he'd already been told that Josie was dead. But Brandon? He didn't know for sure, but he didn't think so.

"Next," Matt said.

Rachel read off another time code. "Ten twelve."

That, Ash knew, was definitely after when he'd been told about his son. No way it was later than that.

Once more the picture raced forward before resuming normal speed. The time stamp in the lower left read 10:12. The boy in the bed was still Brandon. And he was very much alive.

“Stop,” Ash said.

Matt hit pause.

“Skip ahead.”

“How far?”

“Nowhere in particular. Just let it run.”

Ash just wanted to see Brandon move, Brandon alive, Brandon definitely there longer than the voice had led him to believe. One hour, two hours, three, four. It was all the same, all revealing the lie he'd been told.

“Stop,” he finally said. “Is there video of Josie?”

“There is.”

“Show it to me.”

Her footage was more painful to watch. She was still ill. But she wasn't dead. Ash made Matt speed through the footage like he had with Brandon's, this time not stopping until Josie sat up.

“Play it,” Ash said quickly.

The image snapped to normal time. Josie had a hand on the wall, steadying herself.

“Hello? Hello?” she said. “Where am I?”

Dear God, he never thought he'd hear her voice again.

He could feel the tears gathering in his eyes, and the breath quivering in his lungs. But he sucked in deeply and forced himself to remain under control.

Matt turned the video off.

“What are you doing?” Ash said.

“I'll give you the drive and have a computer set up in your room. You can watch as much as you want there. But if I were you, I wouldn't. There's nothing else that will mean anything. The most important thing was for you to see that they're still alive.”

Ash glanced at the envelope in front of Rachel. “You said you had different times marked. There must be something you thought I should see.”

“Moments, only. Things I thought might help convince you. But you don't need convincing.”

Ash hesitated, then asked, “Were they told anything about me?”

Matt looked at him for a moment. “Yes. At first they were told you were sick, then later that you had died.” He paused. “I can show you that if you really want.”

A spike of pain shot through Ash's heart. His children, how they must be suffering thinking both of their parents were dead.

He shook his head. He would have to watch at some point, but he wasn't sure he could take it right now. It was enough to know they were alive, that they had survived the mysterious illness that had apparently taken everyone else around them. That he would be able to—

His head whipped around, his eyes finding Matt. “They survived the disease, but...but the explosion!”

“No,” Matt said quickly, shaking his head. “They weren't there. They were moved as soon as your daughter could travel, two days after they took you in.”

“Moved where?”

“Some place where they...”

“Where they what?”

Matt glanced at Billy, so Ash did the same.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

Billy cleared his throat. “Captain, you have an immunity to this particular virus. They’ve been looking for someone like you. What happened at Barker Flats isn’t the first time some variant of this virus has been tested. But we’re pretty sure you and your children are the first to survive. It’s obvious you’ve passed your immunity on to them. We think they are...running tests on your kids. Using them to pinpoint this immunity.”

A mix of anger and horror flashed in Ash’s eyes. “Tests?”

“Mostly with their blood, would be my guess,” Billy said in his nonchalant way.

“The good news,” Rachel said, jumping in, “is that it means they’ll want to keep Josie and Brandon alive.”

“I need to find them,” Ash said, pushing himself up. “I need to go now. I have to get them back.”

Rachel touched his arm. “If you go now, you won’t get within a hundred miles of them. Your face is all over the television. You’ll be caught, then all three of you will be lost.”

Clenching his teeth, he said, “I can’t just stay here and do nothing.”

“We’re not asking you to do nothing.” Matt walked down the table until he was directly across from Ash. “We’re asking you to let us help you get them back.”

Ash was almost shaking now, his anger at those who had taken Josie and Brandon growing with each second. “How can you help me?”

Rachel smiled. “Let us show you.”





**H**ECTOR MENDEZ ARRIVED home at ten a.m. He lived alone in an old house on the outskirts of Victorville, California. The place had belonged to his mother, but she'd been dead for three years so it had been his since then.

That had also been around the time he and Lucy finally went their separate ways. It was his fault, and he knew it. He'd been a long-distance trucker when they were together, away from home for weeks at a time. He'd made some big stink about this being who he was and how he wasn't going to change. But staying home by herself wasn't who Lucy was either.

The irony, of course, was that not long after she left him, he gave up the long-distance work, and took a local trucking job for a regional bakery that had him home every day just about the time everyone else was going to their jobs.

His daily route started at midnight and took him from Victorville through Barstow, up to Sage Springs, around to Trona, then Ridgecrest, Johannesburg, Adelanto and finally home. His employer supplied mostly hotels, a few restaurants, and a couple of hospitals.

As was his habit, he and a few of the other drivers had breakfast at the local diner and then he'd driven home. Once there, he had his usual pre-sleep beer, watched one of the shows he'd recorded the night before, and went to bed.

He woke at three p.m., two hours earlier than usual. The reason was simple. He'd coughed himself awake. He headed into the kitchen where he hocked up what was in his throat, spit it into the sink, then got a glass of water.

*Great*, he thought as he chugged the liquid down. He hated being sick.

He decided to take a couple of cold tablets, the non-drowsy type since he'd have to be up and moving around in a few hours, and went back to bed.

When his boss called at 12:10 a.m. to find out why he was late, the ringing of his phone reached his ears but his mind barely registered it. Thirty minutes later, when Karl, a friend who also drove for the bakery, knocked on his door, he didn't hear anything at all.

Hector was dead.



**TAMARA COSTELLO DIDN'T** see the email from her brother until after lunch. She wasn't used to checking for them on her sat phone. Ninety-nine percent of the time she relied on her smartphone for email. But finally she noticed the tiny icon glowing dully on her display, indicating she'd received something.

She'd actually become annoyed with Gavin. She'd been trying to call him, but kept going straight to his voice mail. The email, however, more than made up for his lack of communication.

Daniel Ash was in the Army. Could it be that this was some kind of military accident, and not an act of terrorism like officials were starting to characterize it? She couldn't help but make the connection to the still unconfirmed report of an explosion at a military installation two nights ago. Had that been an Army base? It was something to check.

She had another live spot coming up in one minute. She tried her brother one more time, wanting to see if he'd learned anything more. Voice mail.

"Dammit, Gavin. Where the hell are you?" she said.

"Tamara, thirty seconds," her producer, Joe, announced.

While she did consider trying to get independent confirmation on Gavin's information, the thought passed so quickly through her mind it was almost like she hadn't had it at all. The several times she'd relied on her brother in the past, his information had always proven to be accurate. And there was no question that the Ash in the picture from one of the links Gavin sent was the same man in the photo authorities had given to the media.

As she got into position, Joe checked the mic clipped to her shirt. The moment he stepped away, she looked at the camera.

"How's this?" she asked.

Bobby, the cameraman, kept his eye on the viewfinder and gave her the thumbs up.

"Okay, we're coming up," Joe told her.

As she put her earpiece back in, she could suddenly hear Greg Roberts in the studio. He'd taken over anchor duties from Catherine a half hour earlier. Tamara took a deep breath, put the appropriate concerned look on her face, then gave Joe and Bobby a nod.

She was ready.

• • • •

"...THAT TIME UNTIL THE CDC was notified," the PCN anchor said. The graphic at the bottom of the screen identified him as Greg Roberts. "The situation seems to have settled into a kind of wait-and-see. We should learn more at the next press conference scheduled for two hours from now." He paused. "Okay, we're going to go back out to our reporter on the scene, Tamara Costello. Tamara, how's the mood there?"

Dr. Karp frowned at his television. *Mood? Where do they get these people?*

The picture switched to the same desert shot beside the roadblock the network had been using most of the morning. Centered in the frame was Tamara Costello, their on-scene reporter.

"The high level of tension we noticed when we first arrived at the western roadblock has become more of a simmer as we await word of what's actually happening in town," she said.

"I've talked to several members of the highway patrol who are manning this post with a squad of Army personnel, and I can truthfully say no one has any more information concerning the residents of Sage Springs than we do here."

The image on the screen split in two, with a shot of the in-studio anchor on the left, and Tamara in the desert on the right. "There's been a report that at least twenty-five people have died in town," Greg said, "and somewhere between seventy-five and one hundred are feared infected."

"We heard that, too, Greg. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to confirm any numbers. I can say that twenty minutes ago, a convoy of vehicles, mostly Suburbans, passed through the roadblock and headed into town at high speed." As she spoke, footage of the caravan replaced the two talking heads. There were five vehicles altogether, their windows blacked out. "Our producer, Joe, heard from someone on the roadblock that these were part of a CDC team here to help the situation."

The picture switched back to the double shot.

"Are there any concerns that the virus could reach where you are currently situated?"

Dr. Karp rolled his eyes. Ten miles away through a warm desert? His skills were excellent, but they weren't *that* excellent.

"Greg, we've been told that our position is completely safe. In fact, one of the officials who stopped here earlier made a point to say that even if the roadblock were just a mile out from the town, there would still be no problem. A source has told me that the extra distance gives the authorities

enough room to spot anyone crazy enough to try and sneak into or out of Sage Springs. As we already know, two people have attempted this and have been arrested.”

“Thanks, Tamara. We’ll check back with you—”

“I do have one piece of new information that I can share with you, Greg. It concerns the man authorities have deemed a person of interest.”

Dr. Karp leaned forward. Beside him, Major Ross did the same.

“Daniel Ash?”

“Yes. According to my information, Ash is either in or was in the U.S. Army. We know that three and a half years ago he was a lieutenant at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, and before that, he was stationed at Fort Irwin, which is less than eighty miles from Sage Springs.”

“How the hell did she learn that?” Major Ross said.

Greg, the anchor, looked equally surprised by this new information. “That’s certainly something we haven’t heard yet. Is there more?”

“That’s all I have at the moment, Greg, but as soon as I know anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you, Tamara. You and your crew be careful out there.”

“We will, Greg. Thank you.”

As the image switched to a one-shot of the anchor, Ross picked up the remote and hit MUTE. He then quickly punched a number into the conference-room phone, making sure the speaker was engaged.

One ring, then, “Yes?”

“Were you watching that?” Ross asked.

“If you’re talking about the Costello woman, then yes, I saw it,” Shell said.

“How the hell did she find that out?”

“Apparently her brother sent her the information in an email.”

“Her brother? I thought you had her brother.”

“We do. We only learned twenty minutes ago that the email had gone out before we were able to fully secure his equipment.”

“Twenty minutes ago? You could have stopped her then!”

Shell was silent for a moment. “There was no reason to. The information was going to come out eventually. It’s not going to do any harm.”

Dr. Karp, who’d been content to let the other two fight it out, finally said, “I think we can use this to our advantage.”

Major Ross glanced at him doubtfully. “You want to explain that?”

“We’ve already been putting the pressure on Captain Ash. A little more can only help. I say we identify him as a mole. People will already be thinking that’s a possibility anyway.”

“So change him from a person of interest into a suspect,” Shell said, the hint of a smile in his voice.

“Not *a* suspect,” the doctor said. “*The* suspect.”

It would either flush Ash out or get him killed. Either way, he wouldn’t be a problem anymore.



THE ONE THING Ash was very good at was going all in when he decided on a course of action. The only goal he had in his life now was getting his children back. Rachel, Matt, and the others described a plan that, even a few hours earlier, he would have found crazy. But not only was his face plastered all over television, it was now being openly speculated that he was responsible for the virus outbreak, exactly as Rachel had predicted.

Give it another day and he would be branded a terrorist, something they were all convinced would occur. And when it did, not only would he be in danger of being arrested if anyone recognized him, there was a good chance some “concerned citizen” would try to kill him.

If he was going to save his kids, the Ash he saw every morning in the mirror had to go.

“Watch your step,” Matt said as he opened a door that led down into the basement of the Lodge—the name that apparently everyone called the ranch’s main building.

Matt went down first, with Ash following and Billy bringing up the rear. When they reached the bottom, Ash saw that the space was mainly being used for storage.

Matt headed straight to the south wall, stopping in front of a clear spot between two shelving units. For several seconds, he didn’t move. Ash looked over at Billy, his eyebrow raised in question, but Billy was looking at the wall, too.

A sudden *thunk* caused Ash to look back around. Nothing had changed as far as he could see. Then Matt reached out and pushed on the wall. A door-shaped panel of stone moved inward, and a light in the space beyond came on.

Matt started to go through the opening, but Ash hesitated. “You’re not going to lock me in down there, are you?” He’d had his fill of confinement.

Matt paused. “Absolutely not. Besides this, there are two other ways out—one that exits in the dormitory where your room is, and another in the ruins of an old barn in the trees. We’ll show you both, and I promise no doors will be locked behind you.”

The two men watched Ash until he nodded and said, “Okay.”

Stepping through the door, Ash found himself in a five-foot-by-five-foot room. As soon as Billy closed the secret panel, Matt put his hand on the wall. A small square section surrounding his palm lit up for several seconds. As soon as it went dark, the wall to their right slid open, revealing a set of stairs.

These were at least double the length of the ones that led down from the first floor into the regular basement. When the trio reached the bottom, Matt palmed the wall again, and a door popped open.

The only thing about this new level that said basement to Ash was the lack of windows. Otherwise, he thought it was very much like a high-tech military facility. There was a long corridor running down the middle, with rooms and other hallways leading off to the sides.

“How big is this place?” he asked.

“The footprint’s about twice as large as the Lodge,” Matt explained as they walked down the corridor. “We can comfortably house fifty people down here for several months, if necessary. There are actually two more levels below this, but both are smaller and used only for storage.” He pointed to the left, down an intersecting hallway. “There’s a firing range down there, and our armory. That room..” He pointed at a door just ahead. “That’s the IT room, where all our servers and other computer equipment live.” He nodded at another hallway. “We have a small cafeteria down there, and several dorm rooms just on the other side of it.”

“I thought bomb shelters went out with the fifties.”

Matt glanced at him. “There are a lot more things to be scared of than just bombs.”

“Like what?”

“Like viruses that get out of control,” Billy said.

“Or, more importantly, the people behind them,” Matt added. “Here we are.”

He opened a set of double doors, then ushered Ash in. Billy’s examination room upstairs was nothing compared to the full-on operating room they’d just entered.

Billy pushed past both of them, heading straight for a sink against the wall. “There’s a shower and some gowns back there,” he said to Ash, pointing at a door in the far corner. “When you’re done, come back here and I’ll throw a couple ideas at you.”

Ten minutes later, they were all standing in front of a computer screen on a counter not far from the surgery table.

“If we had time, I’d do a lot more, but for now we need to achieve the biggest change we can with the minimum amount of downtime for you. Now, this is what I was—”

“I don’t care what you do,” Ash said.

“Don’t you want to have some say?”

“I just want my kids back.”

No one said anything for a moment.

Matt gave Ash’s shoulder a pat. “I’ll choose for him.”

Billy looked at Ash, silently asking if that was okay, but Ash said nothing.

The ranch’s doctor shrugged. “All right, then. Let’s mark you up.”

• • • •

RACHEL WAS SITTING next to Ash’s bed when he woke, a book in her lap. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

His whole head throbbed. “I’m fine. What time is it?”

“Nine.”

“Evening, or...or morning.”

“Evening. You haven’t been out *that* long.”

It had been two p.m. when the surgery began, so he’d been unconscious for seven hours. He tried to touch his face, but it seemed to be covered in bandages.

“You’re a mess right now,” she said. “But in a couple of months it’ll all look normal to you.”

He tried to push himself up, but couldn’t. “I can’t...wait a couple of...months.”

“Of course not. We talked about that, remember?”

*Did we? Maybe.*

“Two days only, and we’ll use that time to get you as prepared as possible.”

Two days also seemed like too long. But what choice did he have? Without the new face, there was no chance he would ever even get close to his kids.

“Do you want to go back to sleep? Or get started?”

“Get started,” he said, his voice still weak.

“Excellent.” She picked up a folder that was on the stand by his bed. “Who are you?”

He squinted at her. “What?”

“You can’t be Captain Daniel Ash anymore, so who are you?”

Now he understood what she meant. A false name. “I don’t care. Anything. John Smith.”

“I think we can do better than that. Besides, you’re not just choosing for yourself, you’re choosing for your kids, too.”

He started to shake his head, but it only made it pound harder. He gave it a few seconds, then said, “Once people know what happened...we can go...back. Be ourselves again.”

She gave him a sad, knowing smile. “I tell you what. Why don’t we just pretend it’s important for right now? Better safe than sorry, right?”

“Sure. Whatever,” he replied, thinking he’d just choose the first name that came to mind. “How about—”

She touched his hand, stopping him. “I have some choices for you.” She opened the folder. “Tell me which one of these grabs you. Tyler Wright, Harold Boyce, Adam Cooper, William Keys, or Samuel Hunter. Anything stand out?”

He honestly didn’t care at all. “The third one,” he said.

“Adam Cooper?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He was silent for a moment. “Because I like the number three.”

She raised an eyebrow, then laughed softly to herself. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

She shrugged, rifled through the papers in the folder, and pulled one out. “All right, Mr. Cooper. Let’s see exactly who you are.”





KARL TRAINER COULD have just let it go, but he wasn't that kind of friend. Besides, his route took him near Hector Mendez's house anyway, so stopping for a quick check to see why his friend hadn't shown up for work wouldn't be that big of a deal.

When he got there, the first thing he noticed was Hector's car still parked out front. He'd been hoping that maybe they'd just missed each other on the highway, and Hector was already at the warehouse. Of course, it could have been that his friend was having car troubles and had gotten one of his neighbors to drive him in. That would definitely explain why he was late.

Sure, that had to be it.

Karl almost drove off, but, hell, he was here anyway. Might as well check. He went up to the door and knocked.

No answer.

"See? Not home," he said to himself.

As he took a step off the porch to head back to his rig, the nape of his neck began to tingle.

"Dammit," he said.

His wife called it his whoodoo-vooodoo. He'd get it every once in a while, a feeling that something wasn't right. The feeling *itself* wasn't always right, either. Still, there were enough times it was that he'd learned not to completely ignore it.

With an exasperated sigh, he decided to have a look around.

He'd been to Hector's enough times that he knew its layout. Contrary to most of the houses he'd lived in, the living room in Hector's place was in the back. Up front were the spare bedroom and the kitchen.

He skipped the window to the spare bedroom because he knew Hector only used it to store his mom's old stuff, and glanced into the kitchen. There was nothing unusual there. An empty beer bottle on the counter, but what house didn't have one of those now and then?

Hector's place was far enough out of town that he didn't need a fence. So Karl simply moved around the house and looked through the sliding glass door into the living room.

Nobody there. Nothing out of the ordinary. But that damn tingle wouldn't go away.

He moved along the back to the window that looked in on Hector's bedroom. The shade was pulled down, but the window was open about four inches so air could get inside.

"Hector?" he called through the gap.

Silence.

"He's not here," he said, trying to convince the tingle this was one of those times it was wrong. But it just kept burning away back there, in no apparent hurry to leave.

The screen over the window was loose, so it was a simple matter to pull it out a few inches, slip his hand behind it, and move the shade out of the way so he could take a look.

The room was dark, full of shadows, but the glow from the clock radio on the nightstand was bright enough that Karl could see someone lying on the bed. By the guy's shape, Karl was all but positive it was his friend.

"Hector, is that you? Buddy, what are you doing? It's after midnight. Hector. Hector! Wake up."

Hector didn't even twitch.

Karl's first thought was that his friend had had a heart attack. Hector did love his greasy burgers so it wouldn't be a huge surprise.

“Goddammit. I swear if you’re dead, I’m going to be pissed!”

Not knowing what else to do, Karl pulled the screen all the way off, pushed the window out of the way, and climbed through the opening. There was a dresser just on the other side, and as much as he tried to be careful, he ended up knocking a few things onto the floor before his feet reached the carpet.

“Sorry,” he said automatically.

Hector was lying on his side, facing away from him, so Karl moved around the bed, flicking on the bedroom light as he passed the switch.

It was Hector all right.

Karl put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, and was surprised at how cold Hector felt.

“You okay, man?” he said, shaking him.

He touched his friend’s neck, searching for a pulse. But there was nothing.

“Oh, God.”

He was too late. Hector had already passed. As he started to pull his hand back, he noticed a whole pile of tissues, half on the bed, half on the floor below it. Without even thinking about it, he leaned down to take a closer look, then suddenly stopped himself and took a step back.

The previous night had been his off night, which meant he’d gone to bed a lot earlier and gotten up around noon. While he’d been sitting around the living room, flipping through the channels on the TV, he couldn’t help but get sucked into the news about the deadly flu outbreak in Sage Springs. Some of the reporters were saying that so far anyone who caught the disease had died. By the evening, after his wife had come home and they were watching the news together, the reports gave the impression that the situation was under control.

But here was Hector, dead from what looked like the flu to Karl. And didn’t Hector’s route take him through Sage Springs?

He stumbled back further, falling to the floor, his hand touching something moist. Quickly, he pushed himself back to his feet, not taking the time to see what it was.

“Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus.”

Facing the bed as if he expected Hector to rise out of it and attack him, he moved back to the window and scrambled outside.

There, he doubled over and rubbed his face as he tried to catch his breath. After several seconds, he stood up, knowing he had to get out of there. He raced to his truck and reached up to open the door. That’s when he saw it. The damp spot on the side of his hand. Water or...

...mucus. *Hector’s snot.*

Instantly he thought about the moist spot he’d touched when he fell.

Eyes wide in panic, he dropped to the ground and wiped his hand against the asphalt, but he knew it was already too late. He’d rubbed his hand across his face. It could have gotten in his eyes, his nose, his mouth. Hell, chances were he’d been infected the moment he stepped into the room.

*“Unofficial sources have told me that, so far, no one who has caught this flu has survived.”*

*I’m a dead man.*

Karl’s mother had been a saint, at least to him. She’d been the nicest, kindest person he’d ever known. “Just doing what’s right,” she’d say. “Don’t know how to live any other way.” Karl had learned from her example and tried to live that way, too. He was a good son, then later a good husband, and a good friend, as was evident by his trip to check on Hector.

Kneeling there beside his truck, he knew there was only one right thing he could do now.

He made three phone calls as he drove away. The first was to 911, reporting Hector’s death and warning them that it appeared to be related to the Sage Springs flu. The second was to work, telling

them that Hector was sick and would be staying home, in case they were thinking about sending someone else out to check on him. He didn't mention his own plans, that he wouldn't be finishing his route, or, in fact, wouldn't even be starting it.

The third call was to his wife's cell phone. At that time of night, she would have turned it off, knowing if he *were* going to call, he'd use their landline. But he didn't want to talk to her. He just wanted to tell her he loved her one last time, so he said it to her voice mail, then turned off his phone and shoved it under his seat.

After that, he drove into the desert, away from the highway, and down a side road he was pretty sure no one would be on for several days. After he parked, he found a couple scraps of paper in the glove compartment and wrote two identical notes:

**DEATH FLU VICTIM INSIDE  
DO NOT OPEN DOORS  
CALL CDC**

He then put them on the windows of both doors, and settled in.

If he were still feeling okay by noon the next day, he'd drive back into town and take whatever punishment the company decided to give him.

But punishment was unnecessary. Karl Trainer never did drive back into town.

• • • •

UNLIKE KARL, THE THREE guys who'd had breakfast with Hector—Luis Chavez, Diego Ortega, and Al Rangel—were not blessed with the foreknowledge of what happened to them. So the virus that was believed to be contained in the small town of Sage Springs gained more and more of a foothold in Victorville with every person the three men came into contact with. This included, but was not limited to: the waitress and hostess at Kerry's Diner where they'd eaten, the customers at Ralph's supermarket between 11:41 a.m. and 12:03 p.m., Al Rangel's neighbor Charlie Fisher, and their respective spouses.

The disease then spread further through the eastern part of the city, clinging onto new hosts wherever it could. It was only by pure chance that none of those touched were heading over the hill into San Bernardino or Riverside or Orange County or Los Angeles. If that had happened, things could have gotten a whole lot worse.

Once again, Karl proved to be a hero. His call to 911 about Hector led to the entire town being shut down before sunrise, and the quarantine zone being expanded to a roughly triangular area that went from Victorville in the West, to China Lake in the North, to Barstow in the East.

When the calls of more sick and dead started coming in, at least it didn't catch anyone by surprise. And by luck and the quick work of the National Guard, the Victorville branch of the outbreak ran its course without spreading further.

Unfortunately, health officials in Victorville weren't the only ones who started receiving calls.



WHEN ASH WOKE the morning after his surgery, the pain in his head had become more of a throb—a huge, pounding throb. Pax was asleep in a chair in the corner. Apparently he'd been given the late shift.

Carefully, Ash swung his legs off the bed, then walked, painful step after painful step, to the bathroom. When he finally came back out, Pax was awake.

"I'd have helped you if you needed it," Pax said, getting out of his chair.

"I didn't need it. Where are my clothes?"

"You should lie down. Take it easy."

"Where...are they?"

Pax frowned and shook his head. "I'll get 'em." He opened the closet next to the bathroom, pulled out a set of clean clothes, and laid them on the bed. "I'll wait for you outside."

It took Ash fifteen minutes to get dressed. When he walked out of the room, he found Pax leaning against the wall in the hallway. "Looks like you'll live," Pax said, giving Ash the once-over. "Come on. Everyone's in the cafeteria."

Ash knew he wasn't a pretty sight. He'd taken a look at himself in the mirror, not because he was curious, but because he wanted to remember what the people who'd done this to his family had forced him to do. He wanted to remember the bandages, and the swollen face, and the bruises. He wanted to remember it all.

The cafeteria was more like a wide spot in the corridor than a room to itself. There were four long tables and, at the back, a counter that opened into a kitchen.

Matt, Rachel, and Billy were sitting together at one of the tables, while a woman Ash hadn't met before was sitting at the next one over, alone. She had coffee-colored skin and long, black hair. After a moment, he realized she might very well be the woman he'd seen doing shoulder exercises outside the day before.

In front of the tables was a TV on a cart. As soon as Ash and Pax walked up, Matt muted the volume, and the others got up and walked over to greet them. Everyone, that was, except the unknown woman.

"You should still be lying down," Billy reprimanded Ash.

"I think he looks fine," Rachel said. "How do you feel?"

"Sore," Ash told them. "But I'm not going to spend the day in bed."

Billy moved in close, examining the bandages and touching Ash's face. Twice, Ash winced.

"I can give you something for the pain," Billy offered.

"No."

Matt smiled. "You look fine to me. Well, except for your face. Come. Sit down."

As Ash took a seat, he glanced at the TV. They'd been watching the news.

"What happened while I was out?"

Rachel said, "Daniel Ash is officially a suspected terrorist."

He took a breath, trying to keep his anger in check, then nodded. "Just like you said."

On the screen, there was a shot of the desert. It was flat and brown and looked very much like the desert he'd seen on TV the previous day, and the desert he'd lived in for a month or so before...it happened.

The only difference today, though, was that instead of a steady shot, the picture was wildly jumping around. In the upper corner was a small graphic that read *Earlier Today*.

“What’s going on?” he asked, nodding at the screen.

Matt grabbed the remote and deactivated the mute.

Out of the speaker came the sounds of pounding feet, cloth rubbing against cloth, heavy breathing, and wind whipping across a microphone. Whoever was carrying the camera was running.

“Watch out! Bobby, Bobby. Watch out!” a female voice said.

The camera tilted quickly to the ground, revealing an offset crack in the asphalt. The cameraman seemed to take a hop step, then the image moved back up.

“This way,” the woman said.

As the lens turned to the left, the back of a young woman came into view. She glanced over her shoulder at the camera. It was the reporter Ash had watched on TV the day before.

“Just carry it, Bobby. You’re going to fall otherwise.”

The picture swung wildly for a few seconds, catching sky, then ground, then feet, before stabilizing at a lower angle. The girl was still in the picture, running just a few feet ahead. Visible now beyond her was a military helicopter. As the image moved a bit to the right, Ash realized there wasn’t just one helicopter, but several.

The woman looked back again, this time her gaze moving well beyond the camera. “Joe! Hurry up!”

There were uniformed soldiers standing outside the open doors of the helicopter. As soon as the reporter got there, one of the soldiers grabbed her arm and helped her up.

“All the way in, ma’am. All the way in,” he ordered.

When the cameraman got there, the procedure was repeated. Once more the image became chaotic, then settled back down and angled out the door the cameraman had just come through.

There were several dozen people running through the desert toward the helicopters. In the distance, Ash could see cars and media vans parked along the highway, and the same large military trucks that had been blocking the road since the previous day.

Seven people seemed to be heading for the cameraman’s helicopter. One of the soldiers took a few steps toward them.

“Only room for four more! Only four!” he yelled, holding up four fingers. He then pointed at the three people farthest away. “You, you, and you! Over there!” He directed them to a neighboring helicopter, but none of the three changed course. “No more room here! You’re over there!”

The four who were okayed to get on reached the helicopter and climbed aboard.

“Glad you could join us,” the reporter said to one of the men. Ash guessed he was probably the Joe she’d been yelling to earlier.

The other three were still coming, so the soldier who had been trying to redirect them got between them and the helicopter, then moved the rifle that had been slung over his shoulder into his hands. He wasn’t exactly pointing it at them, but he was making it clear he could.

“No. Room. Here. That one!” He tilted his head at the other aircraft.

This time the three stragglers got the message.

The soldier and his buddy who’d been outside with him jumped through the door, then yelled up front, “We’re good to go.”

Almost immediately the helicopter lifted off. There was a final bird’s-eye shot of the desert, with Sage Springs laid out in the distance, then the image on the screen switched to the anchor in the studio.

“Those startling images were taken by cameraman Bobby Lion. With him was PCN reporter Tamara Costello and their producer Joe Canavo. The video was shot earlier this morning as they were evacuated out of the expanded quarantine zone that now stretches over a large portion of the Mojave Desert in Eastern California. As a reminder, if you are watching us from within the quarantine zone, you are asked to stay in your homes until further advised and avoid contact with anyone other than those who are already in your home with you.”

“It’s spread?” Ash asked.

“Several cases reported in Victorville this morning,” Billy said. “That’s just northeast of L.A. They’re also calling it the Sage Flu now.”

“My God.”

“You’ll want to watch this,” Rachel said, still looking at the TV.

“...alert for this man.” The anchor had been replaced by the same picture of Ash the networks had already been showing. “Daniel Ash, a captain in the U.S. Army, is now thought to be behind this terrorist attack. His motives are unknown at this time, but sources do tell us he’d been showing signs of instability since returning from a tour of duty in Afghanistan. As we learned earlier this morning, this tragedy was made worse by the discovery that Ash apparently killed his own family prior to releasing the lethal virus.”

The image changed to a picture of Ash with Ellen, Josie and Brandon.

All Ash could do was stare at the screen. Any doubts he may have had about what Matt and the others had told him—gone. Completely.

“That’s enough,” he finally said, then stood up. “I want to get to work.”

“Sure,” Matt said. “But why don’t we get you some breakfast first?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’re going to need to eat something,” Billy said.

“I said I’m not hungry. So what’s next?”

Matt shared a look with Rachel, then glanced at Pax. “Weapons?”

“Sounds good to me,” Pax said. He rose to his feet and smiled at Ash. “How about a little target practice?”

“Lead the way.”

• • • •

THE DOOR PAX STOPPED in front of not only had two deadbolts, but also a thumbprint-recognition screen that released steel rods holding the door in place from above and below. Inside was the armory. Weapons hung on all the walls, while more were stored on shelves.

“Most of these never get used,” Pax explained. “They’re here more for education, so we’re familiar with anything we might come up against.”

“Are you guys like some sort of militia? Is that what this is?”

Pax was silent for a moment. “That’s really a hard question to answer. I guess in some people’s minds we might be called that. But our purpose isn’t to create our own little country, or take on the government, per se. But you should really talk to Matt about that. He’s the explainer. Me, I’d just mess it up.” He flashed a quick smile. “When was the last time you fired a handgun?”

“I don’t know. Four or five months ago.”

“How good are you?”

“Good enough. Better with a rifle.”



“Probably gonna want to avoid rifles for a while,” Pax said. “If that butt’s in your shoulder and it kicks off and hits you in the face, you will not be happy. Of course, you could have the same problem with a pistol if you can’t control the recoil.” He smiled again. “Break your nose all over again. That’s not my idea of fun.”

“Don’t worry. I can control the recoil.”

“Thought you could.” Pax smiled. “How about a little pistol refresher? Sound good to you?”

“Sure.”

Hanging on one wall were at least a hundred different handguns.

“The Army issue you an M9?” Pax asked.

“Yeah.”

“I could pull down one of those, if you like, but I prefer one of these three here.” Pax removed three pistols from the wall.

“I’m not married to the M9, so if you’ve got something better, great.”

Near the door were two floor-to-ceiling cabinets.

“Here,” Pax said, handing the guns to Ash.

With his hands free, Pax pulled a couple boxes of ammunition out of one of the cabinets. He then motioned Ash back into the hallway, and led him to the door on the opposite wall.

“Right in here,” he said as he unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Ash could sense the depth of the room even before Pax flipped on the lights and revealed a space that moved out from the door for at least fifty yards. Not too far in was a row of narrow dividers, and tracks along the ceiling that ran the length of the room. A classic indoor firing range.

Pax set the boxes of bullets on the shelf of the middle divider, then took the guns back. “As you might have noticed, we’ve got three compacts here, all nine millimeter like your old M9.” He set two of the guns down, then held up the third. “This one’s a Smith & Wesson M&P Compact. Twelve rounds plus one in the chamber. Trigger pull at six and a half pounds.” He put it down, and picked up the next one. “Glock 19. Fifteen rounds standard. Five and a half pounds on the trigger pull.” He replaced it with the last. “And this one’s the SIG SAUER P229. It holds thirteen rounds. Single-action trigger pull at four-point-four pounds. So, which would you like to try first?”

Ash decided to take them in order, starting with the Smith & Wesson. Although he had no problem controlling the kick, he could feel the first few shots all the way up his arms and into his head. Once he got going, though, the pain became more background noise than anything else.

Next he went to the Glock, then the SIG. After he took the last shot, Pax said, “So?”

Ash looked at the gun in his hand. “I like the feel of this one.”

“Good choice. One of my favorites. Of course, I’m partial to all three of them, so you couldn’t go wrong whichever way you went. You want to shoot some more?”

“Yes.” Ash popped the mag out and handed it to Pax. “I’d like to tighten up my groupings.”

With Pax’s help, by the time Ash had polished off the last round in the second box of ammo, his groupings at fifty feet could be covered by a dollar bill.

“It’s a good start,” Pax said.

“Get another box.”

Pax looked at him, surprised. “Don’t want to take a break?”

Ash released the mag into his hand. “No.”

As he plowed through the third box of bullets, he pictured the face of Dr. Karp on the target.

This time, his groupings were much better.



THE MEMBERS OF the media who'd been covering the roadblock at Sage Springs were flown to Fort Irwin Army base outside Barstow, California. Technically, they were still in the quarantine zone, but so far there had been no known cases in Barstow or on the base.

There, Tamara was able to learn that contingents of soldiers had been sent east on I-40 and northeast on I-15 to turn back motorists coming in from Arizona and Las Vegas. She'd also had an interesting, off-the-record conversation with one soldier who'd said the roadblocks had already dealt with several irate drivers insisting that they didn't have time to drive all the way to the I-10 to get to L.A. so they should be let through. Many promised to "keep their windows rolled up" and "not make any stops," while a couple of people had even gotten out of their cars and tried to physically intimidate the highway patrol officers who were handling most of the problems. Needless to say, those individuals had been arrested and taken east to a jail just on the other side of the Nevada border.

Even having learned all that, Tamara was frustrated. The Army was not allowing them to go anywhere. It was like the media were prisoners on the base, stuck with whatever news the Army decided to give them.

To add to her annoyance, her brother still hadn't gotten back to her. He'd given her that great lead then *poof*—disappeared. She'd just tried to call him again, but when she got his voice mail once more, she'd hung up and called her parents.

"Tammy, please tell me everything's fine," her mother said. The last time Tamara could call them had been the previous day right after the news broke. "We've been glued to the TV every second we've been awake. They keep showing that part where you and your friends are running to the helicopters. I wish they'd stop that. It nearly gives me a heart attack every time."

"Mom, just turn it off when it comes on," Tamara said. "Or just switch to another channel."

"I couldn't do that. Your ratings."

Tamara's mom had it in her mind that every single household was monitored and counted in a network's ratings. Even if that were true, PCN's ratings wouldn't have suffered from the temporary loss of one viewer. Especially not now, when Tamara was sure that if a TV was on somewhere, it was tuned to one of the news channels.

"Mom, have you heard from Gavin?"

"No, dear. But you know your brother. He gets tunnel vision. Probably working on a project."

Tamara frowned. He did get tunnel vision at times, but he'd never let her down like this before. "Okay. Thanks. That's all I wanted to know."

"Tammy?" her dad said. He'd obviously been listening in on the other line. "Have you talked to your boss? They need to get you out of there. You're right in the middle of everything."

"I'm a news correspondent, Dad. I'm *always* in the middle of things. Besides, everything's fine here. The closest outbreak is at least fifty miles away."

"But you never know, sweetie. The sooner you get out of there, the better your mother and I are going to feel."

"Don't worry so much. I'll be fine." She noticed Joe trying to wave her over to where the majority of the media was hanging out. "Look, I've got to go. I love you."

"We love you, too," her mother said.

"Very much," her dad added.

“Okay. Bye.”

She hung up, then hurried over to her producer. “What’s up?”

“Just got off the phone with Irene,” he whispered. Irene was their boss in New York. “She says they’ve been negotiating with the Army to get us taken out to the I-15 roadblock.”

“That’s great!”

“What’s great?” Peter Chavez, a reporter with one of the wire services, turned and asked.

“Uh, nothing, Peter,” Joe said, then smiled. “Just...telling Tammy about what I’m getting my wife for her birthday.”

Peter didn’t look convinced. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Tamara said, trying to cover her mistake. “He’s taking her to Paris. Isn’t that cool?”

Peter frowned. “Guess salaries are nicer over there at Generic Cable News.”

“I guess they are,” Joe replied. He then grabbed Tamara’s arm and moved her away from the crowd. “What an ass.”

“When will we know about going to the roadblock?” she whispered.

“I’m not sure. Soon, I hope.”

Not too far away, a TV had been set up under a canopy so that people with nothing to do could watch. The screen suddenly filled with some jumpy, low-quality video, catching Tamara’s eye.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Joe looked over and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Quickly they both made their way to the back of the group watching the television.

“Bobby,” Tamara said, noticing her cameraman a couple people ahead of her.

When he turned, she motioned for him to join them in the back.

As soon as he moved in beside her, she asked, “What *is* that?”

“Somebody just uploaded it to the Internet,” he said. “Some sort of skirmish at a roadblock just east of Tehachapi.”

Tehachapi was west of the town of Mojave, which was in the quarantine zone, and east of Bakersfield, which was not.

The footage looked like it had been shot on a camera phone. There were several dozen people pushing and shoving. Most were civilians, but there were a few people in uniforms, too.

This went on for several seconds, then a face flashed across the screen that caused Tamara to jerk back, startled.

It was Gavin, or someone who sure looked a hell of a lot like him. She pushed her way through the crowd so she could get closer to the screen.

Whoever was holding the camera seemed to be moving slightly away from the crowd. She could see the whole mob now, pushing and shoving at each other. She tried to find the guy who looked like Gavin, but didn’t see him.

A voice cut over the video, distorted by the poor quality of the camera’s microphone.

“Most of these guys...I think have family...in the...zone.” The speaker’s voice was punctuated by deep breaths. “They want to get in...but...the soldiers are...trying to push them...back. It looks like some...people are getting through.”

The shot zoomed in on a small group that was trying to go around the end of the roadblock while the soldiers were busy with the larger crowd. Suddenly several members of the big group saw what was happening and took off after the others, no doubt hoping that they, too, could get through. The trickle became a stream, then a river.

At the edge of the pack, two soldiers went down. As soon as their colleagues saw this, they opened fire.

“Oh, my God!” someone standing near Tamara yelled out as civilians started falling to the ground.

But Tamara couldn't even speak. She had seen Gavin again. He was wearing one of the shirts she'd given him for Christmas. And when the chaos was at its height, it looked very much like a bullet had hit him, too. Only unlike the others, he hadn't fallen away from the roadblock, but toward it, like he'd been shot from the other direction. And then there was the look on his face a moment before he went down, a look of disorientation and confusion.

Like he had no idea what he was doing there in the first place.

The pressure in her head built until she could almost take it no more. How she didn't scream, she had no idea.

• • • •

THERE WAS ANOTHER CONFERENCE call at noon. Since this one had been arranged ahead of time, they were connected via video chat. Though both Dr. Karp and Major Ross were at the Marin County location, each was in his own office. Shell was in a hotel room somewhere near the quarantine zone, and the Director of Preparation was at Bluebird. Of course the DOP's feed was blacked out. The project's number one guideline was that the members of the Bluebird Directorate were to remain anonymous.

“Dr. Karp, do you have the latest statistics on the outbreak?” the DOP asked.

The doctor leaned forward a few inches. “I talked to our source at the CDC five minutes ago, so the numbers I'm about to give you are as up to date as possible. Dead—three hundred and twenty-one. Currently infected—five hundred and seventeen. This information, of course, has not been released to the public yet. But I doubt they will be getting any—”

“That's enough for the moment,” the DOP said, cutting him off. “Mr. Shell, your update, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Shell said, adjusting himself in his chair. “On the quarantine front, state and military officials have a pretty good handle on containment for the majority of the population. Fortunately, the outbreak occurred in an open and underpopulated area.”

“It was not *fortunate*, Mr. Shell,” Dr. Karp broke in. “It was by design. Why do you think we chose Barker Flats in the first place?”

“Thank you, doctor,” the DOP said. “Mr. Shell, please continue.”

Shell took a loud, annoyed breath, then said, “As you know, our strategy is one of plugging the holes the official response can't handle. With your help, Director, I have my main team using Fort Irwin in Barstow as its base. Thank you for making that happen.” He paused, but the DOP said nothing. “I, uh, also have a team set up at a private airfield north of Victorville. Using thermal satellite imagery, we have been able to track in real time individuals who've tried to get out of the zone over the open desert. So far there have been twenty-eight attempts, and my people have stopped all of them.” There was no need for him to say what stopping meant. They all knew he was tasked with removing problems, not jailing them.

“Do you have any idea how many of those were actually infected?”

“Obviously, we wouldn't be able to know that without proper tests, but I can say with confidence that six showed outward signs of KV-27a infection. My teams continue to monitor the intel, and are ready to move on any new escape attempts at a moment's notice.”

“It's critical that no one gets out,” the DOP said.

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Please continue.”

“Yes, sir. There was the matter of the reporter’s brother.”

“Yes. Gavin Costello. A mistake to pick him up in the first place.”

Shell looked uncomfortable. “Yes, sir. Things were a little fluid at that point, and there was no telling what he might dig up for his sister.”

“Mr. Shell, I’m not fond of glossing over mistakes. There was nothing for him to dig up that would have harmed us. It was a mistake from the beginning.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Karp kept his expression neutral, but inside he was laughing as Shell squirmed.

“Continue your report.”

“Concerning Gavin Costello. Unfortunately, we couldn’t just let him go, especially given his sister’s high-profile job. Elimination was the only answer. We started spreading a rumor among people who were stranded in the Bakersfield area that the roadblock east of Tehachapi was going to be opened. When they arrived and found that it was still closed and would remain so, with the prodding of some of my men scattered within the group, they rioted. As soon as the military opened fire, one of my men eliminated Mr. Costello. When he is finally identified, his presence can easily be explained as concern for his sister.”

“And Ash?” the DOP asked.

“As you know we traced the original car to a parking garage at a casino in Nevada. I then gave a team instructions to trace the paths of every car that left that garage in the following four hours.”

Shell’s face was replaced by a thermal satellite image. Along the left side was a busy freeway running basically from bottom to top. It was covered with dozens of bright, warm blobs indicating vehicles.

“Please notice the spot near the midpoint of the picture. This is the most likely candidate.”

The spot in question was down an empty road that led off from the freeway. It was faint, but definitely warmer than the surrounding area.

“We were able to trace this car from the casino to this point. The heat signature you are looking at was generated by a person sitting inside a car. When it arrived here, there were two people, one up front, and one lying in the back. The driver got out, walked to the road, and was picked up three minutes later.” He then explained how the person in back got out, and eventually took a seat up front. He showed another picture. In this one, a larger vehicle was parked next to the smaller one. “The man transferred to the new vehicle and they left.”

“Were you able to follow it, too?” the DOP asked.

Shell hesitated. “We were able to follow them south for about twenty minutes. But we experienced a transmission problem that took us off line for an hour. In that gap, we lost them.”

“So you’re no closer to finding him now than you were earlier.”

“We are very hopeful that Dr. Karp’s suggestion of exposing Ash through the media will work,” Shell said, surprising Karp with his implied praise. “At the very least, it will be a long time before he can ever show his face again. Which means he’ll be unable to cause us any problems.”

“We don’t want that to be a reason for you to stop looking, though,” the DOP said.

“Of course not. It’s a top priority.”

“Have we figured out yet who was behind his escape?”

“By the level of organization involved, I think we’re dealing with the same people who aided Lauren Scott last year.”

*Lauren Scott?* The doctor hadn’t thought of her in a while.

“Thank you, Mr. Shell. You and Major Ross are excused.”

“Yes, sir,” Major Ross said.

“Thank you, sir,” Mr. Shell replied.

A moment later, *Connection Terminated* appeared where both of their faces had been.

“Dr. Karp,” the DOP said.

The doctor straightened in his chair. “Yes, sir?”

“First, progress on the vaccine?”

“As I’ve stated before, these things take time, but we feel like we’re getting very close now.”

“And the problem with the different reactions between the sexes?”

“We’re confident that we’ll have that solved shortly.”

“Good. See that it is,” the DOP said. “Now, about the virus. I do not want Mr. Shell privy to any of the...safeguards. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the doctor said, a bit unsure. “May I ask why, sir?”

There was no response for a moment, then, “Let’s just say that your virus is not the only thing that’s being tested.”

Before Dr. Karp could say anything else, the black screen that represented the Director of Preparation was suddenly replaced by the words *Connection Terminated*.





THE ORDERLY WAS glad that they'd finally decided to room his two patients together. It had decidedly improved both their spirits, and made keeping an eye on them easier for him.

He watched them in the monitor, talking to each other.

The boy was sitting on his sister's bed. He usually did that. The girl, while markedly improved, was still taking her time fully recovering. She tired easily, and still wasn't eating enough to remove the IV from her arm.

The orderly turned up the volume so he could hear.

"...mise?" the boy asked.

"Of course."

"Then I promise, too."

She held out her arms and he fell into them, letting her hug him tight.

A few tears rolled down the boy's face, but the orderly could see that he was attempting to be strong, attempting to be an adult years before he should even think about it.

"If they try," the boy said, "I won't let them."

"I won't let them, either," his sister told him. "We only have each other now, so we have to stick together."

The boy nodded. Several moments passed, then he said, "Do you really think there's a heaven?"

She stroked his head. "Yes, of course."

"So Mom and Dad are there? Thinking about us?"

"I think they're thinking about us as much as we're thinking about them."

"I'm thinking about them all the time."

"Exact—"

The orderly turned the sound down, wishing he had done so sooner.

• • • •

PAUL UNGER AND NICK Regan were half-brothers and best friends. Paul was a year older than Nick, and though he had an on-again, off-again relationship with his birth father, he really considered Nick's dad his, too.

While they lived in Randsburg, California, Paul and Nick attended high school twenty-five miles away in Ridgecrest. That meant they had to get up earlier every morning than most people in town so they could catch the bus.

The morning of the quarantine, their mom, as she always did, flipped on the TV to catch the news while they ate breakfast. Even at that early hour, the quarantine had already been enlarged.

"Sarge!" their mom had yelled. "Sarge, quick! You have to see this."

Their dad—Nick's biological and Paul's chosen—rushed into the kitchen, pulling a robe over the gym shorts and T-shirt he usually slept in.

"What is it?"

She turned up the television, and the four of them watched with growing horror as the news reported the expanding outbreak and the new quarantine zone. When a map showing the actual boundary lines of the zone appeared on the screen, the true realization of their situation hit home.

"That's us, Dad," Nick said. "We're in the zone."

On the screen, the anchor said, “The CDC is asking all those in the Sage Flu quarantine zone to remain in their homes, and to avoid contact with anyone else. If you have questions, or are in need of medications, medical attention, or do not have enough food in your house, an 800 number has been set up to provide assistance.” The promised number appeared on the screen.

Nick smiled. “I guess this means the bus isn’t coming.”

“Even if it does, you’re not getting on it,” his mother said, taking him more seriously than he meant.

Paul glanced at his stepdad. “The people who are sick are a long way away from here. Why are they making us stay inside?”

Sarge had come into marriage and family after spending twenty years in the Army, so he was a bit older father than most of the kids had. He was also a bit more experienced, having traveled the world and worked in, among other places, several base hospitals. So although Sarge didn’t have a medical degree, Paul knew his stepdad might actually know the answer, or at least have an educated guess.

But if he did, he kept it to himself, because he only said, “They’re probably just being cautious.”

In a way, that answer scared Paul more than something concrete would have.

With little else to do, they, like most of the people in the zone, stayed indoors glued to the television. So they were all sitting in the living room in the early afternoon when the video of the Tehachapi roadblock riot was played. As soon as it ended, Sarge picked up the remote and turned the TV off.

The others looked at each other, confused, then Nick said, “Dad?”

Sarge stared at the television screen, saying nothing.

“Dad, what is it?”

After another moment, Sarge took a deep breath, then looked around at his family.

“Boys, can you give your mother and me a moment, please?”

“Why?” Paul asked. “What is it?”

“Please,” Sarge said again.

“Sure,” Nick said, standing. “Sure. No problem. Come on, Paul.”

Paul hesitated a second, looking at Sarge, then rose and followed his brother into the hallway that led to their shared bedroom. Nick was going to head all the way back, but as soon as they were out of their parents’ sight, Paul grabbed his brother’s arm, put a finger to his own lips and said, “Shhhh.” He pulled Nick down to the floor, and they crawled back to the open end of the hallway to listen.

“You can’t know that,” their mother said, sounding scared.

“Vonda, this is going to get worse before it gets better, maybe a lot worse. They want us to stay in our homes, but we’re still sitting ducks here. The only way we can insure the boys don’t get sick is to get them out of here, out of this zone.”

“They’re shooting people who were trying to get *in*. They won’t even think twice about doing the same to someone trying to get out.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, and I think I might know a way.”

“What *way* are you talking about?” she asked.

“Better if I tell them at the same time.”

“I don’t know. I’d rather they just stay here.”

“Sweetheart, we can’t argue about this. It’s our boys’ lives we’re talking about. If they stay here, I think there’s a good chance they’re going to die.”

There was silence for a moment, then, “Okay.”

Sarge suddenly raised his voice. “Boys?”

Paul motioned for Nick to crawl back down the hallway with him.

“Boys! Come back out here!”

Once they reached the door to their room, Paul said, “What?”

“Come out here,” Sarge said. “Your mother and I need to talk to you.”

A few seconds later, they were all sitting around the living room.

“I think the news people aren’t telling us everything,” Sarge began. “My guess is they probably haven’t even been told themselves. Here’s the thing. I think this illness is a lot worse than they’re making it out to be. The reason we’re in the zone now is because someone who was sick must have passed through this area at some point. That means there’s a chance someone right here in town is infected, maybe more than one.” He looked down at his hands for a second, then back at the boys. “The bottom line is, you can’t stay here. If you do, you might die. Part of our jobs as parents is doing everything we can to keep our kids alive. So I want you two to get out of the quarantine area.”

“What about you and Mom?” Nick asked. “You’re coming with us, right?”

“My hip would never make it,” Sarge said. It was something that had bothered him for years. “And your mother...”

He seemed unable to finish, so their mom said, “I’d only slow you down.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Nick argued.

But they all knew she would. Their mom had put on some weight over the years. Not enough to be called fat, but enough to make her winded after a long walk.

“She’s staying with me,” Sarge said. “That’s not open for discussion.”

He pushed himself out of his recliner and went over to the desk in the corner. He searched through several of the drawers before he found what he was looking for and came back.

It turned out to be a map of Eastern California. He unfolded it and spread it out on the coffee table.

“You’ll take your dirt bikes. We’ll top off the gas from the tank in the car. Then you’ll head out this way.” He drew a path east across the map, toward Nevada.

“There’s no road there,” Nick said.

“I think that’s the point,” Paul told him.

“They’ll be expecting people to head west or south,” Sarge said. “That’s where the cities are. And you can’t go north because China Lake’s right up there. The Navy will have that whole area blocked off. They’ll never think anyone would go east.” He tapped the map. “When you get past this point, you’ll be out of the zone. Get on the first road you see, and keep going into Nevada. When you get there, keep a low profile, and don’t let anyone know where you’re from.”

“I’ll put some food together,” their mom said, already heading toward the kitchen. “You can carry it in one of your backpacks.”

“You’ll need some money,” Sarge said. “I got about five hundred dollars stashed away. I’ll give that to you. But I don’t know how long you’re going to be out there on your own, so make it last.”

“We will,” Paul said.

Nick stared at his brother. “We’re really going to do this? We’re going to leave them?”

“Yes. You are,” Sarge said before Paul could reply. “Now go get changed. You’re going to need some warm clothes. The nights still get cold.” As they headed toward the back, he added, “And bring your sleeping bags.”



SARGE DECIDED THEY should wait until just after sunset to leave. When the time finally came, the boys rolled their dirt bikes out of the garage. Paul's was an old Honda, while Nick's was an even older Yamaha, both 125s. Each boy was wearing two T-shirts, a sweater, a jacket, a pair of jeans, and long johns.

"Promise me you won't ride without your helmets," their mother said.

"We won't," Paul told her.

"And you'll call us once you're out."

"Yes. Yes."

Though they were carrying their cell phones, chances were they wouldn't have a signal out in the middle of the desert. But even if they did, Sarge told them not to use the phones until they were out of the zone, in case someone could track them.

Nick and Paul both hugged their mom.

"Remember, walk your bikes through town," Sarge said. "Don't start 'em up until you reach the other side of the highway. Better if nobody knows you've gone."

"Yes, sir," Paul said.

Sarge shook hands with his sons. "You guys take care of each other. Now, get a move on it."

Their house was on the western edge of town. The boys walked their bikes to the street, turned and gave their parents a long, final wave before heading east.

Randsburg was deathly quiet as they moved through town. It wasn't a big place to begin with, but there was usually someone outside at this time of the evening. But if not for the lights in several of the windows, it would have seemed like the place was deserted.

As they neared the western end, Paul said, "I need to make a stop first."

Nick looked at him for a moment, then his eyes widened in understanding. He shook his head. "Dad said no stops."

"I don't care. I'm not leaving without telling her goodbye."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Then keep going, and I'll catch up to you."

Nick stopped. "I'm not going without you."

"And I'm not going without talking to her," Paul said, halting beside him.

They stared at each other for several seconds, then Nick said, "Fine. But make it quick, okay?"

Paul smiled, and started pushing his bike again. "Sure. No problem."

As they walked up to Lisa Jennings's house, Paul sent her a text telling her to come outside, but not to tell anyone. Less than sixty seconds later, the kitchen door opened and she stepped out.

As soon as she saw Paul, she ran over and threw her arms around him.

"I'm so scared," she said.

"We all are," Paul told her.

They held each other for a few minutes, kissing a couple times, but mostly hugging. Finally, she noticed that Nick was there, too, then she saw the motorcycles and her face scrunched in confusion.

"What are you guys doing with your motorcycles? You heard everyone's supposed to stay home, right?"

"Uh, yeah," Paul said. "We know."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Come on. We got to go," Nick said.

"Go where?" Lisa asked.

Paul glanced at Nick.

Nick shook his head, then leaned toward his brother and whispered, “Dad doesn’t want anyone to know we left, remember?”

“She won’t tell,” Paul said, not bothering to lower his voice.

“Tell what?” Lisa asked.

Paul hesitated only a moment before he spilled the whole plan to her. If he couldn’t trust Lisa, whom could he trust?

As soon as he finished, she said, “I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. It’s going to be dangerous.”

“As dangerous as hanging around here waiting for the Sage Flu to get me?”

Nick stood silently by his bike, saying nothing, but the look on his face clearly showed he didn’t think Lisa coming along was a good idea.

“What about your parents?” Paul asked.

“Dad’s not even here. Got stuck in L.A. when this thing happened.” She tilted her head toward the house. “Mom doesn’t have to go to work at the motel tonight, so she’s been drunk off her ass all day. Finally passed out thirty minutes ago. She won’t notice.” She looked over at Nick. “I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want to die.”

Nick frowned, but then he nodded and said, “Okay.”

Five minutes later, as the three of them were walking down the road toward the highway, Lisa’s mother, still passed out on the couch, coughed.



**A**SH WOKE THIRTY minutes before dawn. In the bathroom, he peeled off most of the bandages that covered his head. His face was still swollen, though much less so than it had been the previous day. Bruises still encircled his eyes and covered his cheeks. Those, he knew, would be with him long after the swelling disappeared.

He studied himself in the mirror, trying to figure out what he would look like once trauma caused by the surgery had passed, but his imagination failed him. He'd have two eyes, two ears, a nose, and a mouth. Ultimately, that was all that was important.

After shooting practice the previous day, Pax had given him an extensive tour of the subterranean facility, and set him up with access to the computer room and the well-equipped gym.

The gym was where he headed as he exited his room at 5:45 a.m.

He was surprised to find someone else already there. It was the woman from the day before, the one he'd seen in the cafeteria but hadn't met yet.

She'd been doing stomach crunches as he walked in, but the second she heard him her head whipped around like he'd scared her.

"Sorry," he said. He took a few steps in her direction. "I'm Ash."

As she got off the bench, he thought she was going to walk over and shake his hand, but instead, she headed quickly to the wall, made her way around him in as wide an arc as she could, then exited the room without saying a word.

He stared after her, confused, but ultimately she wasn't important. There was work to do.

He had to be selective in what exercises he did so he wouldn't rupture the stitches that seemed to cover his head, but he was still able to get in a good workout.

After a shower, he went back to the firing range and spent two hours working with the SIG. His groupings had gotten to the point where they were consistent from set to set.

His next stop was the cafeteria for breakfast. Bobbi was in the kitchen, apparently on temporary assignment from upstairs. She made him an omelet with bacon and toast on the side. As he was finishing up, Pax arrived, holding a sweatshirt in his hand.

"Just took a look at your work on the range," Pax said. "We're going to have to offer you a place on our target shooting team."

Ash glanced at him, then returned his attention to his food.

"Bobbi, you got some more eggs back there?" Pax called out.

"You already had your breakfast upstairs," she told him.

"Doesn't mean I'm not still hungry."

"Doesn't mean I have to cook for you again, either."

Pax made a sour face toward the kitchen. "It's not like I have time to eat anymore anyway." He looked at Ash's plate. "You done?"

"Why? You want this?"

There was still half a piece of uneaten toast, but Pax shook his head.

"No. I need to take you up to see Matt."

As they walked toward the stairs, Pax handed the sweatshirt to Ash. "Put this on."

The sweatshirt was zip-up style with a hood. Ash figured it must be a little cold topside, so he did as Pax instructed.

"Hood, too," Pax told him.

“Why?”

“In case anyone’s watching.”

“Watching?”

“You’d be surprised how good surveillance is these days. Can see right through a window from miles away.”

“That sounds a little paranoid.”

“Welcome to our world.”

At Matt’s office, Pax opened the door for Ash, but didn’t go inside with him.

Matt was the only one there, sitting at his desk and writing something in a hardbound notebook.

He looked up. “You’re looking better today.”

“Not as good as I’d like,” Ash said.

“I can understand that. Have a seat.”

Matt wrote something else in the notebook, then closed it and leaned back, considering Ash.

“What?” Ash asked. “Has something happened?”

Two quiet seconds passed. “The guy who helped you get out of Barker Flats wasn’t our only inside source.” He paused, then put his forearms on the desk and leaned forward. “We got a message this morning from another one of our people that appears to indicate time might be getting short for your kids.”

“What was the message?” Ash asked quickly.

“The number four.”

Ash furrowed his brow.

“It’s simple code,” Matt went on. “It means danger.”

“Can you find out what kind of danger?”

“It doesn’t work that way. This was all he was in a position to tell us.”

“At the very least, can he give us their location?”

Matt was silent for a moment. “We’re pretty sure we already know where they are.”

“What? You know?”

“You’ll leave in three hours.”

Pushing his chair back and standing, Ash said, “I need to leave *now!*”

“That’s as soon as our plane can get back here. If you leave now, you’d still get there quicker if you wait. I know it’s not easy, but we can use the time to finish prepping you as best we can.”

Matt pressed a button on his desk phone.

There was a single ring, then Rachel’s voice said, “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Bring her in.” He hung up, then looked back at Ash. “Sit down. Please. I promise you we’re doing everything we can.”

It took all of Ash’s effort to lower himself into the seat. Moments after he did, the door opened, and Rachel and the girl from the gym entered.

The girl’s long black hair had been pulled into a ponytail when she’d been working out, but now, except for a strand she twisted nervously in her fingers, it hung free over her shoulders.

Rachel had a hand on the woman’s back, urging her across the room. As they neared, Ash stood. Instantly, the woman took a quick step back.

“It’s all right, Chloe,” Rachel said. “We’ve already talked about this. He’s not one of them.”

*One of what?* Ash wanted to ask, but he held it in, not wanting to scare the woman again.

Finally, Chloe gave Rachel a nod.



“Good,” Rachel said in a calm voice. “Chloe, this is...” She stopped and looked at Ash. “What do you want to be called? Adam? Cooper?”

“Ash, if it’s all right by you,” he said.

She smirked. “Your call.” To Chloe, she said, “His name is Adam Cooper, but he apparently goes by Ash. Ash, this is Chloe White.”

“Hello,” he said, trying to keep his voice gentle.

Chloe cringed a bit, but didn’t retreat. “Hi.” There was a momentary lull, then she said, “You’re *not* one of them, are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chloe motioned at Rachel and Matt. “They say you’re in the Army.”

“Yes...well, I don’t know now. Maybe.”

“Some of them are in the Army. Not a lot, but some.”

Ash looked her in the eyes. “I’ve only been in the Army. Nothing else.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

She nodded to herself several times. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I just...I don’t want to...go back, you know?”

“Go back where?” Ash asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to think about it. Please don’t make me think about it.”

“Come on, Chloe,” Rachel said quickly. “There are a few things we need to take care of before you leave.”

Chloe allowed herself to be led back to the door. Once there, she turned to Ash and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m sorry. I’m not...I’m not always like this.”

As soon as she and Rachel were gone, Ash looked at Matt. “What was that all about?”

“She’ll be going with you.”

“Her? Why?”

“She’s your guide.”

Ash stared at him. “Did you not just see her?”

“She’s the only one familiar with the facility your children are in.”

Ash glanced back at the door. “This girl can really help me?”

“Yes. She can.” Matt paused. “You need to understand that these people did something to her while she was with them. She used to be strong, uncompromising, but they broke her before we could get to her. Piece by piece she’s putting it back together, but it’s slow. Most of her life...well, let’s just say that it’s like she’s starting out again. Sometimes she slips. Maybe we shouldn’t have told her you were in the Army, but it was better it came out now than later. She’ll be okay.”

“If she’s taking me to where these people are, isn’t there a danger she’ll slip again?”

Matt hesitated. “Perhaps. But you were a surprise to her, an unknown. She already knows what to expect where you’re both going.”

“Are any of the rest of you coming?”

“I wish we could. This...outbreak has stretched our resources. We’re already working with a skeleton crew here. If any of us leaves, it’ll make it all that more difficult to support the rest of our organization, and many are in just as much danger as you will be.”

Ash couldn’t help but frown. “I’m having a hard time understanding just what your purpose is.”

“Do you want to know? Because we’ll tell you if you do. It’s pretty heavy stuff, though.” He paused, thoughtful for a moment. “Your children are your goal right now. Anything we tell you will

only distract from that. It's your choice.”

Several silent seconds went by.

Matt was right. Until Josie and Brandon were with him, Ash didn't need anything else clouding up his mind.

“Tell me about where they're keeping my kids.”



THE DESERT WAS tricky, even more so in the moonless night with their headlamps off. But Paul, with Lisa sitting behind him, and Nick didn't have much of a choice. The only thing they could do was keep their speed down, and hope they didn't hit any of the random holes and ruts too hard.

At midnight, they found a small canyon and stopped. About fifty feet in was a rock overhang, so they decided to use it as shelter and get a few hours of sleep.

Because none of them thought to set an alarm on their cell phone, those few hours turned into almost seven. By the time Paul opened his eyes, the sky was blue, and the warmth of the early spring day had already pushed back the cold of the night.

"Ah, crap!" he yelled, then nudged Lisa, who was sharing his sleeping bag with him. "Hey, baby, we got to get up."

She groaned, but didn't open her eyes.

"Come on, Lisa. It's already late."

"Just a little longer," she said, her voice low and raspy.

He gave her a kiss. "One minute. That's it."

"You're so generous."

He crawled out of the bag without unzipping it, then scrambled over to where Nick was sleeping and shook his shoulder.

"Time to get up."

Nick tried to turn away from him.

"Come on, Nick. We overslept."

His brother opened one eye halfway. "It's morning already?"

"We should have been gone four hours ago," Paul told him.

Nick grunted and rolled onto his back.

Now that Paul knew the other two were basically up, he went over to his backpack, took out one of the sandwiches his mom had made, then all but inhaled it. Since their water was limited, he was careful to drink only a few ounces.

Nick and Lisa were both sitting up now, neither looking particularly eager to get going.

"Come on," Paul said. "We've got to move!"

"All right, all right," Nick said. "I'm up."

He unzipped his sleeping bag and rolled out.

"Me, too," Lisa said.

"I don't want to stop for a while," Paul told them, "so eat something. I'm going to go see if I can get above the rim and figure out where we are."

Nick gave him a halfhearted wave of acknowledgment, then held out a hand to help Lisa out of her bag.

Paul scanned the canyon. Near the back he saw that part of the wall had crumbled down, creating a difficult but not impossible ramp to the top. He jogged over and carefully climbed up the slope.

He was just nearing the top when a rhythmic noise began, echoing through the canyon. He looked around, trying to spot the source, but though it kept getting louder and louder, he couldn't see anything that might be causing it.

Nick stepped out from under the overhang, looked up at Paul, then lifted his shoulders and held out his hands, silently asking what was making the noise. Paul, having no answer, repeated the gesture back.

He was about ten feet from the top of the ramp, and thought maybe he could see whatever it was from up there. But the moment he started to climb again, two helicopters streaked low across the sky just beyond the edge of the canyon. As soon as they passed the open end, they turned and descended to the ground.

There was no question in Paul's mind why they were here.

"Hide!" he yelled down at Lisa and Nick.

There was no way they could hear him above the whirl of the helicopters, but they'd obviously had the same thought. They began running through the canyon toward the crumbled ramp.

Paul looked quickly around, then slipped into a crack between two large clumps of dirt, keeping his head elevated just enough so he could see over the top.

Six men piled out of the helicopters, three from each, and began running into the canyon. Paul wasn't sure what was scarier: their rifles, or the full bio-protective suits they were wearing.

He looked down the ramp for Lisa and his brother, but it was too uneven, so while he could hear them scrambling on the slope, he couldn't see them.

Two of the armed men stopped near the bikes by the overhang, while the other four continued toward the back of the canyon.

"Stop!" one of them yelled, his voice distorted by his suit.

Paul heard Lisa and Nick stop climbing, and knew they'd been caught.

*Dammit!* Sarge was not going to be happy.

He watched the men, expecting them to move in and herd Lisa and Nick away, but instead, two of them raised their rifles.

*No! No! No! They've stopped! They've stopped!*

Paul started to open his mouth to yell exactly that, but before the words could even reach his lips, the men fired. The double boom ricocheted off the canyon walls, but what Paul *didn't* hear was more upsetting. Neither Lisa nor his brother yelled out.

As the men lowered their guns, Paul felt as if the earth had just swallowed him up. He watched all four men walk over to the ramp, then pass out of his line of sight. He could hear them moving around and talking quietly amongst themselves. When they reappeared on the canyon floor, two had Nick slung between them, and two had Lisa.

His brother.

His girlfriend.

Both of them clearly dead.

Paul stared down at them, hardly able to process what he was seeing.

No one was going to believe this. No one would ever believe helicopters had found them in the middle of the desert and—

His hand snapped down to his pants pocket, and he pulled out his cell phone. He turned it on, and worried for a moment the people would disappear before it started up. But he was in luck, if you could call it that. They set the bodies down near the base of the ramp, while one of the two who'd stayed near the motorcycles ran back to the helicopters. The man returned a few moments later with a clump of black plastic.

As soon as Paul's phone was ready, he accessed the camera, flipped it to movie mode, and began recording.

The man with the plastic gave half to the guys standing near Lisa, and the other half to the ones next to Nick. As they unfolded their pieces, Paul realized they were bags—body bags—just like ones he'd seen in some of the Military Channel documentaries Sarge liked to watch.

He had zero doubt this had been a killing operation from the beginning. There had been absolutely no intention of simply bringing any of them in. Why else would they have the bags with them?

“That’s my brother, and my girlfriend,” he whispered next to the camera, hoping that the suits the people below were wearing would make it hard for them to hear anything. “Those...those men shot them. We weren’t doing anything, but they shot them.” He opened his mouth to say more, but decided he’d already pressed his luck enough.

Once the bodies were sealed up, the men started carrying them out of the canyon. They all stopped for a moment near the motorcycles and seemed to have a quick conference. When they were through, the two men not carrying the bodies picked up the backpacks and sleeping bags, and carried them to the helicopters.

As soon as everything was aboard, the helicopters rose into the air and flew off in the direction from which they’d come, the thumping of the blades fading until silence descended on the canyon.

Paul didn’t move. There was a part of his mind that said if he stayed right there, none of this had really happened. That pretty soon Nick and Lisa would walk up the ramp looking for him. It would all be fine. They’d get on the bikes and get the hell out of there.

But there were no footsteps, no voices, no nothing, because the girl he loved and his brother were dead.

That’s when Paul lost it.

It was ten minutes before he finally pulled himself together, his face streaked with tears, and climbed out of his hiding spot. The first thing he did was crawl the rest of the way up to the ridge of the canyon.

There, he looked everywhere to make sure the helicopters had really gone. There wasn’t a speck anywhere, not even a cloud. Just blue, empty sky. The wrong sky for the kind of day it had turned out to be.

He hurried down the ramp, pausing for only a brief second as he passed the spot where Nick and Lisa had been killed. What blood he could see looked like dark stains against the dirt. It was...unreal.

When he reached the canyon floor, he ran to the overhang, wanting to get under the cover of the rock. It had occurred to him that the only way the men in the helicopters had known they were there was if he, Nick, and Lisa had been spotted from above. There must have been planes circling around that he and Nick hadn’t noticed. He was going to have to expose himself eventually, but, for the moment, he wanted them to think no one else was there.

Thank God the bikes had been too bulky to put on the helicopters. He would never make it if he had to walk out, but the bikes gave him a chance.

Using a hose off of the engine on Nick’s bike, he siphoned the remaining gas from Nick’s tank into his to give himself the best chance for escape.

His first inclination was to wait until dark, hoping that would make it harder to spot him. But the problem with that was the same problem they’d had the previous night. He would have to keep his speed down so he didn’t kill himself. If he left now, in broad daylight, he could race through the desert and that might be the difference between survival and a bullet in his head.

*A bullet.*

The rifles. The echo of the shots. The lack of any screams.

He shook himself. He couldn't think about that right now. He needed to go. He needed to get out. No one would know what happened to Nick and Lisa if he didn't.

He wheeled his bike to the edge of the overhang, then took a last look back at the earthen ramp where his girlfriend and his brother had died. Unconsciously, he touched the cell phone in his pocket, making sure it was secured. He couldn't lose that, no matter what.

He pulled on his helmet and hopped on the bike. There was no reason to stay any longer.

With a sudden roar, the motorcycle shot out of the canyon and into the desert.

• • • •

BEFORE THE SUN CAME up that morning, the Army finally caved to media pressure, and flew several people back to the roadblock outside Sage Springs. These were the people who had driven their particular network's vans to the location before the quarantine had gone wide. They were now allowed to drive the vans back to Fort Irwin under the escort of four Army Humvees and three helicopters flying above. Each had a soldier equipped with a radio riding inside with the driver. No one was to get out of their vehicle, and they were to stop only if the escorts stopped, too. If there were any problems, the soldier with them would radio it in.

Since the roads were empty, they made it back to Fort Irwin just after sunrise.

Tamara and Joe were both up and waiting when Bobby parked the PCN van in their newly assigned spot.

"Were you able to get any shots?" Joe asked as the cameraman climbed out.

Bobby gave him a quick shake of the head, then motioned to the other side of the van with his eyes. There, the soldier who had ridden with him was getting out. With an expression that conveyed tolerance at best, the soldier waved to Bobby and said, "Have a good day, Mr. Lion."

Bobby smiled broadly. "You, too." As soon as the soldier walked away, the smile disappeared. "I told him I just wanted to get a couple of shots from inside the van, but he made it very clear that we were only there to drive. Hell, he wouldn't even let me get in back to check the equipment before we left."

Tamara knew Joe had been hoping to get the shots, but, personally, she didn't care. Her mind was on something else.

"Can we check now?" she said.

Both men looked hesitant.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Joe asked.

"Absolutely."

"Come on," Bobby said.

He led them around the van to the side door, then opened it up. Not only was the van used to haul equipment, but it was also a mobile editing facility, allowing them to put stories together, record voiceovers, and transmit everything back to the network. Via their uplink, they also had a speedy Internet connection.

Using this, Bobby accessed the website where the footage from the incident at the Tehachapi roadblock had been uploaded. He clicked around for a bit, then said, "Found it."

He downloaded the video and transferred it into the editing software.

Before hitting PLAY, he looked back at Tamara. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," she said quickly. "Play it."

Together they watched the video all the way through. Tamara had told Bobby and Joe what she believed she saw, but had said nothing to anyone else. Every time the network replayed the video, she

had watched it, pointing out to them the man she was sure was her brother.

Bobby and Joe tried to reassure her by saying things like “you can’t tell for sure,” and “the resolution isn’t the best so you could have made a mistake,” and “why would he even be there?”

As sure as she was, she wanted to believe them, so she had stared at the video every time it came on, but every time she came to the same conclusion. It was Gavin.

The reason she couldn’t be absolutely positive, though, was that she had no control over what she was watching. She hadn’t been able to stop it or start it or reverse it. She had to watch it all the way through, then wait until the network decided to show it again. But now that the truck was here, she had access to the equipment that would allow her to take a better look.

“Go back to the part right before he’s shot, and hold it,” she said.

Bobby scrolled back, then hit pause. The problem with video, especially lower resolution video, was that the clarity of the picture came from the motion. A single frame often looked blurry, with less detail. Such was the case here. The man she was sure was her brother wasn’t much more than an indistinct human figure when paused on the screen.

“Can you go back a second or two,” she said, “then scroll back and forth through this section until I tell you to stop?”

“Sure,” Bobby replied.

He took it back to where the man in question turned in the direction of the camera, then he started moving forward through the footage at half speed. They had just passed the point where they’d originally paused when she said, “Stop.”

The image on the screen froze again.

“You see that?” She pointed at the man’s left arm.

“It’s an arm,” Joe said.

“On the arm. Those dots.” There were three dark spots visible on the exposed underside.

“That could just be digital noise,” Bobby said.

She pointed again. “Gavin has a tattoo on the inside of his left arm. One big dot, and two smaller. He was on the swim team in high school. It’s the molecule model for water.”

The two men looked at the screen again. Bobby then played that portion back and forth a couple of times. It was clear the dots were not digital artifacts, but were indeed on the man’s arm.

“Jesus,” Bobby said.

A tear began rolling down Tamara’s cheek. There was no denying it now—Gavin was the one who’d been shot.

“Play it ahead some,” she said. “Let’s see if we can figure out who did this to him.”

Bobby moved the video forward.

In all the times Tamara had watched it at normal speed, she had been unable to spot anyone who might have shot her brother. Her fear was that slowing the footage down wouldn’t change that.

“Wait, wait,” Joe said. “Play that last part back.”

“What did you see?” Tamara asked. Whatever it was, she had missed it.

“It may have been nothing.”

Bobby played the segment again, this time going super slow.

“There,” Joe said. “That guy.”

He was pointing at a man behind Gavin. The guy’s eyes were clearly fixed on Tamara’s brother. Something bright popped into view near the man’s waist for just a couple of frames, then the man disappeared behind Gavin. Two seconds later in real time, Gavin would be shot.

“What was that?” Tamara asked, referring to the bright spot.



“Gun, I think,” Bobby said.

“Then that’s him.”

Bobby froze the video. “This is right before your brother gets shot.”

“The man’s barely on screen,” Joe said. “No wonder we didn’t notice him before.”

The video didn’t actually show the man shooting Gavin, but it was clear to all three of them he had.

The question for Tamara now was, what was she going to do about it?



THE PLANE ARRIVED two and a half hours later, landing on a private airstrip on ranch land about a half-mile from the Lodge. It was a Gulfstream G250 business jet, outfitted for four passengers plus crew. After it was checked and refueled, Matt led Ash and Chloe aboard.

The main cabin was separated from the cockpit, so while Ash knew the flight crew was up front, he had no idea who they were. The cabin itself boasted four comfortable-looking leather chairs. The forward two had tables in front of them, while the back two did not. Chloe immediately went for one in the back, while Ash chose a seat up front, tucking the messenger bag that now served as his suitcase under it.

Ash was cleaned up as best as possible, but still looked like he'd been in a major accident. Rachel had cut his hair so it was now a uniform quarter-inch all the way around. She then did a quick bleach job making it and his eyebrows about three shades lighter than they'd been. The final touch had been contact lenses that changed the color of his eyes from blue to brown. He had two extra pairs in his bag as backups.

One thing was for sure: No one who used to know him would recognize him now.

"Pax will fly out with you, but this is as far as I go," Matt said, holding out his hand. "You're a good man, Ash. Get them back."

As Ash shook with him, he said, "Thanks for all the help you've given me."

"I've posted a message for our person on the inside, telling him you and Chloe are coming. He might get it, he might not. Even if he does, he might not be able to do anything to help, but...well, I'm sure he'll try." He paused. "Pax will give you a number to memorize. Any time you get in trouble, you call that, now or in the future, and we'll do what we can to help." Matt smiled, then glanced toward the back of the plane. "Chloe, good to see you again. Stay safe."

"No such thing," she said.

She was calmer than any of the other times Ash had seen her, but he could still sense a cloud of nervous tension hovering around her.

"The window shades will be automatically lowered before takeoff," Matt told him. "It's not that we don't trust you, but we have certain procedures we need to stand by."

Ash shrugged. He didn't really care where Matt and Rachel's ranch was. He was focused on his destination. On his children.

Matt hung in the doorway as if he had something more he wanted to say, but he finally just gave Ash a nod and got out.

When Pax climbed in a few minutes later, he was carrying two cases—one a normal-sized briefcase, and the other a metal-sided container that could have easily fit a small microwave oven inside. He stored the metal container in a cabinet up front, then put the briefcase on the seat next to Ash. After securing the outer door, he gave the entrance to the cockpit a double tap and returned to his seat.

"Hold this," he said, handing the briefcase to Ash.

As he buckled himself in, a low hum filled the cabin, and hard plastic shades lowered over the windows. To compensate for the loss of sunlight, the interior lights brightened.

Pax leaned over to take the case back, but then stopped. "Might as well do this now."

Outside, the dull roar of the engines grew in intensity.

"Open it up," Pax said.

The plane started rolling down the runway. It was slow at first, but quickly picked up speed. There was no taxiing here, just get on and go.

Ash popped the latches on the briefcase and flipped it open. Inside was a padded envelope and two file folders.

As Ash removed the envelope, the vibration caused by the runway suddenly ceased, and like that, they were in the air. He leaned back for a moment as their angle of ascent increased.

A year earlier, he had taken his family to a small amusement park in Virginia. The park had one of those rides where you were basically in a box that went up and down and side to side, but didn't really go anywhere. The sense of travel was conveyed by the combination of the movement and a video that played on a front screen. While they'd been on the ride, something had gone wrong with the projection system, and for several seconds they only had the walls to look at while the box kept jumping around.

Taking off with the windows closed reminded him of that.

As soon as they were settled into a comfortable climb, Ash opened the envelope and emptied the contents into the briefcase. The thing that stood out first was a small stack of cash. He quickly thumbed through it. Three grand. With the money he already had, that made five thousand total. Not exactly a windfall these days, but it definitely could come in handy.

"Thanks," he said.

"You run out, you call us. We can get you more."

Not that Ash was looking for an answer, but he wondered for the umpteenth time who these people really were.

"I'll...I'll pay you back."

"No need."

Ash didn't argue, but he wasn't conceding the point, either.

He looked back into the briefcase. The other two items from the envelope were a piece of paper and a wallet. He picked up the wallet first. Inside were three credit cards, a membership card for AAA, and a Florida driver's license, all under the name Adam Cooper.

"The credit cards are all good," Pax said. "But use each only once. If I were you, I'd avoid using any of them at all. Cards leave trails."

Ash thumbed out the license and looked at the picture. It could have been him, or it could have been someone else entirely.

"We had to do a bit of fancy Photoshop work on that," Pax said. "But it'll pass for now. When that new face of yours settles in, you can get a real picture taken."

Ash put the license back, then picked up the piece of paper.

"Why is this here?" he asked. It was the pink slip for a 2009 Honda Accord.

"You don't want to walk everywhere, do you?" Pax asked. "It'll be waiting when we land. Registration will hold up even if you get pulled over."

Ash stared at the cash and the cards and pink slip. "What do you guys want from me? You can't be giving me all this for free."

Pax was silent for several seconds. "The hope is you'll come back and help us when your personal business is settled. But that'll be up to you. It's not an expectation. We'd do this for you no matter what."

"Come back and help you do what, exactly?"

Pax leaned back in his seat. "That's something you'll have to hear from Matt, when you're ready." He closed his eyes like he was going to take a nap.

Ash transferred the items into his bag, then pulled out the two files from the briefcase. The first folder contained a set of grainy, five-by-seven photos, eight in all. Five were of men, and three were of women. A note was attached to the front picture.

If you see any of these people, or someone you think looks like any of them, I'd appreciate it if you would contact us.

Matt

Ash looked at the pictures again. None of the faces were familiar to him. He put the photos back in the folder and set it aside. The second folder contained newspaper clippings. There was also a note with these.

Some things to think about.

This one was not signed, but the handwriting was the same as the other.

Ash looked through the clippings, reading the headlines: *Earth Population Hits 7 Bil, Oil Spill Devastates Gulf Coast, Darfur Genocide Sees No End, Ethnic Cleansing a Worldwide Epidemic, Vanuatu Sees Territory Shrink As Oceans Rise.*

Cheerful stuff.

"Those you can keep."

Pax's voice surprised him. Ash looked over, but Pax was still lying back with his eyes closed.

"The only things I need to take back are the pictures and the briefcase."

"Are these articles supposed to mean something to me?" Ash asked.

"Didn't cut them out. Don't know what they are. Was just told you could keep them."

Ash wasn't sure he wanted to keep them, but he slipped the folder into his bag. He could always throw them out later.

"How long are we going to be in the air?" he asked.

"A couple hours."

"Is there a bathroom on this thing?"

"In back."

As Ash passed Chloe, she eyed him warily but didn't pull back.

He had almost forgotten about her as he looked through the things Pax had brought him. Matt had said she would be valuable to him, but Ash was doubtful that whatever value she brought would outweigh the negatives he felt she had. It would probably be best to part ways once she pointed him in the right direction.

Because if she got in his way...

• • • •

RACHEL GOT OUT OF THE car and joined her brother at the edge of the runway. Together they watched the Gulfstream gain speed as it rushed away from them then lift off into the air. It wasn't until the plane was a little dot in the distance that either of them spoke.

"What do you think his chances are?" she asked.

"You know I'm not good at figuring out odds. But if you pushed me I'd probably say not a chance in hell."

"We've had people beat that before."

“Yes, we have.”

She smiled. “You once said there was no way we would ever be able to defeat them.”

He took a breath. “I’m still inclined to believe that.”

“Yet we’re still here. Still fighting.”

“It’s a war that should have started a lot earlier than it did. All we’re doing is damage control and catch up.”

They fell silent.

“Do you think he’ll come back?” she asked.

“You mean after he beats no chance in hell? Maybe.”

“We could certainly use him.”

“We already are,” Matt said.

Rachel knew he was talking about the vials of Ash’s blood their off-site team was already working with. Their resources and facilities weren’t as impressive as the organization they were up against, but they weren’t working with kids’ chemistry sets either, and their people were both dedicated and motivated.

“I think he *will* be back,” she said.

Silently, they both looked west, in the direction the plane had finally disappeared. For the moment, there was nothing more to say.



CONFIRMATION CAME AT noon when Tamara's mother called, wailing, and told her that someone from the California Highway Patrol had just notified her that Gavin was dead. Thirty minutes later, a list of the Tehachapi casualties was handed out to the media at Fort Irwin.

Tamara knew Gavin's name would be there, but when she saw it, it was as if the breath had been ripped from her lungs.

Joe put an arm around her. "I'll call the network and let them know. You won't have to do any more reports."

"No," she said. "Don't call."

"You don't need to be a hero."

"I need to do this, okay? I need to have this right now. Understand?" What she didn't say was that while Joe had been off at a logistics briefing elsewhere on the base, she and Bobby had been working on a piece about her brother's death that she wanted to work into one of her upcoming reports.

"Seriously, Tammy. Your brother died. Don't push yourself."

"She'll be fine," Bobby said.

Joe frowned. "I don't know."

"What else is she going to do out here?" Bobby asked, looking around. "It'll give her something to take her mind of things until she can go home."

Joe thought for a moment, then looked at Tamara. "If that's what you really want."

She nodded. "It's what I want."

She allowed herself a quick glance at Bobby while Joe was distracted by a couple of helicopters landing nearby. "Done?" she mouthed.

He nodded.

*Good.* As soon as she could figure out how to work it in, the report would be ready to go.

"Who are *these* guys?" Joe asked.

Tamara turned around. The two arriving helicopters had settled down about fifty yards from where the press was camped out. The only other time helicopters had landed in that area was when they were all evacuated here. Though these were dark green, they had no markings on them, military or otherwise.

Three men jumped out of each helicopter, then gathered on the tarmac. After about half a minute, two of the men broke off and headed over to a waiting Jeep. The helicopters, though, had not powered down, giving the impression their stay was going to be short.

"I have no idea," Tamara said. "National Guard?"

"Could be, I guess."

They were just turning away when Bobby said, "Oh, crap."

Tamara looked over. Bobby, always looking for images they could use, had his camera on his shoulder, shooting the helicopters.

"What is it?" she asked.

He stepped back into the shade of the canopy and said, "Come here."

Tamara walked over, with Joe right on her heels. As soon as she got there, Bobby handed her the camera.

"The four men," he said.

She aimed the lens at the men on the tarmac.



“The guy on the left.”

She centered the picture on the guy in question.

“Here,” Bobby said. “Let me zoom it in for you.”

He pushed a button on top of the camera, and the image of the man rushed at her.

“Whoa, whoa,” she said. “Too much.” The picture had pushed past the man, and into the passenger area of the helicopter. There was something yellow clumped on the seat, but she barely registered it. “Let me do it.”

Bobby showed her where the button was, and she eased the zoom out a little, then adjusted the angle so she could see the man’s face. He was in profile, and though he looked a bit familiar, she couldn’t place him. Maybe one of the guys who’d flown them out during the evacuation?

She was about to ask Bobby what was so special about the guy when the man turned, suddenly bringing his whole face into view.

For several seconds she forgot to breathe. Finally, she pulled her eye from the viewfinder and allowed Bobby to take the camera from her.

“What is it?” Joe asked.

Bobby gave him the camera.

“Oh, my God,” Joe exclaimed once he’d gotten a look at the man.

They had all made the same connection.

Standing a little over a hundred feet away from them was the man who’d killed Tamara’s brother.

• • • •

THE ORDERLY CHECKED on the children one last time. Their vital signs were stable, and their breathing deep and even. He made sure the IV tubes would not get caught on anything when the beds were moved, then exited the room.

His colleague had finished packing up the pharmaceutical supplies and their workstation, so the orderly did a final walk-through to make sure they hadn’t forgotten anything. They hadn’t.

He picked up the radio from their desk and said, “Station K. Ready and awaiting removal.”

“Roger, Station K. Removal team should be there in two minutes.”

“Copy that, Control.”

Together, he and his colleague double-checked all the latches on the containers to make sure everything was secure.

“I think we’re good,” his colleague said. The orderly was just starting to nod in agreement when the other man blurted out, “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you check the room at the end?”

The orderly shook his head. As far as he knew, there’d been no reason to go in there.

“I used the bathroom in there this morning,” the other man said, already starting off down the hall. “I think I might have left a tissue on the sink.”

“Jesus. Get it. We’re not supposed to leave anything.”

“I know. I know.”

His colleague headed quickly down the hall and disappeared into the last room on the right. When he came back out several seconds later, he held up his hand. In it was a couple of unused tissues.

The orderly was about to read him the riot act for being sloppy, but right then the removal team arrived and he soon forgot.

• • • •

“WHAT SHOULD WE DO?” Bobby asked.

Though Tamara barely heard the cameraman speak, the only thought she had was that she was looking at the man who had put a bullet through her brother’s back. Without even realizing it, she started walking toward him.

“Hey, where are you going?” Joe asked.

She didn’t answer.

“Tammy. That’s not a good idea,” Bobby said.

Still, she didn’t reply.

Footsteps ran up behind her, Bobby on one side and Joe on the other. Each grabbed one of her arms, stopping her.

“Snap out of it,” Joe said. “Going over there isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

She struggled to pull free. “I want to know his name.”

The four men on the tarmac seemed to realize something was going on. They glanced in the PCN team’s direction, but then, as one, their gaze swung to the left. The two men who had separated from them earlier were jogging rapidly toward the helicopters. One of them was waving the other men toward the aircraft.

“No!” Tamara yelled as the man who’d killed her brother disappeared inside the helicopter.

Bobby grabbed her around the shoulders, holding her back.

The last man had barely gotten on board when both helicopters rose into the air and shot off toward the North.

“No!” she repeated.

“It’s okay,” Bobby said. “You wouldn’t have been able to do anything.”

“But he shot my brother. I...I don’t even know his name.”

“I got him on tape. If there’s a name on his uniform, I probably got that, too.”

“Hey, you guys all right?”

The three of them turned and saw Peter Chavez stepping out in their direction from under the canopy.

“We’re fine, Peter,” Joe said.

“You sure?” Peter asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

As soon as the wire-service reporter returned to the shade, Tamara whisper, “I want to check the video.”

Bobby nodded.

As they walked quickly back to where Bobby had set down the camera, she touched his arm, slowing him and putting a little distance between them and Joe.

“I want you to cut a shot of the guy into the story,” she whispered.

He pulled back a little. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care if it’s a good idea. Will you do it?”

He grimaced, but then nodded. “I’ll do it.”

• • • •

PAUL WAS COVERED IN dust. It had even gotten under his helmet and into his month. He tried spitting out what he could, but he was already parched. What he really would have loved at that moment was a nice long drink of water, but that would have to wait until he found civilization. His bottles had been in his backpack the men from the helicopters had taken.

So far he'd been able to make pretty good time. The roughest part had been right after he left the canyon. The gentle slope there had been deceiving. Decades of rainwater had carved out gullies that seemed to appear out of nowhere. If he had hit one of those too hard, he would have wrecked and broken his arm or worse.

But now he was on smooth, level ground so he was able to ramp up the speed. He figured the area was probably the bed of the ancient ocean that used to cover this part of the desert. Sarge would have known for sure.

He allowed himself a quick look around. Brown for as far as he could see. He glanced at his gas gauge. He had maybe another sixty or seventy miles left. Reluctantly he backed off on the accelerator. If he kept his speed down a bit, he might be able to squeeze out another ten or twenty miles. That could make all the difference in the world.

He let his eyes settle on the hills in front of him. Another fifteen minutes and he'd be there. If he figured it right, once he reached the top he'd be out of the quarantine zone. The thing he didn't know was how far he'd still have to go to reach anyone after that. The map his dad had given them was also in the backpack.

To this point, he'd focused all his thoughts on surviving—going as fast as he dared, keeping the bike upright, looking for holes in the ground. But the thought of the map brought everything back.

Mom and Sarge. Leaving home after the sun went down. Racing through the dark desert.

Nick.

Lisa.

The girl who meant everything to him and his best friend in the world—both dead.

The thing he kept coming back to was that he'd sat there and done nothing. He had watched the men raise their rifles. He had watched them fire.

And he had done *nothing*.

Maybe he could have created a distraction. Maybe it would have been enough for Nick and Lisa to get away. Would it have worked? Probably not, but, dammit, he should have given it a try. He should have—

He didn't see the rock.

One moment his eyes were tearing up with anger over his inaction, and the next he was flying over his handlebars, landing hard against the desert floor.

He lay on his back for a moment, groaning with the pain. The worse of it seemed to be coming from his left knee. He pulled off his helmet then felt his leg, checking if it was broken.

When his hand reached his knee, he nearly jerked back. It felt wrong. He tried to sit up, but that just made the pain worse, so he only raised his shoulder and tilted his head so he could see what was going on.

Immediately, he knew what had happened. He'd seen something similar before, during P.E. at school. They'd been playing soccer, and Ryan Young had tried to kick the ball but had stepped awkwardly and fallen to the ground.

Like Ryan's had been then, Paul's kneecap was sticking out like a shelf off the side of his bent leg, dislocated.

His eyes slammed shut as a new wave of pain washed over him. He took several deep breaths, trying to regain a little control. When it happened to Ryan, the school nurse had come down to the field and slipped it back into place while the rest of them stood around and watched.

Paul didn't have anyone to put it back in place for him. He was going to have to do it himself.

"It's okay. It's okay," he said out loud. "Two seconds and it's over."

He arranged his leg so that the back edge of his shoe's heel was on the ground. He then put his left hand on his kneecap, and his right on his thigh. Taking several quick, deep breaths, he tried to calm himself. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he pushed down on his thigh and in on his kneecap. As the leg straightened, the cap moved back into place.

He yelled out, not so much in new pain, but in memory of the old. Because while his knee was indeed throbbing, the sheer intensity of the pain he'd been feeling had subsided.

He lay against the desert floor, panting.

It was several minutes before he finally pushed himself up. His bike was about ten feet away. At first glance, it didn't look like it had suffered much damage. He took a tentative step toward it, but immediately his left leg howled in pain. There was no way it was going to be able to hold his weight for any length of time, so he hopped as best he could to the bike.

As he pulled it off the ground, he smelled gas. There was a wet spot on the dirt under where the tank had been. He looked at the bike, checking for a hole, a loose hose, anything.

It was the cap. It had come loose somehow. He tried to think back to when he'd siphoned the gas from his brother's bike. Had he not made sure the cap was on tight? There was really no other explanation.

He took it off now and looked inside. There was still some gas sloshing around in there, but how much had he lost?

"Dammit!" he yelled. *I'm such an idiot.*

He put the top back on, making sure it was secure this time, then wheeled the bike over to where he'd left his helmet.

Once he was re-outfitted, he got on and started up the bike. His left leg was already starting to stiffen and was going to be a problem. With more than a little pain, he bent it enough to get his foot on the peg.

He coughed a couple times, and he couldn't wait until he could drink some water and get the dust out of his system.

Then he resumed his journey to freedom.



IT WASN'T UNTIL they landed that the window shades rose again.

Ash looked outside. They seemed to be at a small airport. He could see a few planes parked off to the side and a hangar in the distance.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Pax glanced out the window. "Well, unless we got lost on the way, this should be Sonoma County, California."

Though Ash had been stationed twice in California, he only had a vague idea that Sonoma County was somewhere in the North.

"This is where my children are?"

"As close as we can get." Pax tilted his head toward the back. "Chloe will take you the rest of the way."

Though they were still taxiing, Pax unbuckled himself and got up. He retrieved the metal case from the cabinet, then set it on the floor between his and Ash's seats. He undid the clasps and lifted off the top. Protective foam lined the box, while another thick sheet covered whatever was inside. Pax pulled this away, revealing a small arsenal.

"You liked the SIG so much, I got you three," Pax said as he touched the hilt of one of the three SIG SAUER P229 pistols inside. "You have four boxes of ammo, three extra mags...well, five if you only use one gun. I also packed a pair of binoculars, and something we call little bangs."

"Little bangs?"

Pax moved a few things around, then pulled out a hard plastic rectangular box about an inch thick, and opened the top. The inside was divided into two parts. On one side was a device that looked like a cell phone, complete with a touch-screen display. On the other side were a couple dozen half-inch squares lined up like crackers in a box, the majority of which were gray.

Pax pulled out one of the squares. In the center was a smaller black box that barely rose above the surface. Running out from it were tiny wires that spread over the gray square.

"See the number?" Pax asked.

Ash took a harder look. On the black box a number had been painted in gray. Hard to read, but not impossible. This square was numbered one.

"I see it."

Pax turned the gray square around. "This other side will stick pretty much anywhere. But you've gotta remove this first."

He flicked his finger across the edge, and Ash could see there was a clear plastic sheet covering the back.

"Put this wherever you need it. Then you use this thing here." He pointed at the black cell-phone-looking device. "This is your trigger device. Interface is easy. You input the unit number, then either set it off manually or set up a timer. These things don't create a lot of damage, but they're quite the noisemakers. Good for diversions if you need them."

"I'll bet."

"Careful, though. You see these four here?" He touched four tiles that were grouped together. Unlike the others, they were white. "These do more than just make a noise. They're what you use if you do need damage. They'll blow a hole in pretty much anything you'll come across. There's only the four, so don't confuse them with the others."

He closed the box and tucked it back in the case. He then gave Ash the emergency phone number Matt had mentioned, making him repeat it several times. It was an easy number. Ash knew he wouldn't forget it.

As soon as the plane stopped rolling, Pax said, "I believe this is your stop."

There was no one around as they stepped out of the jet. In fact, the whole airport seemed quiet and deserted. It was tucked between several green hills, and though Ash could see a few houses in the distance, there was no town visible.

Pax nodded toward the hangar. "Your ride's right over there."

Parked near the closed hangar door was a silver Honda Accord.

The metal case went in the trunk, while Ash put his messenger bag in the back seat. Chloe had a dark green backpack. She tossed that into the footwell up front before climbing into the passenger seat.

"You got GPS in there," Pax told Ash. "It's already preset to get you to the highway. Chloe will take over after that."

He held out his hand, and Ash took it.

"You've been put in a terrible position, Captain," Pax said. "Most people would have given up already. Think they crossed the wrong man when they found you."

"Yes," Ash said. "They did."

Pax stepped back. "Don't be a stranger."

By the time Ash got the car to the airport exit, the jet was already racing down the runway and taking off.

He let the voice of the GPS guide him through the countryside. In his other life, he would have appreciated the beauty of the area, mainly because Ellen would have loved it.

*I should have brought her here.*

*I should have brought her a lot of places.*

He gritted his teeth and continued to drive.

When they finally reached the highway, the GPS stopped giving directions. Ash looked over and saw that Chloe was staring out the window.

"Which way?" he asked. It was the first thing either of them had said since they'd gotten in the car.

She didn't move for a second, then she pulled up her head and looked over at him. "What?"

"Which way? Pax said once the GPS stopped, you'd know where to go."

"Oh." She leaned forward, looking out the window again, and seemed to notice their surroundings for the first time. "Where are we?"

"At the freeway. North or south?"

She started nodding. "South. Definitely south."

He headed for the on-ramp. "How far?"

She glanced at him again, then returned her gaze to the window. "Fifteen-point-seven miles."

"Serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He hesitated, then said, "Okay. Fifteen-point-seven miles."

"Almost point-six now."



SINCE ASH KNEW HE'D be shedding Chloe as soon as he didn't need her any more, he was content to let the miles pass by in silence and avoid forming any kind of bond. For whatever reasons of her

own, Chloe seemed fine with not talking, too.

The first thing either of them said came from Chloe at exactly fifteen-point-four miles from where they'd entered the freeway. "Next exit." Once they were on the off-ramp, she said, "To the right."

They were in a rural area, probably about fifty miles north of San Francisco. The area immediately surrounding them was hilly and green from recent rains. As they headed west the hills grew larger, and the trees started changing from scattered oaks and a few cottonwoods to a growing forest of evergreens.

"How far are we going?" Ash asked.

"At this speed, we'll turn in nine minutes."

Ash was tempted to go a little faster, but the road was only two lanes and had become winding with plenty of blind turns.

After a few minutes, Chloe said out of the blue, "They changed my face, too."

Ash glanced at her, then back at the road.

"I'd be dead now if they hadn't," she added.

Unable to stop himself, he said, "Is that why you're helping me?"

For several moments, she said nothing. Then, "I have to help. I have no choice."

Ash frowned. "Are you telling me that Matt forced you to be here?"

"No. Of course not. After you get your children, if someone else needs help, you'll have no choice, either. We have to fight them. We have to stop them."

"You mean this Dr. Karp? Don't worry. I'll deal with him."

"You don't understand. You just don't understand." She shook her head, then looked back at the road. "There," she said, pointing ahead. "Turn there."

The new road was narrower and obviously less used. The centerline looked like it hadn't been repainted in decades, and had become more of a faded suggestion than an actual demarcation. The road was dark, too, the sun hidden from view by a thick grove of conifers.

"Five miles," Chloe announced.

Ash glanced at the odometer and noted the mileage.

"I'm sorry they took your children," she said.

Ash didn't respond.

"They took someone from me, too. But I can never get her back."

Ash remained quiet for a moment longer, then said, "There's someone I can't get back, either."

Again, silence descended.

After a bit, Chloe said, "Slow down."

Ash checked the odometer, and saw that they had come almost four and a half miles. He reduced their speed.

The area was quiet. They hadn't seen a single car on this road, nor had there been any houses or buildings alongside it.

Chloe patted her hand against the air. "Slower."

Ash eased back on the gas some more.

Finally, she pointed at a spot just ahead and across the road. "There. Do you see it? Between those two trees."

Where she indicated he could see the ghosts of two tire ruts running into the woods. They were mostly filled with dry pine needles, and looked as if no one had driven on them for a long, long time.

Ash pulled across the road and stopped just short of the ruts. He stared into the woods. As far as he could see, there was nothing back there but more trees.



He grimaced skeptically, then looked at Chloe. "My kids are back there somewhere?"

She hesitated. "The building where I'm supposed to take you is back there."

"This isn't even a road. It's a path that no one's used for God knows how long."

She narrowed her eyes. "Would you rather I take you down the road they do use? Maybe right up to the front door so you can ring the bell? I can do that if you'd like. Except I'd probably just point the way and let you go on your own. I don't want to die today."

Of course she wouldn't do that. What was he thinking? And if this really was a way in, wasn't it a good thing it looked completely untouched?

"Right," he said, then added, "I'm sorry."

He turned the Accord onto the path.

Chloe guided him through a slalom course of trees, taking them deeper and deeper into the woods. Keeping their speed to a crawl, Ash still managed to scrape the sides a few times.

After they'd been going like that for about fifteen minutes, Chloe said, "You should turn the car around here. I'll get out and guide you. Then we'll walk the rest of the way."

It took a little effort, but with Chloe's help, Ash was able to get the sedan pointed back in the direction they'd come.

Once out of the car, he went around to the trunk and opened the weapons case Pax had given him. He grabbed one of the guns, then spent a few minutes filling its mag and the three spares. When he was done with that, he almost shut the case. Instead, he reached in and grabbed the box of little bangs before closing it up.

Chloe had been standing nearby the whole time, watching him. He wasn't sure if she'd been expecting him to give her a gun, but she didn't ask and he didn't offer.

"Let's go," he said.

They hiked for a quarter of an hour, then as they approached a ridge, Chloe motioned for him to get down on his hands and knees. When they reached the top, they dropped to their stomachs and looked down into the tree-filled valley.

At first, Ash thought it was as empty as the forest they'd just come through, but then Chloe pointed down and to the right. About a half-mile away he saw part of a roof jutting out from the side of the hill, like the structure was built right into the earth. If there was anything else around, he couldn't see it through the trees.

She then pointed at one of the evergreens about ten yards ahead of them, then at another about the same distance to the left, then at another and another.

"Twenty feet up," she said.

It took him a couple seconds to see what she was talking about. Attached to each tree at the height she'd indicated were some sort of electronic devices that had been colored to blend in. If Chloe hadn't pointed them out, he would have never noticed them.

"What are they?" he asked.

"Motion sensors. They circle the complex. You can't see it, but another fifty feet beyond that point is a fence."

Ash studied the area for a moment. "I take it there's a way through there."

Chloe shook her head. "Not that I know of."

"But Matt told me you could get me in."

"That's true."

He stared at her for a moment. "You want to stop being so cryptic?"

Several seconds passed, then she said, “This used to be an old mental hospital. It was closed sometime in the nineties and the land was turned over to the government, but don’t expect to find it in any of their records. The...others took it over and fixed it up for their own needs. It’s not one of their main facilities so they don’t always use it. But according to Matt, this is where your kids were taken.”

“You still haven’t told me how I get in.”

“There used to be a separate building where the mental hospital kept...problem patients. The building’s gone, but the foundation is still there.” She looked at Ash. “It’s outside the motion detection zone.”

“How does that help us?” Ash asked, still not following.

“They might have torn down the building, but they didn’t remove the tunnel that connected it to the main hospital.”



THE THROBBING IN Paul's knee had become so constant he almost didn't notice it any more. He wished the same could be said for his growing thirst. His dry mouth and chapped lips were constantly nagging at him.

He'd reached the summit of the hill that marked the boundary of the quarantine zone thirty minutes earlier, but any elation he might have felt had been tempered by the miles of open desert that still stretched before him.

He coughed a couple times, then glanced down at his gas gauge. The needle was hovering just above E. He'd be walking soon, and in his condition, he wouldn't be walking far. If only he could find a road, hopefully someone would drive by and see him. Or perhaps it was his lot to die out here like his brother and his girlfriend. The only difference being that his fate would be delivered by the elements, not a slug of lead.

The ground was rising again in front of him like a gentle swell in the middle of a dirt ocean. As he did every time he neared a crest, he prayed that he'd finally see a road on the other side, anything that would give him a chance.

"This time," he began repeating. "This time. This time. This time."

Just before he actually reached the top, he steeled himself and prepared to see nothing. He was so sure that was exactly what would happen, that even as he stared at the distant highway, it took a moment before he realized what it was.

He stopped the bike, his good foot planting on the ground. Was the highway real? Maybe the pain and the dust and the lack of water were making him see things. He wanted to believe, but...could he?

His eyes followed the road, then his breath caught in his throat.

Not five miles away, he saw a handful of buildings grouped together. Parked around them appeared to be several cars and a couple of buses. He blinked. The buildings were still there. The cars and the buses were still there.

Finally allowing himself a smile, he started down the hill. He was tempted to open the bike up all the way, but he knew even five miles might be too far for the fumes left in his gas tank. So he eased all the way back on the accelerator and let the bike roll free down the hill.

He was laughing as he neared the bottom, his hand poised to feed the rest of the gas into the engine as soon as his speed started to slow. That's when he heard it. The thumping.

He didn't need to look back to know what was there, but he did anyway.

Two helicopters, like black blots against the western afternoon sky.

There was no doubt in his mind that these were the same two that had come to the canyon that morning, that had brought the men who had killed two of the people he loved most. And though he was out of the quarantine zone, he knew they were here to kill him, too.

He jammed on the gas and shot toward the buildings, already knowing they were too far away and that the helicopters would reach him first.

If only he hadn't stopped at the top of the ridge. If only he hadn't fallen off the bike and hurt his knee. If only he hadn't delayed himself a half dozen other times. But he couldn't change any of that now.

The only thing he could do was ride.

MARTINA GABLE AND THE rest of the Burroughs High School softball team were doing what they'd been doing for the last day and a half. Nothing.

They'd been heading home in a school bus from a tournament in Reno, Nevada, when the quarantine had been imposed over much of the Mojave Desert, including their hometown of Ridgecrest. Unfortunately, one of the girls was pumping a steady mix of pop from her iPod through the bus's sound system, so no one had been listening to the radio at the time. But why would they have done that? They'd come in second in the tournament, much better than they'd hoped, so they had reason to enjoy themselves on the way home.

Ten miles past Cryer's Corner, they reached the roadblock and learned for the first time what was going on. Initially, there'd been panic and fear, of course. But when they went back to Cryer's Corner—not much more than a wide spot in the road with a café, a gas station, and a small convenience store—they were able to use the land phones there to contact their families and find out that everyone was fine.

They'd talked about driving back into Nevada to find someplace to stay, but when Coach Driscoll called around looking for a motel, everywhere she tried was full. Apparently the quarantine was stranding people all over the place.

The Cryer family owned all the businesses at Cryer's Corner. They offered to let the girls sleep on the floor of the café, so that's what the coach decided they'd do.

As the day progressed, a few other cars drove in—a couple of families and some solo drivers. They, too, were offered places to sleep.

The coaches tried to organize a practice out behind the café that first afternoon to distract the girls, but it didn't work out too well. So this second day they'd pretty much let everyone do what they pleased, as long as they didn't cause any trouble.

Martina had played catch with her friend Noreen for a while, then had thumbed through one of the gossip magazines another girl had brought along. After lunch, she'd found a spot on the side of the gas station, and was idly tossing rocks at a dumpster, wishing the damn quarantine would be lifted so they could go home. This put her at a good angle to see the helicopters the moment they popped over the hill.

Immediately, she got up and went around to the front of the station where several others were hanging out.

"Helicopters," she said, pointing.

Since everyone on the softball team lived next to the China Lake Navy base, they were used to the sight of jets and helicopters. But having already spent a day of monotony on the side of the road, seeing them now felt like something new.

"From the roadblock?" Cathy Thorwaldson asked.

"I didn't see any out there," Martina said. "Did you?"

"Maybe they flew in during the night while we were sleeping." This came from one of the drivers who'd arrived alone, a college-age guy. Cute, too.

"Hadn't thought of that," Martina said.

"Do you hear that?" their catcher, Jilly Parker, asked. She'd been standing near the pumps but had taken a few steps toward the desert.

Martina listened. There was a very faint whine in the distance. "The helicopters, probably."

Jilly shook her head. "Doesn't sound like helicopters."

A couple seconds later, they all heard a rhythmic *thump-thump-thump*.

"That's the helicopters," Jilly said.

She was right, Martina realized. The whine was still there, too. Its volume had increased a bit, and it seemed to be coming from ground level as opposed to the sky.

• • • •

SIMS WAS CROUCHED JUST behind the two front seats of the helicopter, trying to spot the motorcycle below. The satellite images had gotten them this far, but now it was a matter of eyeballs.

“There, sir,” the co-pilot said, with a quick nod out the window. “Running along that old wash.”

Sims adjusted his position, then immediately saw movement about a mile ahead.

“Get us down there.”

“Sir,” the pilot said. “We’re already twenty miles outside the containment zone.”

“I don’t care where we are. If the person on that bike is infected, we could have a new outbreak on our hands. Our job is to make sure that doesn’t happen.” *Yet*, he thought, but didn’t add.

The other thing he didn’t voice was his desire to clean up a situation that they had created themselves. The person on the motorcycle had come from the canyon they’d visited that morning. Apparently there hadn’t been two riders, but three. This third person must have hidden from Sims and his men, and that annoyed him.

It should have never happened. They should have checked for additional people but they hadn’t, and it had been his fault. Two bikes, two sleeping bags, two people. Logical, but wrong.

“Hang on, sir,” the pilot said.

A second later, the helicopters dipped in unison toward the fleeing motorcycle.

• • • •

JILLY AND MARTINA USED a stack of barrels to climb up on top of the gas station, then moved to the back edge so they could see what was going on.

“That whine’s a motorcycle. I’d know that anywhere,” Jilly said.

Martina had recognized it, too. It was a common enough noise in the desert around Ridgecrest. But though she was looking toward where she thought the noise was coming from, she couldn’t see anything.

Jilly suddenly pointed repeatedly at the desert. “There, there, there!”

Martina put a hand on her forehead, shading her eyes. “I don’t see it.”

“It’s there! Along that wash.”

Something glinted in the distance, sunlight on a helmet, Martina realized as she finally spotted the motorcycle rider. For a few moments, she watched him—she assumed it was a him—heading in their direction.

“Is that one of the people who lives here?” she wondered out loud.

“I didn’t hear anyone leave earlier, but I guess it could be,” Jilly said.

Until that moment, Martina had thought the helicopters and the motorcycle had had nothing to do with each other. But suddenly both helicopters dove down toward the bike.

“What are they doing?” she asked.

• • • •

UNDER SIM’S DIRECTIONS, the helicopters bracketed the motorcycle, his aircraft coming up on its left, the other on its right.

“We’ll take the shot,” Sims said into the radio. “If he doesn’t go down, you’re up.”

• • • •

PAUL FELT THE THUMPING of the helicopters in his chest. He allowed himself a quick glance back, and was surprised to see they were approaching him from either side.

There was movement at the open door of the helicopter to his left. He turned forward, checking the terrain ahead, then chanced another glance back. A man stood in the doorway now, held in place by what looked like a strap. In his arm was a rifle.

Without even thinking about it, Paul released the accelerator and pulled on the brakes.

Just then he heard something whiz by him through the air. Involuntarily, he jerked the handlebars to the side. The front tire of the bike turned with it, catching the edge of a sagebrush. Before Paul knew it, he was once more tumbling through the air.

• • • •

“IS THAT A HIT?” SIMS asked. “Is that a hit?”

There was a brief delay. “I’m not sure, sir. But he *is* down.”

“Get us back there.”

• • • •

MARTINA ACTUALLY SCREAMED when the driver of the motorcycle flew off his bike.

“Did they...*shoot* at him?” Jilly asked.

“I’m not sure,” Martina replied.

“I thought I saw a flash.”

Below them, one of the cars in the lot started up. Almost immediately, they could hear tires spinning for a moment on the dirty asphalt, then catching hold. Martina glanced over the other side, just in time to see the cute college boy race away from the gas station in his Jeep and head into the desert toward the downed driver.

• • • •

THE HELICOPTERS HAD both swung around and were now hovering above the motorcyclist. Sims was pretty sure it was a man.

“Does anyone see any movement?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“No, sir.”

“All right, then everyone suit up, and let’s bag him—”

The radio crackled. “Sir, civilian approaching.”

Out of reflex, Sims looked over at the other helicopter. “What?”

“Just ahead, sir,” the man in the other aircraft said. “A Jeep. There are also a couple people standing on one of the buildings at the roadside stop along the highway, looking this way, and several more doing the same from ground level.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, sir.”

Sims looked out the open doorway and spotted the Jeep. He quickly realized it would get to the motorcycle rider only seconds after they landed. What would they do then? Kill the Jeep driver, too? What about the people in town watching? He was pretty sure Mr. Shell did not want that kind of bloodbath.

*Dammit!*

He looked down at the motorcyclist again, then tapped the pilot on the shoulder. “Head back to base.”

Even before they made the turn for home, he had his satellite phone out. The quarantine zone would have to be expanded to include that little bit of nowhere in case the motorcyclist was infected. But even if he wasn't, and those in the town didn't actually die from the disease, the quarantine would make it easier for Sims and his men to go in and deal with the witnesses.

It was an aggravating problem but fixable.

It didn't even dawn on him that he should have also requested a communications blackout of the area. He thought that was already a part of the quarantine. Why wouldn't it be?

It was another lesson they'd learn for next time.

• • • •

PAUL REMEMBERED FLYING off his bike, but didn't remember landing. That was because the impact had knocked him unconscious. So the next thing he was aware of was a man lifting him off the ground.

"What...what's going on?"

"Just relax," the guy said. "You're going to be fine."

Where had the guy come from? The helicopter? But they were going to shoot him, weren't they?

Then he saw the vehicle he was being carried to, a dark red, old-model Jeep, not a helicopter.

Someone passing by on the road, maybe? Did it really matter?

As the man helped him into the front seat, Paul knocked his injured knee against the dash, which caused him to wince in pain, which in turn caused him to cough a couple of times.

"Sorry," the guy said.

"I'm...okay."

The man got behind the wheel and started up the Jeep. As they turned around, Paul caught sight of his motorcycle. It was lying half in a creosote bush, its handlebars skewed. He could see a hole in his gas tank, but nothing was dripping out.

*Just enough*, he thought with a smile. *Just enough.*





MARTINA AND JILLY climbed down off the roof as the Jeep returned. By then, many of the rest of the people stranded in Cryer's Corner had come outside to see what all the noise was about. Word of what had happened spread quickly.

When the Jeep pulled to a stop, several people crowded around. The guy who'd been on the motorcycle was a mess. He looked like he'd been rolling in dirt for weeks, then had the side of his head dipped in blood.

There was something familiar about him, but Martina couldn't place it. This thought, though, was soon forgotten as the cute college boy came around and helped the motorcycle rider out of the Jeep.

"I don't suppose anyone here's a doctor?" College Boy asked.

"My dad is," Amy Rhodes said.

"Yeah, but he's not here, is he?" Jilly asked.

"Isn't Coach Delger a nurse?" someone asked.

"Yeah, I think she is," Martina said. "Where is she?"

"Last I saw her, she was in the café," Amy told them, no doubt trying to redeem herself.

When no one moved right away, Martina said, "I'll get her."

She raced over to the café and rushed inside. There were only three people there—an old woman behind the counter, and Coach Driscoll and Coach Delger in one of the booths. The coaches both had their backs against the window, with their legs stretched out, and seemed to be asleep.

"Coach Delger?" Martina called out as she ran over.

Both coaches cracked open their eyes.

"What is it, Martina?" Coach Driscoll asked. She was the head coach. Coach Delger was a volunteer from town.

"Someone's hurt. And we thought...well, Coach Delger, you're a nurse, right?"

Both of the women sprang to life and pushed themselves out of the booth.

"Where?" Coach Delger asked.

"Outside. Some guy on a motorcycle got thrown to the ground."

Coach Delger raced ahead and shot out the door.

"Medical student," Coach Driscoll whispered to Martina as they followed. "Her residency starts after the end of the season."

"A student? Oh, uh, maybe we should ask around and see if anyone else is a nurse."

"She'll do just fine," Coach Driscoll told her.

As soon as Martina stepped back outside, she saw that the college boy had an arm around the motorcyclist and they were both walking toward the café. Coach Delger ran up beside them and took a quick look at the injured rider. She then glanced over at Martina.

"Open the door," she called out.

Once they were inside, the college boy helped the rider to a corner booth. It was one of those circular kinds that could fit a lot of people and had a correspondingly large table. Coach Delger had the injured kid sit on the table, then told Martina to get everyone else outside.

"You heard her," Martina announced to the group who'd followed them in. "Everyone out."

Soon she had the place cleared, but since the coach hadn't specifically told *her* to leave, she returned to the table.

She'd barely walked up when Coach Delger said, "Martina, I need you to look for a first-aid kit. There's got to be one here somewhere." Before Martina could leave, she added, "And I'll need some warm water and towels to clean him up, too."

Martina found the old woman in the kitchen already filling up a large bowl with water.

"I heard her," the woman said, then nodded toward the back of the room. "First-aid kit's hanging on the wall by the bathroom. Just lift it and it'll come right off."

The kit was a large metal box. Martina got it off the wall and carried it back into the dining area. When she got back to the table, the coach was examining the rider's head where all the blood was.

"Not too bad," Coach Delger said. "A cut and a little bump. I'm guessing you were wearing a helmet, right?"

"Yeah," the boy said.

"Some of the cushion missing on the inside?"

"A little."

Smirking, she said, "Get a new helmet and that won't happen next time."

The old woman came out of the kitchen with the water and some towels.

"Susan," Coach Delger said to Coach Driscoll. "Can you clean up his head? I'm going to check if there's anything else wrong."

"Sure," Coach Driscoll said. She grabbed a towel and got it wet.

"My knee," the boy said.

"Which one?"

"Left. From before."

"Before?"

He gave a little shrug. "Not my first crash today. Dislocated it."

While Coach Delger used a pair of scissors from the first-aid kit to cut away his pants leg, the boy looked at Martina.

"What are you guys doing here?" he asked.

"We were at a softball tournament. Got stuck outside the quarantine zone on our way home."

"Did you win?"

She figured he was just trying to distract himself from his pain. "Second place out of sixteen teams. Not too bad."

"Go Burros," he said.

She smiled for a second, then looked down. She wasn't wearing one of her school shirts. Maybe someone outside was. That must have been it.

"Yeah, go Burros."

"Who did most of the pitching? You or Sandra?"

Martina wasn't the only one who was suddenly staring at the rider. Both coaches had stopped what they were doing and were looking at him, too.

"Do I know you?" Martina asked.

"Do I look that bad?"

She squinted her eyes, studying him. "You look familiar, but..."

"Spanish class," he said.

"Paul?"

"Hey, Martina."

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Coach Driscoll asked.

"This is Paul Unger," Martina said, surprised. "He goes to Burroughs, too."

“What were you doing out there on a motorcycle?” Coach Driscoll asked.

Paul got a faraway look in his eyes, and the small smile that had been on his lips disappeared.

“Trying not to die.”



THEY GOT THE WHOLE story out of him.

As soon as Coach Delger realized he'd come from the quarantine zone, she immediately segregated everyone into two groups: those who had come in contact with Paul, and those who hadn't.

The hardest part of the story to believe was the deaths of Nick and Lisa. That was until he showed them the video.

It was Martina's idea, however, to post it on the Internet.



CHLOE GUIDED ASH through the woods, circling around to the top of the rise behind the building, just beyond the line of motion sensors. After crossing a small clearing, she walked on for another dozen feet, then stopped under the cover of the trees.

Without a word, she got on her knees and started digging. At first Ash couldn't figure out what she could possibly be doing, but after she removed a thick layer of needles and branches, she exposed a manhole cover.

"Where does it go?" he asked.

"I have no idea. Just thought I'd randomly show it to you." She stared at him for a second as if he were an idiot. "Where do you think it goes?"

She was right. It was a dumb question.

"How do we get it open?"

"That's a better question than the last one, at least," she said.

She got off her knees and walked over to a tree a dozen feet away. Jumping up, she grabbed one of the low branches and pulled herself onto it. She reached to the branch above her and moved her hands around for a moment. When she dropped back to the ground, she was holding a long metal rod that had an L hook at the bottom.

With a smirk, she stuck the hooked end through a hole in the cover and yanked the disk off, surprising Ash with her strength.

He took a step closer and looked down through the opening. The filtered afternoon light was only able to penetrate a few feet into the dark hole, illuminating just the concrete sides of the tube and the first rung of a built-in iron ladder.

He thought for a moment. Perhaps it was now time to part ways with his guide. "Is it just down and follow a tunnel?"

She scoffed. "No, it's *not* just down and follow a tunnel."

"Okay," he said, revising his plan. "I was just asking."

Chloe went first, pulling a flashlight out of her pocket he hadn't known she'd brought along, and he followed. At the bottom was a large, damp tunnel running perpendicular to the entrance tube.

"This leads back to the main building?" he asked.

Chloe grimaced, annoyed. "Do you not listen to me? I already told you it doesn't." She huffed out a breath, then said, "Come on."

She headed to the left, the glow of her flashlight leading the way, then stopped after forty feet and said, "Here."

She turned her flashlight toward the wall and revealed a big V-shaped break. Ash examined it for a moment. There was an opening through the dirt on the other side of the concrete, not really a tunnel, more of a rift through the earth. Just at the furthest reach of the light he thought he caught a glimpse of more cement.

"This happened during the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989," she said. "You know, the one that took down that freeway in San Francisco?"

He vaguely remembered that from when he'd been a kid. "What's on the other side?"

Instead of answering, she climbed into the rift and started working her way through the cramped space. Ash knew it was going to be even tighter for him, so instead of crawling as she had, he got on his stomach and pulled himself forward.

The distant cement turned out to be a wall, the break in it not a giant V, but a lopsided oval. As he slipped through the opening and got to his feet, he found himself in a wide space that fell quickly off into darkness beyond the spill of the flashlight.

“Welcome to the Palmer Psychiatric Hospital’s special patient facility. Or what’s left of it,” Chloe said.

She moved the flashlight through the room. There were piles of wood and old office furniture and what appeared to be mattresses. Trash was strewn throughout.

“When they tore down the building, they left the basement,” Chloe explained. “They threw some dirt over the top and let the earth reclaim it. Above us is that clearing we walked through.”

“Why leave the basement?” he asked.

“You ask me like I was there. I wasn’t. I do know, though, that they tore the building down not long after the earthquake.” She paused. “You want my guess?”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“The hospital was still open then. The people who were running it would have known about the tunnel, and probably thought they could still use this place. It’s nice and hidden from the view of anyone. I wouldn’t have put it past them.”

That was a bit on the conspiracy side of things for him, but then again, hadn’t his whole life slipped firmly to the conspiracy side? God, what was happening to him?

“Show me the tunnel into the hospital.”

“Follow me.”

She led him to a door in the far corner. Inside was a staircase leading down.

“There’s two underground levels?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Just the stairs,” she said as she started down. “And the tunnel.”

Directly left of the stairs at the bottom was a wide opening. Chloe shined the light into it, but it revealed nothing more than walls on each side before the darkness took over again.

As she started to walk into it, Ash said, “Wait.”

She turned back.

“This isn’t your fight,” he said. “I appreciate you getting me here, but I think I should go on alone from this point.”

She stared at him, then said, “Really? Do you know how to get out of the other end of this tunnel?”

“Is it that hard?”

“It depends on your definition, I guess.”

He shrugged. “If you tell me how to do it, I’ll manage.”

“And what are you going to use for light? You’re not taking my flashlight.”

“Actually, I am,” he said. “You can wait here until I get back.”

She took a step away from him, toward the tunnel. “You want to leave me here in the dark? Are you kidding me?”

“It’ll be safer.”

“Yeah, until I go crazy because I keep hearing things, then I run straight into a wall and knock myself out. I’m sorry, Mr. Not-In-The-Army-Anymore, but no way in hell I’m staying here in the dark.” With that she turned and started down the tunnel.

Once more he found himself in the position of following her.

The tunnel between the buildings was a good six feet wide and at least eight tall, with a gentle downward slope. Ash realized that explained why the stairs from the annex basement had been built.

If the tunnel had been dug directly from the main building up to the annex, it would have had a considerably steeper incline.

After they'd gone nearly fifty yards, Chloe whispered, "We're getting close, so best to stay quiet." Ten yards further on, they came to a stop in front of a cinder-block wall that closed off the tunnel. "I thought you said this went all the way through," Ash said, feeling suddenly panicky. "You're such a downer."

She knelt by the wall and worked her fingers into the gaps on either side of a block on the bottom row. Within seconds, she slid it out. Peeking through, she shined her light into the opening then sat back up. Four more blocks came out. When she was done, she'd created a hole big enough for them to snake through.

"This was apparently put up when the hospital finally closed. They were supposed to fill in everything on this side of it." She shrugged. "I guess they didn't have the money."

"How did you find out about it?" he asked.

She was silent for a moment. "Matt's people, when they got me out. They showed me."

Before he could ask another question, she disappeared through the wall. Ash, left in the dark, had to feel his way down to the opening then slip through and join her. On the other side, the tunnel went on for another twenty feet, then T-boned into a wide corridor.

"Where exactly are we?" he asked.

"This is the main hospital. The part that was built into the side of the hill," she said. "We're on the top floor, but still underground."

Ash tensed. "Where will my kids be?"

"Two floors down," she said without hesitation.

Once more he thought about leaving her behind, but she'd proved more useful than he'd expected. So instead, he said, "Show me."

"There are five stairwells," she told him. "One at each corner, and a fifth along the south wall." She pointed off to their left. "We're actually on the fourth floor. Your kids'll be on the second, in the northeast corner." As she said this, her jaw clenched a little. She was quiet for a moment. "The quickest way is by either of the north-side stairwells, but there's an excellent chance the others will hear us before we can even get close."

"So we use one on the south side," he said, eager to move.

"Yes, but not one in the corners," she told him. "The one in the middle. This floor used to be where the doctors' offices were. The middle stairway is attached to the old hospital director's office. It was his private way of getting in and out."

"Fine," he said impatiently. "Can we just go?"

She glanced at him without moving. "You might want to get your gun ready."

• • • •

THE MIDDLE STAIRWAY creaked a bit as they went down, but not enough, Ash hoped, to draw attention. When they reached the closed door at the second floor landing, Chloe stopped and listened.

"I don't hear anything," she whispered.

"What's on the other side?"

"An examination room. Or at least I think that's what it used to be."

"Do they use it?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "There was a stack of old wheelchairs there when I came through. That was about it. They only use a small area in the back of the building."



As she reached for the door handle, Ash grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“I’ll go first.”

Holding the SIG in one hand, he grabbed the knob with his other and eased the door open.

Indirect sunlight filtered into the examining room from a window on the south wall, providing more than enough illumination to see the stack of wheelchairs Chloe had mentioned. From the dust on the floor it was clear no one had been through here in a long time. Ash stepped inside, and moved quickly across the room to the main door. There was only silence on the other side.

He hesitated for a moment, then turned to Chloe. “There’s light here. If you want, you can wait until I come back.”

She raised an eyebrow. “If I want? You’re not *telling* me to stay?”

Shaking his head, he said, “It’s up to you.”

“Let’s go, then. You’re going to need me.”

He nodded reluctantly, then opened the door. The hallway on the other side was dark, but not pitch-black like the tunnel or the basement. The scant bit of illumination was courtesy of sunlight spilling out of a couple open doors to the left.

“I assume we go right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Mind if I carry the flashlight now?”

She hesitated for a moment, then handed it to him.

The hallway got darker and darker as they headed back into the section that was embedded in the mountain. There were doors along both sides. The few that were open led into rooms that Ash sensed hadn’t been used in decades.

They’d been going for just over a minute when Chloe touched his back and pointed ahead at an opening to another hallway. He stopped at the corner, listened, then peered around it. There was a very dim light at the far end, but that was it.

“If they’re here, that’s the part of the building where they’ll be.”

*If...*

He was beginning to wonder. So far there had been no sign of anyone else in the building. Surely by now, they would have heard at least one of these mysterious people who were supposed to have his children. It was just too damn quiet. The condition of the building didn’t help his mind, either. It was a dump. Why would they have brought his kids here in the first place?

He turned down the hall, knowing the only way to find out for sure was to keep going.

Silence continued to reign as they got closer and closer to the other end. With each new step, Ash couldn’t help but think that Matt’s information must have been wrong. There was no way anyone was here. He moved all the way to the end of the hall, then stopped for another check.

Stone. Dead. Silence.

Even in places with just a few people around, there was always a sense of others. Ash didn’t have that sense now.

He stepped out into the intersecting hallway without checking first, knowing no one would be there. And he was right.

“We’re alone,” he said, not bothering to whisper. “Matt was wrong. They’re not here.”

Chloe was more tentative as she stepped out to join him. She looked one way down the hallway, then the other, her face full of confusion. “He was sure of it. I know he was.”

“Maybe he was just—” He stopped himself and shook his head.

“Just what?”

“Nothing.”

“What did you mean? Just what?”

“I didn’t mean anything, okay?”

She stared at him, obviously waiting for more. When he remained quiet, she said, “I’d be dead if it wasn’t for Matt and Rachel. There’s no question about it. And you’d be dead, too, if they hadn’t changed how you look and given you a new name. So if you’re questioning whether Matt was lying to you or not, don’t. He wasn’t. He never would.”

Without another word, she turned and walked down the hallway to the right, fading into the black.

“Are you coming?” she called out. “I can’t see anything without the flashlight.”

“What’s down there?” he asked.

“If your kids were here, they would have been kept down this way. We should check.”

Doubting they’d find anything, he walked down the hall and joined her.



WITHIN FIFTEEN MINUTES of being posted online, video of what appeared to be two teenagers murdered by soldiers somewhere within the quarantine zone had been picked up by several blogs, and spread through the Internet via Twitter, Facebook and a half dozen other social networking sites.

Its first television appearance was on a German network, thirty-five minutes later. Another hour passed before the American networks finally started showing the footage. While some immediately dismissed it as phony, others pointed not only to the effort that would have been needed to intentionally create something like it, but also to the footage's incredible realism.

Network researchers worked feverishly to find out who had posted the video. The account had an ID made up of numbers and letters that, on the surface, meant nothing to anyone. When the video-hosting site was contacted, they denied requests for the user's true identity, citing privacy guidelines. The only information that had been uploaded with the video was the line: *Shot by my friend this morning in the Mojave quarantine zone, so sad!*

While the search for the poster was going on, the Army vehemently denied any connection to the events in the video. They, too, pushed the idea that the footage was staged.

The breakthrough came in the form of a phone call from a teenage girl named Frances Newcombe of Ridgecrest, inside the quarantine zone, to her cousin John working at Glitz, an entertainment-focused cable channel based in Los Angeles. John was a producer on the long-running show *Tinseltown Tales*, which, in his case, meant he spent most of his time in edit bays making sure the shows were fast-paced, exciting, and made at least a little sense.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he told her when she said she knew who had uploaded the video. He'd been tied up most of the day on an episode about a recently failed celebrity marriage, and was unaware of the latest developments concerning the Sage Flu.

"How can you not know?" Frances said. "It's been on the news, like, nonstop for the last hour."

"What has?"

"The video of the soldiers carrying away the bodies of two people they'd killed in the quarantine zone!"

The producer frowned. Sure, there was the unfortunate incident in Tehachapi, but soldiers openly firing on civilians? Not likely. Besides, his cousin was sixteen, an age when kids easily jumped to conclusions and felt everything was the end of the world.

"Hold on," he said, then put his hand over the phone. "Tony, you know anything about some footage on TV of soldiers and dead bodies in the quarantine zone?"

Tony, the editor, spun around in his chair. "Yeah. It's wild, isn't it?"

"You saw it?"

Tony nodded. "When I went to get more coffee a few minutes ago. It was on the TV in the break room."

"Who shot it?"

"They don't know. They're trying to figure that out. Someone uploaded it to the Internet but didn't give their name."

John took his hand off the phone. "You know who shot this video?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Frances said. "Okay, I don't know who *actually* shot it, but I do know who put it up. It's my friend Martina's account."

“You’re sure.”

“One hundred percent positive.”

“Have you asked her about it?”

“I tried calling her cell, but I couldn’t get through.”

“Give me a second,” John said. If his cousin was right, and this video *was* generating a lot of buzz, then this could be a very, *very* big moment for him. “Okay. Give me her name and her number.” She did. “What about her home? If we can’t get through to her cell, maybe we can find her there.” His cousin gave him that, too.

“Don’t forget I’m the one who gave it to you,” she said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll pass this on, and maybe someone will call you to find out more.”

“You mean like one of the reporters? Will I be on the air?”

“You never know. I’m glad you called me, Frances. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up before she could ask anything else.

“What was that all about?” Tony asked.

John just smiled, then ran out of the room. He didn’t stop running until he reached the door of the network president, who, it turned out, was watching the desert canyon footage on their sister network PCN at that very moment.

• • • •

WHEN THE VIDEO OF THE desert shooting first aired on PCN, Tamara and Joe had been arguing about the story she and Bobby had put together about the riot at Tehachapi, and, specifically, what they thought had really happened to Gavin.

“I’m telling you,” Joe said. “The minute that goes on the air, we are all fired.”

“You saw what I saw,” she argued. “I could tell. It was in your eyes. You know it was the same guy.”

“We all *think* it was the same guy. We don’t know one hundred percent. But that’s not even my point.”

“Oh, come on, Joe. How can you say that? That man *killed* my brother.”

“See, *that’s* what I’m talking about. You aren’t objective on this. Even if it is the same man, and he did kill your brother, you are too emotionally involved to be the one reporting it.”

“Of course I’m emotionally involved, but I’ve kept myself in check and you know it! That’s a damn fine report and we need to air it.”

“Oh, we do, do we? And when whoever’s anchoring comes back to you, that is, if they haven’t fired us already for airing something we haven’t warned them about, when he comes back and asks you questions about the report, you’re going to keep your cool? You won’t show any emotion? What if he questions the connection? What if he just hints that maybe there’s another explanation? You going to be able to hold it together then?”

She clenched her teeth together. “It’s the truth, and you know it.”

“No. I *don’t* know it. Not for sure.”

She gawked at him. “What? You saw the same thing I—”

“Hey, guys!” Bobby called from inside the van.

“—did. You *know* it’s the same guy. You *know* he—”

“Guys, seriously! Get in here!” Bobby yelled.

Tamara glanced over at the van, then back at Joe. “We’re not done,” she told him, then headed over to see what the other member of their team wanted.

Bobby was sitting in the chair in front of the mobile editing station. On one screen was footage he'd been shooting around the base. He was supposed to be putting together a report about the conditions the media had to work under since being moved to the base. On the other screen was a live feed from the network of some amateur footage shot in what looked like a desert canyon. Tamara could see several people in biohazard suits, and, during a brief second when the camera tilted up just a bit, at least one helicopter outside the canyon.

The suited people were standing next to a couple of bodies.

"What is this?" she asked.

"More Internet video," Bobby told her. "Network's played this one a couple times already."

As she watched it, Tamara couldn't help but feel the sense of something familiar.

Whoever was doing the filming seemed to be above the action. As the bio-suited people began bagging up the two bodies, a voice said in a haunting whisper, "That's my brother, and my girlfriend. Those...those men shot them. We weren't doing anything, but they shot them."

"My God," Tamara said.

The image zoomed in, intending, it seemed, to identify the people in the suits. But the angle was making it difficult, and the suit masks weren't helping. Still, the camera operator was able to hold on two of them just long enough to get an idea of what they looked like.

Tamara tensed. "You're recording this, right?"

Bobby nodded. "Every second."

She said nothing for a moment, willing herself to remain as calm as possible. "Bobby, can you bring up that video of the soldiers from the helicopters that landed here?"

He gave her an odd look but said, "Sure."

He punched a few buttons, and the report he'd been working on earlier disappeared from its monitor, replaced by the requested shots.

"Scroll ahead to that part where you were trying to zoom in for me," she said.

He sped up the footage.

"There," she told him a few seconds later. "Back it up a little bit, then let it play."

He did. On the screen they watched the soldiers talk together, then the picture zoomed in quickly, rushing past Gavin's killer and focusing for a few moments on the interior of the helicopter. Just like she remembered, there was a clump of something yellow on the seat.

"Freeze there," she said. Once the shot stopped moving, she looked at the other two. "Am I seeing things?"

Both men stared at the screen, then looked back at the network feed.

"Son of a bitch," Bobby said under his breath.

The yellow clump looked very much like one of the bio-suits worn by the people in the desert canyon.

"Hold on," Joe said, shaking his head. "I'm sure all crews have been outfitted with these kinds of suits. They probably all look alike."

"I'm sure you're right," Tamara said. "But then that means you're also conceding those people in the video are part of the military."

Joe didn't have a response to that.

"There's something else," she said.

Once the network finished playing the desert clip, Tamara had Bobby go back to where the kid whose friends had been shot zoomed in on the biohazard face masks. Bobby paused on the image she

requested, then went back to the footage he'd shot of the men outside the helicopter there at Fort Irwin. Once more, she had him pause on an image.

She didn't have to say anything.

The features and expression of the man on the left screen were exactly the same as the features and expression of the man on the right.

"I want to talk to whoever shot that footage," she said.

Without looking away from the screen, Joe said, "Let me see what I can do."





THE DOOR CHLOE opened led into a dark section of the building that was obviously built into the side of the hill. Ash moved past her into the room, swinging the light around to get a quick take on the space. But he barely registered anything before the overhead lights came on.

He whirled around. Chloe was standing by the door, her hand next to a switch.

*Power in this decrepit building?*

It seemed odd, but then, as he looked around, he realized the room he was in wasn't decrepit at all. It was clean, almost sterile—white walls, black-tiled floors, no dust, no mud. Even the air smelled pure. It was as if they'd been transported out of the abandoned building they'd been in, and into a brand new hospital a million miles away.

The room wasn't particularly large. There were benches against two sides and a row of empty bins along the wall.

Chloe pulled open the only other door in the room and passed through. As Ash followed, she switched on a light in the new space. They were in a corridor, with a dozen doors leading off it in either direction.

"They're gone. Definitely," she said.

"If they were here at all."

She looked at him. "Let's check."

She began opening doors. Behind each were shorter hallways with what appeared to be a nurse's station near the front, and anywhere from three to five doors on either side. These spaces were as immaculate as the first room had been.

Starting at the far end, Chloe and Ash entered each hall and went door to door, checking inside. Each door opened onto an empty room. It wasn't hard to imagine the rooms were designed to hold a bed, and that each of these small hallways was like a hospital ward.

"What do they use this for?" he asked.

Chloe said, "Whatever they want."

That seemed to be all the answer she was willing to give. Ash noticed that with each new ward they entered, she seemed to draw more and more into herself.

So far, they had found nothing. As Ash approached the door for the next ward, Chloe said, "Not that one."

"Why not?"

She walked past him to the next door down. "We'll try this one."

But it was as empty as the others, and so were the final two after that.

"We haven't checked that one yet," he said, nodding at the door they'd skipped.

She stared across the hall at it for several seconds, then finally said, "Okay."

When he opened the door, the new ward looked exactly like all the others. He walked in and checked the first room. Empty. As he stepped back out, he noticed that Chloe was standing in the ward doorway, her feet not having crossed the threshold.

"You okay?" he asked.

She gave him a quick nod, but didn't say anything.

He knew this must have been where she'd been imprisoned. He wondered what they'd done to her, what had affected her so deeply.

He walked over to the room directly across the hall and looked inside. It was a mirror image of the first room. He moved to the room next door—same again—then crossed over to its opposite.

When he flicked on the light this time, he got a surprise. The room was furnished. There were two hospital beds, two tables that could be rolled into position so a patient could use them, a padded chair by the door, and a cabinet between the beds.

He walked all the way in.

“What is it?” Chloe called out.

“This one’s not empty.”

There were no sheets on the beds, but the mattresses themselves looked new. He leaned down to take a cautious sniff. Neither smelled of age or decay.

He checked the cabinet, then searched the rest of the room to see if anything had been left behind. The only thing he came up with was a hair, thin and brown and long, that had fallen between the mattress and the headboard of one of the beds. It could have belonged to a million different people, a billion even, but it could have also belonged to Josie. Had his children really been here? Was it possible?

He carefully rolled up the hair, put it in the change pocket of his jeans, then continued searching the room but found nothing else. When he turned to leave he was surprised to see Chloe standing at the door.

“I..I had the same kind of bed,” she said, her eyes flicking to the left down the hall, unconsciously looking in the direction of the room Ash assumed had been hers. “But it was...it was only me. Your kids are lucky they have each other.”

“There’s no way to know if they have each other,” Ash said. “I don’t even know if they were really here.” He looked back toward the beds, trying to hold himself together. “The only thing we know for sure is that they *aren’t* here now.”

When he looked back, Chloe wasn’t in the doorway any more. He exited the room, assuming she’d be back at the ward door, but instead she was standing in the middle of the hall, staring at the last room on the right.

“Let’s go,” he said. “There’s no reason to stay here.”

But as he took a step toward the exit, she didn’t move.

“Chloe?”

Without looking at him, she said, “Matt’s...Matt’s inside person...is the same one who helped me.” The words were obviously causing her a great deal of distress, but Ash couldn’t understand why. “He would...leave me...messages. You know...so I’d know I wasn’t...alone. That helped me to survive.”

“You don’t need to torture yourself like this,” Ash said. “Come on.”

“Matt told him I was coming with you,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard him. “If something...changed, he...might have left me...a note.”

Ash took a step toward her, suddenly hopeful. “A note?”

She continued to stare at the door. “We don’t even know if...he got Matt’s initial message...but if...if...if he did...”

“If he did, what, Chloe?”

She took a couple of deep breaths. “He would probably leave it somewhere only I would know.”

“Where?”

The silence stretched out for a dozen seconds, then she said in a barely audible voice, “In my room.”

“It’s okay,” Ash said, trying to calm her down. “Just tell me where it is, and I’ll check.”

Her head began shaking left and right. “No. I have to do it. It’s my spot. My place only.”

Her breath shuttered in and out one more time, then she took a step toward the door, then another step and another, each coming quicker than the last. When she reached the room, she went inside without hesitating.

Ash wasn’t sure what to do. Should he let her look on her own or should he help? When half a minute passed and she hadn’t reappeared, he decided he needed to see what was going on.

As he opened the door, he could hear her sobbing.

“Chloe?” he said, rushing in.

She wasn’t there.

“Chloe?”

Another sob, this one from his left through the doorway to the bathroom. He found her inside on her knees in the middle of the tiled floor.

He dropped down beside her. “Are you hurt?”

She jumped when he touched her, surprised that he was there. “I can do this. I’ll be okay.”

“Just let me help.”

“I can do this,” she repeated, but didn’t move.

Her put his arm around her shoulders. She tried to pull away again, but then she took another breath, this one longer and slower, and she let him leave his arm where it was.

“What did they do to you?”

She said nothing for several seconds, then finally turned and looked up at him. “I don’t remember.”

“Well...that’s probably...good, right?” he said, realizing he shouldn’t have asked in the first place. “Maybe it’s best that way.”

“No,” she said quickly. “You don’t understand. I *don’t* remember. *Anything.*”

“What do you mean, anything? From when you were here?”

Again, her head shook. “From before. I remember waking up here. I remember being strapped to the bed. I remember the needles and the pills and the tests. I remember all that. But anything that came before in my life? I don’t remember.” She looked around the room. “This place took my past from me.”

*Good God*, Ash thought. “You don’t...know anything about your past?”

“I *know* about it. My name used to be Lauren Scott. Matt and Rachel showed me family pictures, articles in the local paper where I apparently grew up, my college diploma. I even sat in a car down the street from my...my parents’ house, and watched them walk along the sidewalk. If I hadn’t been shown a photo of them, I would have never recognized them. They were just two people I didn’t know. I had no feelings for them whatsoever.” Her eyes narrowed. “These people took that from me. They took *me* from me. That’s who I can’t get back.”

Ash wasn’t sure what to say. Was it better to remember that his wife was dead, and that he had two children who were in need of his help, or to be conscious of the fact you could remember nothing at all?

She wiped a hand across her cheeks. “I’m sorry. This isn’t helping. We’re here to find your kids, not watch me break down.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have every right to be upset.”

She tried to smile, but failed, then said, “Help me up.”

Once they were back on their feet, Ash asked, “Was there a note?”

“I...I haven’t checked yet.” She stepped toward the shower. “It’s over here.”

“I can get it.”

“No. I’m okay now.”

Whether she was or not, she was at least more in control of herself as she stepped into the shower stall. Water for the shower was controlled by a handle that could be moved left or right. Behind the handle was a concave metal plate that curved into the wall. Chloe pressed her fingertips around the edge of the plate, then twisted it to the left. It moved about two inches, then slipped out of whatever clamp was holding it in place. She moved it as far out as the still-attached handle would allow, then reached into the gap behind it. When she pulled her hand back, there was a piece of paper between her fingers.

Ash tried to temper his anticipation. The paper could still be nothing. A note from when she’d been here before, perhaps, or...or...

She unfolded it, read what was there, then showed it to him.

There was a date at the top, that day’s date, and a time, ten a.m., with the word “gone” after it. That meant as few as six hours before, Josie and Brandon had still been there. The next part read:

Kids still alive. Taking to NB7.

*Alive. They’re alive.* But what did he mean by “still”? Did that mean their time was almost up?

“What does NB7 mean?” Ash asked.

“It’s the way the others refer to their different facilities. They each have alpha-numeric designations.”

“Do you know where this place is?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never heard of it.”

Ash felt his world start to crumble. He’d been so close. He put a hand over his eyes, and could feel the pressure in his head building. He had to do something, but he didn’t know what.

Chloe touched his back. “Hey. We’re not done yet. There’s someone who might know.”

He looked at her. “There is?”

She hesitated. “Yes. A woman named Olivia.”

“Can we call her?”

Chloe shook her head. “We can’t call. We need to go see her.”

“Where is she?”

“Not too far, I think. Maybe an hour, hour and a half away. Matt’s the one who knows exactly where she is.”

Without even hesitating, Ash pulled out his phone and called the emergency number Pax had given him.



RACHEL ENTERED MATT'S office as he was finishing up his call with Ash. "Did they find the children?" she asked when her brother hung up.

"The place had already been cleared out."

"Oh, no."

"It's not as bad as it could have been. Winger was able to leave a message. They've taken the kids to someplace called NB7."

"Is that on our list?"

"No. I checked while we were talking." He paused for a moment, then looked at his sister. "Chloe suggested Olivia might know where it is."

"Olivia?" Rachel frowned. "Even if she does, she might not tell them."

"You don't think it's worth trying?"

Rachel looked out the window. Her history with Olivia was not a particularly pleasant one. "Does it matter? You've already sent them to the Bluff, haven't you?"

He adjusted himself uncomfortably in his chair. "If you can think of any other way to find out in a hurry, I'm more than open to it. But, yes, I've already sent them there."

Rachel stared at the distant hills, knowing her brother had done the right thing, but also not sure if she would have done the same if it had been up to her. Of course, truth be told, if it *had* been up to her, Olivia would have been dead a long time ago.

Finally, she turned back to him and set the paper she'd been carrying on the desk. "We have another situation."

Matt read the message. "Damn."

"I think there's a better than fifty-percent chance we're going to have to perform an extraction," she said.

He glanced through the message again, then nodded. "Keep a close eye on it, and get everything in place."

"I have a truck already on its way."

He eyed her suspiciously.

"It's going in with a CDC pass," she said. "There won't be any problems."

"Still, an extraction's going to be tricky, given the location."

"But not impossible."

"No. Not impossible."

• • • •

AT BLUEBIRD, A SIMILAR high-level conference was being held. The Director of Preparation—who, among other things, oversaw Dr. Karp's work and the operation Mr. Shell was heading up to keep a lid on things—and two of his counterparts were meeting in a small room specifically designed for these kinds of quick, private meetings.

"It's getting out of hand," the Director of Recovery said. "We are dangerously close to exposure."

"I don't think we're even near that point yet," the DOP said.

"Don't you? What about that video that the networks are blasting all over the place today? Those weren't military troops doing the shooting. Those were *our* people."

“Yes, they were. And even if they weren’t covered in bio-suits, there would be no possible way for the connection to be made back to us.”

“What were they doing out there anyway?”

“Their job.”

The DOR didn’t look as if he liked the answer.

“Is there a problem?” The DOP asked.

“Given the safeguards of KV-27a, it just seemed...unnecessary.”

The DOP looked at his colleague for a moment. “Are you worried about the deaths of two people?”

“Of course not,” the other man said quickly. “There just seems to be a lot of...glitches with this particular operation.”

“You’re right. There have been several *glitches*.”

“Starting with KV-27a reaching the public in the first place!”

“True, but I think that has actually been a benefit to us. As have these glitches. They’ve exposed areas of concern that are much better for us to know about now than later, don’t you think? If we had to do it all over again, I think I would have pushed for something like this to occur by design as opposed to by accident.”

“You’ve got to be...” The DOR fell silent.

“What? Kidding? Is that what you were going to say?” The DOP’s eyes cooled to hard steel, his voice cutting the air as he spoke. “The stakes we’re playing with are enormous. I can’t worry about two kids being killed in the desert. They’re not even a drop in the bucket of what’s to come if we’re to achieve what we’ve set out to do. The future of humanity is in our hands alone. That’s the oath we’ve all taken, or have you forgotten? Perhaps you think we need to change the parameters of the entire project. Perhaps you think we need to go easy.” He paused. “Tell me, how are you going to react when implementation day comes? Are you going to raise your concerns then, too?”

The DOR tensed. “Of course not.” He stood up. “Perhaps I was...hasty.”

The DOP immediately became calm and conciliatory. It was one of the abilities that made him an excellent leader within Project Eden. “We’re all under a lot of pressure. Don’t worry about it.” He offered his hand.

The DOR shook it, nodded at the silent third man in the room, then left.

As soon as the door closed, the DOP said, “He needs to be replaced.”

The third man, the Director of Survival, rose to his feet. He was smaller than the others by a foot, and one of the most dedicated members of the project. “Yes, he does. But he also has a point about the mistakes.”

“I know.” The mistakes *were* good learning tools, but the ones who had made them would need to be dealt with.

“What about the KV-27a safeguards? Any word?” the DOS asked.

“I’m told everything is on schedule.”

“Excellent.” Changing the subject, the DOS said, “Where are we on the vaccine?”

“Almost there. We should have a working batch within a few weeks.”

“Then we’re on to the next phase.”

The Director of Preparation smiled. “Yes, we are.”



BY LATE AFTERNOON IT was clear to Martina and the others in the segregated group at Cryer's Corner that Paul Unger was not just suffering from his wounds, but was also ill.

Coach Delger had said that if he only had the increased fever, then it could have been explained by his injuries. But there was the cough, too, and the growing congestion, all symptoms that had been previously reported in connection with the Sage Flu.

Martina was a smart girl. She knew if things played out the way they had everywhere else, she and the others in the segregated group would all be dead within a day or so. It scared her more than she wanted to admit, but she tried to stay calm because a few of the others were totally freaking out already, and someone had to keep their head.

It didn't help that the news reported the virus had spread throughout the entire quarantine zone, including their hometown of Ridgecrest. And even though the correspondent had said the new outbreaks seemed to have been contained to a handful of people here and there, the sense of doom that hung over the café was stifling.

There was no report, though, on the fact that the quarantine roadblock had been moved from ten miles west of Cryer's Corner to ten miles east. Perhaps they were the only ones who knew about that. And given the fact that the phones, and therefore the Internet, had stopped working not long after Martina uploaded Paul's video, there was no way they could share that information.

The only good news as far as she was concerned was Ben. That was the name of the cute college boy. He was from San Mateo in the Bay Area and had been driving home from a skiing trip in Colorado. Luckily for Martina, he wasn't one of the people flipping out so, naturally, they had gravitated toward each other.

At that moment, they were sitting in a booth at the far corner of the café, absently watching the TV. The reporter was a woman who'd been caught inside the zone, and was now at Fort Irwin near Barstow with several other members of the media. Martina wasn't paying her much attention, though. The woman had pretty much been saying the same thing over and over all day.

"This sucks," Martina blurted out.

"The news?" Ben asked.

She glanced at the screen. "Well, yeah. That, too. But all of this. It completely sucks. We can't even call our families to see how they're doing. It's like we're in prison."

"At least this prison has cushioned seats," he said, smiling.

"Ha ha." She turned her attention back to the TV, but could only take it for another minute before she said, "I wish I'd just start coughing and get it over with, you know?"

Ben didn't say anything.

"Did you hear me?"

She looked at him. He was staring out the window at something in the distance. Finally, as if on delay, he said, "Sorry." Then, with a sudden burst of energy, he scooted out of the booth. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" she asked, but he was already halfway toward the front of the café, so she got up and followed him.

He stopped at the counter near the register and looked around.

"What are you doing?" she asked, walking up.

"Have you seen Molly?"

Molly Cryer was the older woman who, it turned out, owned the café.

"Maybe in back?" Martina suggested.



With a nod, Ben passed through the opening in the counter and back into the kitchen. More curious than ever, Martina continued to follow him.

Molly was sitting on a little stool in back, watching a DVD of some old black and white movie on a small TV set on a desk. She had a soda in one hand, and an unlit cigarette in the other.

“The gas station across the street,” Ben said. “There’s a big rig behind it.”

“Yeah,” Molly said without taking her eyes off the screen.

“Whose is it?”

“The rig? That’d be Eddie Jackson’s truck.”

“Is he around?”

“Nah. He’s in…” She paused for a moment. “Reno, I think.”

“Who has the keys?”

“I assume Lance does over at the station.”

“Great. Thanks.”

As Ben headed back out, Martina said, “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up.”

“About what?”

He said nothing.

“Whoa! Where are you two going?” Coach Driscoll asked as Ben and Martina reached the front door.

“I need to check something,” Ben said.

“Well, just stick around right out front. Don’t want to expose anyone else.”

Most of the unexposed group had been hanging out at the mini-market just down from the café. No one had really laid claim to the gas station on the other side of the road yet, because there really wasn’t much to claim other than a couple of pumps and a greasy garage.

Once he was outside, Ben started jogging straight for the station.

Before he reached the road, Martina said, “I don’t think we’re supposed to go across.”

“Then you don’t have to come.”

Though she’d bent one or two rules in her life, she wasn’t a big one for breaking them, but given the fact that by this time tomorrow she’d probably be dead, what did it matter? She picked up her speed and caught up to him midway across the asphalt of the empty highway.

“Still not going to tell me what you’re doing?” she asked.

“Still not.”

No one seemed to be around as he led her into the gas station’s small office. He then started pulling desk drawers open, and slamming them closed when he didn’t find whatever it was he was looking for.

After a few minutes, he moved into the garage and took a quick scan around. His gaze locked onto a black cabinet on the wall.

He pulled the door open, then let out a yelp of triumph.

Martina moved around so she could look inside. There were several rows of hooks. Most were empty, but a few had keys hanging from them. Ben moved his finger along the sets that were there, pulling off several.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s see if I’m right.”

As they stepped out of the garage, a voice yelled out, “What are you doing in there?”

Lance Cryer, the guy who ran the gas station, was standing near the highway looking at them. He’d been in the group deemed unexposed.

“Just borrowing some keys,” Ben said.

“Dammit. You shouldn’t have gone in there. That’s my place. Now I can’t use it until someone washes it all down.”

Ben grimaced. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“Too late now, isn’t it?” Lance said. “What are you going to do with those keys?”

Ben looked down at the sets in his hand. After a second, he seemed to come to some decision. “Tell Eddie Jackson I’m sorry, too.”

“What?” Lance asked, confused.

Ben touched Martina on the arm. “Come on.”

They circled around the gas station to the semi truck parked in back. The first set of keys didn’t work, but the second opened the door.

“Go around to the other side,” he told her. “I’ll open it up for you.”

By the time she got there, the passenger door was unlocked.

“Okay, so are we going to make a run for it?” she asked, smirking, as soon as she was inside.

“Not a bad idea. But I kind of think I’d rather die of a cold than a bullet.”

That wiped the smile off her face.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was trying to be funny. But...”

Shaking her head, she said, “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” She glanced at him expectantly. “So why are we here?”

Ben put the key in the ignition and turned it enough to get the electricity inside working.

“That,” he said, pointing at a device mounted in the dashboard.

“What is it?”

“CB radio. If we can get it to work, we might be able to get you in touch with your mom.”

Martina looked at him. “You...you think so?”

“That’s the hope.”

It took him a few minutes to get the hang of it, but soon he got it working.

“Hello, hello. Is anyone out there?” he said into the mic. Static. “Hello. I’m calling from Cryer’s Corner inside the quarantine zone. Can anyone hear me?”

Static again, then, “...hear you.”

Martina hit Ben’s arm excitedly.

“This is Ben. Ben Bowerman. Who’s this?”

“...ame’s Marty Zimmerman. Everyone calls me...ee.”

“Sorry, you faded out. Calls you what?”

“Zee. Everyone calls me Zee.”

“I can’t tell you how great it is to hear your voice, Zee.”

“Where’d you say you are?”

“Cryer’s Corner.”

“Kinda near Death Valley?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hell, I know where that is. Tiny speck of a place. Did you say you’re in the quarantine zone?”

“Uh, yeah. Where are you?”

“Sitting in the parking lot of a casino just east of the Cal border along I-15. Stuck here with a load of potato chips I was supposed to be taking to Barstow, while I wait to hear where I’m being rerouted. But better stuck here than inside the zone, I guess. What’re you hauling?”

“I’m...not a trucker. There’s a whole group of us stuck here at Cryer’s Corner.”

It took a few minutes to explain everything, then another as Zee made the requested call on his cell phone before Martina heard the voice she thought she would never hear again.

“Hello?” her mother said, her voice distorted by the fact it was coming out of a speakerphone on a cell that was then being transmitted over the CB.

“Mom?”

A slight delay. “Martina? Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” she said, her eyes welling with water.

“This connection is horrible, sweetie. Can you try calling back?”

“No, no!” Martina yelled. “We don’t have any service here. I’m on a radio.”

“You’re on a what?”

Martina loved her mom dearly, but there were some things she didn’t get right away. “Just don’t hang up, okay?”

A moment later, her dad joined in on another extension. They talked about missing her and wishing she were home. She tried to sound upbeat, and was careful not to say anything about being exposed to the virus. *Let them have one more night of peace*, she thought.

“I want to know about this video you apparently put on the Internet,” her father said.

“It’s so horrible,” her mother cut in. “Please tell me it’s not true.”

“How did you know I put it up?” Martina asked, confused. Her video account name was a completely random series of numbers and letters.

“We’ve had several calls from people at PCN, including that reporter out in Barstow. They apparently learned about it from your friend Frances.”

*Frances, of course.*

“Did you really put that up?” her dad asked.

“Yes, Dad. I did.”

“But it’s fake, right?” her mom said. “That didn’t really happen.”

“It’s not fake, Mom.”

Her dad said something, but the static on the line covered most of it up.

“Dad, can you say that again? I couldn’t understand you.”

“...wants to talk to you, sweetie.”

“Who wants to talk to me?” she asked.

“The reporter. From PCN? She gave us her number and wants you to call. I’m not sure you should or not, though.”

Martina looked at Ben. “They want to talk to me?”

He shrugged. “It makes sense. That video must be a big thing right now.”

Over the radio, her dad said, “Sweetie, are you there?”

She moved the CB mic back to her mouth. “I’m here, Dad.”

“Do you want us to give you the number?”

“I’d talk to her, but I can’t call from here.”

Zee cut in. “I could do it for you, if you want.”

“Who’s that?” Martina’s dad asked.

“That’s Zee, Dad. He’s helping us with the radio connection.” She looked at Ben. “Should I talk to her?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Someone needs to get the word out about what happened to Paul and his friends.”

She thought for a moment, then keyed the mic again. “Dad, go ahead and give Zee the number. I’ll talk her.”



MATT HAD CALLED the place where Ash and Chloe were going the Bluff. It turned out to be two and a half hours away from the old Palmer Psychiatric Hospital, not one.

The directions took them into the Sierra Nevada Mountains, east of Sacramento. Ash was surprised by how light the traffic was until he realized it was probably due to the outbreak down south. Though there had been no reports of cases up here, that didn't mean the fear didn't stretch well beyond the quarantine zone. Better to play it overly cautious and keep your family at home than to risk infection.

They left the interstate behind as they entered the mountains and proceeded up a narrower, windier road into the thickening forest. From there it was down a series of smaller roads. Ash carefully followed Matt's instructions, but even then he almost missed the gate in the darkening twilight.

It wasn't anything special, and in fact looked like a half dozen others they'd passed on the way up. Metal-pipe frame, three twelve-inch-wide planks running from side to side, and that was it. The fence it was connected to was made of wood posts with barbed wire strung between, the majority of it covered by vegetation.

Though Ash was tempted to climb out and push the gate open, Matt's instructions had been clear. "When you reach the gate, stay in your car and wait."

Two full minutes passed before the gate swung open on its own. Once it was completely out of the way, Ash drove through.

The road on the other side was narrow, the feeling reinforced by the pine trees that grew right up to the edge and the overarching canopy created by their branches. This went on for nearly a hundred yards, then suddenly the trees fell away, and they entered a grass-covered clearing at the top of a hill.

Chloe drew in a surprised breath. "It's so beautiful."

At the far edge of the clearing was a house, and beyond it an amazing view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

In many ways, the house looked like a smaller version of Matt and Rachel's lodge. Wood-stained sides and large windows and warm outside lighting. This Olivia person obviously lived pretty well.

There were two cars parked out front—a pickup truck and a decade-old Cadillac. Ash pulled in behind them then cut the engine.

"Are you staying here or coming with me?" he asked Chloe.

"I'm certainly not staying here."

They both got out and headed over to the house. As they stepped up onto the porch, the front door opened and Ash got his first shock. The smiling couple who came out to greet them was the same couple who had picked him up in the Winnebago out in the middle of nowhere when he'd been fleeing Barker Flats.

He glanced quickly side to side, thinking he must have missed the RV, but it was nowhere to be seen.

The man, Mike—if that hadn't been a fake name—thrust his hand out at Ash. "Great to see you again," he said. As Ash shook his hand, Mike pulled him into a quick hug. "Simply great." He turned to Ash's companion. "And Chloe, it's been far too long."

"Hi, Mike," she said.

They hugged with genuine affection.

Janice came over next and gave Ash a coy, contrite smile. "I'm sorry about the coffee. I hope you'll forgive me, and know I was only trying to help you."

A day or two earlier, he might have still been mad at her, but now it didn't seem important. "It's fine. I know you were doing what you were supposed to."

Her smile widened in relief, then she gave him a hug. When she stepped back, she said, "Your face looks horrible."

"Janice!" Mike said.

"Are you going to try to tell me it doesn't?" she asked.

Ash touched the bandage that covered his nose. He'd almost forgotten about the surgery. "She's right," he said. "I wouldn't even want to look at me."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," Janice said, then turned away. "Chloe, you are as beautiful as ever."

The women hugged.

"Come, come," Mike said. "We've got a fire inside."

Mike ushered them indoors and led them into a living room.

"Would anyone like coffee?" Janice asked. She looked at Ash. "I can guarantee you this pot is completely harmless."

"Are *you* Olivia?" he asked.

"Me? God, no. I'm Janice."

"Sit," Mike said. "She'll bring us coffee."

Ash remained on his feet. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not here for coffee or small talk. I'm here for someone named Olivia. Matt said she'd be here."

Mike and Janice shared a look, then Mike said, "She is."

"Then I'd like to talk to her now."

Mike's smile disappeared. He nodded. "Of course. This way."

He crossed the living room and entered a small hallway near the back corner. As Ash followed, he realized Chloe was behind him.

"Just me," he told her.

"I'm coming, too."

"This isn't your business. It's mine."

"I'm coming, too," she repeated.

He stared at her for a moment, then said, "The second you get in my way, you're out."

They found Mike standing halfway down the hallway, in front of an open door.

"Inside," he said.

They crossed the threshold into what turned out to be a large bathroom.

Ash looked at Mike, confused. "We're in here because...?"

"You've been allowed to come to the Bluff only because Matt trusts you. He thinks you might be able to help us someday. If that trust is misplaced, and you try to betray us, you won't last very long. I'm not threatening you, I'm just telling you. So before we go any further, I need to know if he's wrong about you."

Ash took a moment, then said, "Matt and the rest of you saved my life. And you've all been very generous in helping me try to find my children. I have no intention of ever telling anyone about him or his ranch or even your little house here. But if you do try to block me from getting my kids, all bets are off."

"Good. Then there's no misunderstanding between us," Mike said.

He stepped over to a closet with accordion-style doors and opened them. Inside, there was nothing earth-shattering or unusual, just a washer and dryer and a stack of towels. Mike reached behind the washer and touched something. There was a subtle *click*. Then, with a simple, one-handed push, the dryer moved to the side, and a section of the wall behind it slid open. Mike motioned for Ash and Chloe to pass through.

The space beyond was dark and not particularly large. As soon as Mike joined them, the wall slid shut. The moment it was fully closed, a light came on, and the small room they were in began moving downward.

An elevator.

There might have been more than a little bit of crazy in these people, but they were certainly well funded, Ash thought.

The car continued downward for much longer than he'd expected. When it finally came to a stop, the door opened onto a brightly lit room. There were two men standing just inside, both armed.

"Please step out of the elevator and raise your arms to shoulder height," one of the men said, demonstrating what he wanted them to do.

Ash was surprised to see that he and Chloe weren't the only ones who needed to follow the instructions. Mike, too, had his arms out, as he let one of the men first use a metal detecting wand on him, then pat him down.

When they were all through, the man who'd spoken originally said, "Follow me."

The door on the other side of the room buzzed and he pushed it open. They then entered a long, wide corridor that was as brightly lit as the space they'd just left. About twenty feet from the door was a see-through wall of either glass or Plexi, dividing the area in two. There was a very elaborate-looking security door inset on the right-hand side of the wall.

Prior to this divider, there was a room off to the side that also had a clear wall along the front. Inside, Ash could see at least five more men. Two were standing right at the wall, looking out. Like the guys who'd been waiting outside the elevator, they were armed. The other three were sitting at desks looking at screens, their faces lit by their computers.

The guide led Ash, Chloe, and Mike over to this wall, then said, "Adam Cooper and Chloe White cleared for entrance."

"Cleared for entrance," one of the men inside repeated, his voice coming out of a speaker somewhere nearby.

The elaborate security door on the large divider began to hum as locks disengaged. Finally, there was a slight sucking sound before it swung open toward them.

"Through here," the guide said, leading them to the other side.

There were twenty doors in the back half of the corridor, ten on each side, paired in twos. Down the center of the space were three more armed men, walking back and forth as if they were protecting something.

"What is this place?" Ash asked Mike.

"I'm sorry," the guide said. "No talking here, please."

Frustrated, Ash fell silent as they continued down the hallway.

The pair of doors their guide finally stopped in front of was the second to last on the left side. He opened an eye-level panel on the left door, looked through it, then closed it again. He gave Mike a nod, then opened the door on the right.

This time it was Mike who took the lead, with their guide staying outside.



As if the whole facility wasn't odd already, this new room was even stranger. The first part was a narrow passageway that took a jog to the right, then turned back to the left before opening into a wide space with five comfortable chairs sitting side by side. The chairs were facing the wall on the left, which seemed to be made of opaque, black glass.

"Take a seat," Mike said.

"Where is she?" Ash asked.

"You'll see her in a moment." He gestured at the chairs. "You should take the one in the center."

Once they were seated, Chloe to his right, and Mike to his left, Ash said, "So what now?"

"Now we talk to Olivia. But I want to warn you first, don't buy everything she tells you. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready." Though ready was probably not the right word. He had no idea from which direction she was going to enter. And where would she sit? Down at one of the ends? How could he talk to her there?

Mike pushed a button on his armrest.

A voice came out of a speaker. "Station one."

"This is Mike. We're ready."

"Copy that, Mike."

Suddenly, it was as if the wall in front of them melted away. The opaque black was gone, replaced by clear glass, a window into another room.

*Not just a room, Ash realized. A cell.*

There was a bed in the back and a sink on the wall next to a toilet. Hanging from the ceiling in the corner, enclosed by a wire cage, was a television that was currently off. But the most striking thing in the room was the woman sitting on a plastic stool just a few feet on the other side of the wall, facing them.

Her blonde hair was short, maybe no longer than half an inch. She had an angular face with high cheekbones and eyes that seemed to smirk. She'd barely moved since the wall became transparent, staring at it, a smile resting on her lips.

"Can she see us?" Ash whispered.

The woman suddenly laughed. "Yes. I can see you. Hear you, too."

"This is Olivia," Mike said. "Olivia, we have some guests who need to ask you a few questions."

"So I've been told." Her gaze shifted to Chloe. "You look kind of familiar. We've met before, haven't we?"

Chloe said nothing.

The woman shrugged, then turned her attention to Ash. "You're one ugly son of a bitch, aren't you? Someone throw you in front of a train?"

Ash ignored her comment. "I'm looking for a location, and I'm told you might know where it is."

"Hold on. You know my name. I don't know yours."

He paused for a second, then said, "Ash."

"As in cigarette?"

"Do you know the location of something called NB7?"

Her eyes widened a fraction of an inch, as if he'd actually surprised her. "What are you? One of their hunters?" she asked, nodding toward Mike. "Out to bag you a big-name baddie, is that it?" She smiled, then leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees. "Have you ever considered for a moment that maybe you guys are the black hats?"

“I don’t care about sides,” Ash said. “I’m just trying to find...some people who are important to me. I’ve been told they’ve been taken to NB7. I just need to know where it is.”

“Look, honey. You might as well stop what you’re doing right now. If they’ve been taken to NB7, then they’re probably already dead. Time to move on.”

Ash tried to maintain his composure. “Just tell me where it is.”

“Out of the goodness of my heart? I don’t think so.”

Ash couldn’t hold back. He jumped up and slammed his fist against the wall. “Tell me where it is!”

“Oh, touchy. Who’d they take? Your girlfriend? Wife, maybe? Your mom?”

“Dr. Karp took my kids!”

Olivia stared at him, once more looking a bit surprised.

“Please,” he said. “Where is this place?”

“Even if I told you, do you think they’d just let you walk out with them?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She leaned back. “Really? Because that actually makes it interesting. Whatever it takes?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on,” Mike said. He pressed the button on the armrest. “Cut audio.”

“Audio off,” the voice from earlier said through the speaker.

Ash twisted around. “What?”

“She’s tried to make deals before,” Mike explained. “The one time someone actually took her up on it, it was a trap.”

“I don’t care. If it gets me close to my kids, that’s all I’ll need. I can take it from there.”

“If you’re dead, that’s not going to help your kids at all.”

“And if they’re dead, there’s no reason for me to live. Switch the sound back on.”

Reluctantly, Mike did.

“Can you tell me where my kids are or not?” Ash asked.

“Oh, you’re back. Mikey there telling you not to trust me?” Olivia said.

“Answer my question.”

She held up her hand and wagged a finger at him. “You know very well how this works. Trade-off.”

“There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“Isn’t there?”

He stared at her for a second. “You obviously have something in mind. What is it?”

Her upper lip curled in a faux pout. “I get so little entertainment in here, and you deny me even a little negotiation. Fine. Here’s all I want you to do. When you find the fabulous Dr. Karp, just before you put the bullet in his head, because I know that’s exactly what you want to do, I want you to tell him hi from me, and ask him why he gave up on me. One more thing. If he says anything after that, tell him he’ll be heading to the afterlife before me.”

“That’s it? That’s all you want?”

Her smile was back. “It would mean the world to me.”

“That, I can do.”

“I thought you probably could.”



THE ONLY THING that kept Ash from speeding down the mountain was the fear of skidding off the side and plunging down the slope. Not only would he and Chloe die, but he'd be effectively killing his children, too. Still, it was hard to keep from pressing the pedal to the floor.

"I'd wish you good luck," Olivia had said after she gave them the location of NB7, "but I'm guessing you're already too late." She stood up and walked right up to the glass, directly in front of Ash.

"Stand away from the wall," the voice from the speaker ordered. "Stand away from the wall."

She locked eyes with Ash, her feet firmly planted where she was.

"Stand away from the wall."

"But just because they're dead," she said, "doesn't mean you can't deliver my message to Dr. Karp."

She obviously hoped that whether his children were dead or alive, Ash would want Dr. Karp to pay for what had been done to his family. And though he wasn't about to accept the possibility that Brandon and Josie were gone, she'd been right.

The biggest problem now was that NB7 was in Eastern Oregon, 370 miles away from the Bluff.

The jet Matt had sent them west on wasn't an option. Mike had checked. The plane was apparently somewhere in Texas, and wouldn't be able to get to an airport close to them for nearly four hours. Add on the flight time, and the fact that the closest place they could land would still be an hour away from NB7, and the balance decidedly tipped in favor of driving.

Mike had suggested they get at least a few hours' sleep at the Bluff before they left, but that was out of the question. Every minute saved could be the difference between Ash's kids living or dying.

According to the car's GPS, the trip should take them six and a half hours. Ash planned on slicing at least an hour to an hour and a half off that once they hit level ground.

"You going to hold the steering wheel like that the whole time?" Chloe asked.

He shot her a quick look. "What?"

"You're gripping it like you want to tear it out of the dash. You're wasting energy."

He glanced at his hands. His fingers were wrapped around the wheel so tightly his knuckles had turned white. Now that he was aware of it, he could feel the stress running up his arms and into his shoulders. He forced himself to relax, then looked back at the road.

"I can drive, if you want," she said. "I'm pretty good." She paused. "I didn't forget how, if you're worried about that."

"I'm fine," he said.

"Sure, whatever you want. I'm here though, okay? 'Cause, you know, I think you'd want to be at your max when we get there. But that's your choice."

He didn't respond, but he knew she was right. It would be after midnight when they arrived and he'd need to be sharp. Maybe after they got out of the hills, he'd let her drive for a couple of hours while he slept.

"What did you think of Olivia?" Chloe asked.

Ash shrugged. "I just wanted the location from her. I didn't think about her otherwise."

"Last time I saw her she was mad as hell because we'd just caught her, like a cornered wild animal." She paused. "She used to work with Dr. Karp on the experiments. Yours wasn't the first, you

know. Not even close. But probably their most successful, huh? Not only did they find something that worked, they found you and your kids, too.”

Without looking at her, he said, “What do you mean?”

“The experiments. You know about that, right? Matt told you?”

“He just said we were part of a test.”

“Oh. Well, then...maybe...I shouldn’t...I mean it’s not my place. Oh, dammit. Just forget it.”

The silence lasted for nearly a minute.

“He was going to tell me,” Ash said. “Back at the ranch, but I just wanted to focus on getting my kids. That first day, he started talking about things that were bigger than I could imagine, like I’d been caught up in some sort of...of...”

“Conspiracy?” she asked.

“Conspiracy,” he said, nodding. “That’s exactly what it sound like to me. Some nut-job theory like NASA faking the moon landings or the U.S. Government being behind 9/11.”

“NASA landed on the moon?” she asked.

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing in concern.

“I’m kidding,” she said. “I forgot about who I was, but things that I learned, things that weren’t about me, I remember most of those.”

“How is that possible?”

She shook her head and shrugged. “Maybe we can ask Dr. Karp when we see him.”

“He did this to you?”

“Not him directly. One of his colleagues.”

“Now we’re back to the conspiracy theory,” he said.

“Yeah, except this one isn’t a theory. It’s conspiracy reality.”

Once Ash had realized his kids were still alive, the only thing he’d concentrated on at the ranch was them. He hadn’t cared one way or the other what Matt and his friends were really involved in, but he was beginning to think maybe that was a mistake. Maybe he should care, maybe there was something to whatever it was they seemed to think was happening.

“Who are they?” he asked.

“Who are who?”

“These people you all seem to be fighting, who are they?”

“I...I don’t know. It’s not my place.”

“Maybe it’s not, but Matt’s not here.”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“I already think you’re crazy.”

They glanced at each other, then she laughed.

“All right,” she finally said. “Are you buckled in?”

He rolled his eyes, then smiled. “Yeah. I’m buckled in.”

“I’m serious.”

He held up a defensive hand. “Okay, sorry.”

She was quiet so long that he looked over to see what was wrong. She had twisted in her seat and was studying him.

“What?” he asked.

“I’ve never been the one to tell anyone before. I’ve only listened as others have done it, so I want to get it right.”

“Okay,” he said, drawing the word out. “Just let me know when you’re ready.”

He heard her take a breath, then she said, "I'm ready now."

Outside, the mountains had finally started to fall behind them, and the road started to straighten out.

"The end of our world is coming. And it's happening on purpose."



“CAN YOU HEAR me?” Tamara said into her phone. She was sitting in the front seat of the van, with the door closed so that no competing reporter might overhear the conversation, trying to figure out who she was talking to.

“Yes, I can hear you,” the female voice replied.

Tamara glanced into the back of the van where Bobby was sitting at the editing console. “Is it okay?” she mouthed.

He gave her the thumbs up, nodding. Often phone conversations needed to be recorded, so they had a device that hooked Tamara’s phone into the van’s equipment, only this time the setup was a little stranger than other times, as the voice of the person on the other end was coming via another phone being held up to a CB radio.

“Can you please give me your name?” Tamara asked.

“It’s Martina Gable.”

Tamara gave it a beat so that Bobby would have a place to cut out the first part of the audio, then said, “Martina, can you tell us where you are, please?”

“Yes. We’re in Cryer’s Corner, California.”

“Who’s we?”

“Well, I’m here with the Burroughs High School softball team. We were headed home from a tournament when we got stuck here.”

“Because of the quarantine?”

“Yes.”

“And there are others there, too?”

“Yeah, there’s the people who live here, and a few others who showed up in cars and got stuck, too. And Ben, of course. Ben Bowerman. He’s the one who figured out the CB.”

“And that’s how you’re talking to us?”

“Yeah. All the phones and the Internet stopped working. And there hasn’t been any cell service here since we arrived.”

Now that Tamara had gotten the basics out of the way, she started in on the more important questions. “It’s our understanding that Cryer’s Corner is in the quarantine zone. How did you get there?”

“Well,” Martina said. “It wasn’t *in* the zone when we arrived. Until this morning, the roadblock was west of us.”

*Interesting.* “And then they moved it east?”

“Yes.”

“Any idea why?”

Martina didn’t respond right away.

“Are you still there?” Tamara asked.

“Yes, I’m here. We think they moved it because of Paul.”

“Who is Paul?”

“Paul Unger. He’s the one who took the video your channel’s been playing.”

Tamara smiled. This was exactly what she wanted. “And you’re the one who uploaded it?”

“Yes.”

“How long after this did the Internet go out at Cryer’s Corner?”



“Maybe an hour or two.”

“So, after it started playing on television.”

“Yeah.”

“I’d like to talk to Paul about the video. Is that possible?”

A pause. “He was...injured just as he got here. He’s in the café across the street.”

“How bad is he hurt?”

“Messed up his knee and hit his head when the guys in the helicopters took a shot at him.”

Tamara froze for half a second, stunned. “Can you repeat that?”

Martina did.

“Can you tell me exactly what happened?”

“Sure. I saw most of it from the roof of the gas station.”

The girl then proceeded to tell Tamara about Paul’s escape. After that she relayed the story Paul had told her about his brother and his girlfriend, and their murders in the desert canyon. Through it all, Tamara and Bobby kept sharing shocked looks.

“There’s...there’s something else, too,” Martina said as she finished Paul’s story.

“Yes?”

“Coach Delger thinks Paul might be sick. You know, with the Sage Flu. We’ve split into two groups. One that was exposed to Paul and one that wasn’t. No one else has shown signs of anything, though, so maybe he just has a cold.”

Tamara had already been feeling a strong connection to the girl, but now she felt her stomach sinking. “Which group are you in, Martina?” she asked, afraid she knew the answer.

“I...I was exposed. That’s how I found out about the video. Bu please don’t put that part in your story. I don’t want my mom to know yet.”

“Sure. We’ll keep that part out,” Tamara said, meaning it. “Can we talk again in the morning?”

“We’ll have to come back to the truck where the radio is. What time?”

“Eight?”

“Zee?” Martina asked. “Is eight okay for you?”

“As long as I’m still sitting here, which looks pretty likely,” the trucker who’d connected them said.

“Great,” Tamara replied. “We’ll talk to you then.”

As soon as she hung up, she turned to Bobby. “Oh, my God.”

“Oh, my God is right,” he said.

“I’ll bet you that the helicopters that shot at this Paul guy are the same ones we saw. The same ones who killed his brother and his girlfriend.”

Bobby didn’t reply, but the look on his face said he was thinking the same thing.

There was a knock on the passenger window beside her. Joe was standing right outside. He’d been on lookout to make sure nobody got near the van while she was on the phone. She motioned for him to climb into the back.

“So?” he asked, once he’d joined them.

“You’re not going to believe it,” she said.

“Tell me.”

While Bobby worked on cutting the important parts of the interview into their already prepared piece, Tamara filled Joe in.

“I think we should go up with it on my next spot,” she said once she was done.

She could see the hesitation in Joe’s eyes.

“Come on. It’s great stuff,” she told him.

“It is,” he said. “I would just feel a bit more comfortable if we sent it to the network first, so they know what we have.”

“I think we should just go for it,” Tamara argued. “I don’t want them messing this up.”

“You know that’s not the way we’re supposed to do things. Network has the right to see all this first.”

“Oh, I see. You’re Mr. Corporate-Rule-Follower now?”

“No,” he said, his face hardening. “But I am a man with a family who would like to keep his job. We do this on our own, there’s a very good chance we get fired. You’ll have no problem finding something else. Me, it won’t be so easy.”

She looked out the window, annoyed, but knowing Joe was right.

“Fine,” she said. “But if the network tries to change any of this, our version gets posted to the Internet.”

• • • •

MR. SHELL HAD BEEN right to keep his eye on the reporter. Perhaps taking her brother had been a mistake, but it had revealed that she was a problem.

If people would just let things go, they had a much better chance of living.

He had watched the report the woman and her editor had just sent to their bosses in New York, and knew it was time to do something about it. But given the slapdown he’d gotten over the death of the girl’s brother, he decided to cover his ass first.

The Director of Preparation called five minutes after Shell sent him an email with a link to the video.

“Tamara Costello appears to be very good at her job,” the DOP said as soon as Shell answered.

“Unfortunately for her, sir.”

“Yes.”

Shell hesitated a moment. “I assume you’d like her removed.”

“Mr. Shell, I believe part of your job is making those decisions yourself. I don’t have time for you to run every little aspect of your operation by me first.”

Shell gritted his teeth, but pushed his frustration down and said, “I’m just bringing this particular case up in light of what happened concerning the subject’s brother.”

“Well, he *was* a mistake. You should have seen that from the beginning.”

“Yes, sir. You’re right, of course.”

“I’m sure you’ll make the right decision this time, Mr. Shell.”

The line went dead.

• • • •

THE DIRECTOR OF SURVIVAL was sitting across the table from the DOP. They had both been eating their dinner when the email from Shell came in. Together they had watched the video, then the DOS listened as his counterpart talked to Shell.

“So he was looking for guidance, then?” the DOS asked once the other director had hung up.

“Yes, he was.”

“Disappointing.”

“It is, but given recent history, not necessarily surprising.”

The DOS cut his asparagus into three parts. “Better to know now.”

“Very true.”

“Is his replacement ready?”

“Of course.”

With nothing more to say on the subject, they both began eating again.



“ON PURPOSE?” ASH asked.

Chloe was still watching him. “I know it’s hard to believe, but yes.”

“I’m not really sure I know what you mean by that.”

“What I mean is that this group of people we’re up against, the group you’ve unintentionally become entangled with, is working toward bringing about the end of civilization as we know it.”

He tried hard not to laugh as he shook his head. “You’re starting to make the idea of a fake moon landing sound reasonable.”

“I warned you,” she said.

“You did.” He should have known better than to ask questions. Whatever delusions these people were operating under were their business, and obviously had little to do with his kids. But as he watched the road his curiosity got the best of him. “Just exactly how are they supposed to be bringing about the end of mankind?”

“I didn’t say the end of mankind. I said the end of civilization as we know it.”

“What’s the difference?”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “How many people are on Earth right now, at this minute?”

With a smirk, he said, “Well, I’m not sure I have the *exact* number.”

She frowned at him. “Roughly.”

“I don’t know. Four or five billion?”

“Over seven.”

“Okay, seven.”

“When do you think we reached one billion?”

“I have no idea. Why is it—”

“The early eighteen hundreds. Just a little over two hundred years ago. That means it took over a hundred thousand years for us to reach that number. Do you know how long it took to reach two billion? Just over one hundred and twenty years. Three billion, *thirty-three* years. Four, fifteen. You see the pattern?”

“So are you saying we’re growing so much it’s going to bring about the end of civilization?”

“These people, the ones that Dr. Karp works for, they believe exactly that. They believe the end of civilization is impossible to avoid. But they also believe that if they can control how things end, they can create a new beginning without sacrificing the resources the planet still has.”

“Okay, so how are they planning to do that?”

“You ready? This is the good part, relatively speaking. They’re going to eliminate over 99% of the current population.”

Ash snorted a laugh. “Right. Sure. They’re going to kill off 99% of the planet.”

“More than ninety-nine. We don’t know the exact target number, but we think they want to end up with around ten million people. They start again, only without losing any of the knowledge the human race has already obtained.”

Ash shook his head. This was ridiculous. Chloe, Matt, Rachel, and the others had been more than helpful, but they were clearly operating on the fringe of reality. Check that, beyond the fringe.

“What do you think was going on at that base where you and your family lived? You said Matt told you, right? It was a test, Ash. They’re trying to find the best method to get rid of everyone else.”

And when they do finally unleash whatever it is they come up with, you better believe that those they've chosen to remain behind will have been immunized against the disease by a vaccine developed from someone who had true immunity." She paused. "Someone like you and your children."

The sneer that had been on his face disappeared.

"No one ever believes it the first time," she went on. "I didn't. So I don't expect you to, either. But you've heard it now. It's there in your mind. In time, you'll see that everything I've told you is true."

*See that everything you've told me is crazy, more like it.* But even as he thought that, there was a small kernel of doubt tapping at the back of his mind.

He took the next exit, then switched places with her and tried to get some sleep. But each time he started to drift off he would see the same emergency vehicles that had been parked on his street the night Ellen died. Only they weren't parked just on his street now.

They were everywhere.



NIGHT HAD DESCENDED over Fort Irwin, the sky filling with the arcing band of the Milky Way. But Tamara wasn't looking at the sky as she paced impatiently near the lights Bobby had set up for her next report. Joe had disappeared fifteen minutes earlier. She had been under the impression he was taking a call from the network, but how long did it take for them to say, "Yes, play the video"?

The three of them had already been waiting for over an hour for a response. An *hour!* It was enough to make her want to punch the side of the van over and over. Couldn't the network see how important this was? Couldn't they understand she *needed* to do this for her brother? The reporting was good, and the evidence was there. She just needed the damn go-ahead.

Maybe she should have just ignored Joe, and had Bobby send it up live during her spot. Maybe they should still do that.

*Not maybe.*

With a renewed sense of determination, she headed around the van to tell Bobby to get the report ready, but before she reached the door, the sound of multiple helicopters cut out any ability to have a conversation.

She moved to the end of the van. Over the past several hours, there had been a drastic increase in the amount of helicopters landing near the media area. Every time they arrived, Tamara would check, hoping they'd be the two helicopters from earlier, the ones with the man who'd killed Gavin. But they hadn't returned.

Until now.

"Bobby!" she yelled.

Realizing he couldn't hear her over the noise, she ran back and grabbed his arm, then pointed at the camera. As soon as he picked it up, she pulled him to the end of the van. When he saw the helicopters, he raised the camera and turned it on.

Like earlier, several men climbed out of each helicopter, then gathered together. When they finished talking, they started heading as a group in the general direction of the media area.

"What are they doing?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know," Tamara replied. "But try to get a shot of each of their faces."

"It's a little dark." While the landing area was flooded with bright light, the media area had to make do with a few scattered floodlights on poles.

"Do what you can."

As the men got closer, she could see the two in front scanning around, looking for something. Then one of them seemed to settle on the PCN van. He said something to the other man, then the whole group veered slightly to the left and headed straight for Tamara and Bobby.

"What the hell?" Bobby said.

The men were still a good hundred feet away when someone grabbed Tamara and Bobby's arms from behind. They both turned quickly. It was Peter Chavez.

"Come on," he said. "We've got to get you out of here."

"What are you talking about?" Tamara asked.

"I'm talking about saving your lives."

"Saving our lives?" She tried to pull her arm out of his grasp, but he didn't let go.



Moving his face close to hers, he said, “Those soldiers? They’re here to kill you. Just like they killed those two kids out in the desert. Like they killed your brother.”

“What? How did you—”

“Come on!”

He pulled at her until she was running along with him. Bobby, who’d heard it all, fell in beside her. Chavez led them on an angle that kept the van between them and the approaching soldiers until they were able to duck around the back of a transmission truck belonging to a Los Angeles network affiliate.

“How do you know that’s what they’re here to do?” Tamara asked, shaken.

“They know about your report. They’ve killed it in New York, and they’ve already got Joe, but you’re still a loose end.”

“Joe? But how—”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, cutting her off. “We have to keep moving.”

He pushed off the truck, and ran toward the building the media had used to sleep in. Tamara shared a quick look with Bobby, then they both took off after Chavez.

“All the way through,” Chavez whispered once they were inside.

The large room in front still had cots set up all over the place, so they had to weave around them to get to the door on the far wall. Passing through it, Tamara glanced back at the building’s entrance, sure that soldiers would rush through and pursue them. But, so far, they hadn’t shown up.

Perhaps Chavez was wrong. How did he even know the soldiers were after them in the first place?

“Are you sure—”

“Come on, come on!” he yelled.

They were in a corridor now that seemed to run the rest of the length of the building.

“Peter, please,” she said, desperately trying to convince herself that everything was all right. “How do you know they’re really after us?”

Peter kept looking toward the door that led back into the main room, obviously anxious to keep moving. “I have a friend at your network. Dean Gaboury. Do you know him?”

“Dean? Yes, sure.” Dean was one of the suits in charge of afternoon news coverage.

“He told me your story’s been killed, and that Joe’s already been detained. He said they were coming after you, too, and asked if I could hide you someplace safe, until they can get this worked out. Your network doesn’t like the idea of its reporters being arrested.”

“Arrested for what?”

“Does it matter?”

“Jesus,” Bobby said.

“No kidding. Now, let’s go,” Chavez said.

Just as they passed through the door at the end of the hall that led back outside, a voice called out from behind them. “Stop right there!”

Tamara’s fear level skyrocketed.

“Over there,” Chavez said.

He moved across a short expanse of concrete, and pulled open the door of a building that looked very much like the one they’d just exited. Tamara was the last one to pass inside, but Chavez was still able to get the door closed before the soldiers exited the other building.

Halfway through, Tamara stopped. “Hold on, hold on. We can’t keep running like this. What’s really going to happen if they find us? They’ll put us in a room and ask us some questions?”

“You know what they did to those kids in the desert, to your brother.”

Her eyes widened. “But...but we’re on a base. People have seen us, right? They can’t do anything like that to us.”

Chavez stepped over to her and grabbed her shoulders, looking her in the eyes. “All right. The truth. Those men are *not* in the U.S. Army. They are something else entirely. They operate on a whole different set of rules. Their only goal is to get rid of loose ends. Joe is dead, and if you don’t come with me, you’ll both be next.” He dropped his hands to his side.

“Joe’s dead?” Bobby asked, shocked.

Tamara stared at him, unable to speak.

“Blue pill or red pill,” Chavez said. “Blue pill, you stay in your ignorant world, go out there and talk to your soldier friends, and stay happy for maybe another hour until they put a bullet in your brain. Red pill, I save your lives.”

“I’m taking the red pill,” Bobby said quickly.

Tamara’s lower lip trembled slightly as she licked it. “Okay.”

Chavez nodded once, then continued down the hallway.

When they exited the building, they found themselves in a small parking lot. There were half a dozen cars, a couple pickups, and a medium-sized, white cargo truck. Chavez led them over to the truck. The back was already open so he jumped inside, then held a hand down to help them up.

“This is too obvious,” Tamara said. “They find us in here for sure.”

“Trust me. They won’t.”

Bobby climbed up on his own, then Tamara reluctantly took Chavez’s hand. Once she was on board, he went to the front of the cargo area and touched two of the screws holding the panels in place. A small section of the wall popped open about a quarter inch. He put his fingers into the gap, then pulled it all the way open like a door.

Inside was a three-foot-wide space that ran the width of the truck.

“It’s not a ton of room, but you’ll be safe. The walls are insulated. Still, I wouldn’t talk very much. There’s food and water, and a pot in case you need to relieve yourself.”

“How long do you think we’ll be in there?” Bobby asked, surprised.

“I don’t know.”

“Whose truck is this?” Tamara asked. “I don’t remember it from the roadblock.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s safe. Once you’re inside, there’s a latch. Close that and no one can open it from out here. Don’t undo it until you hear someone knock three times like this.” He tapped lightly against the metal, knock-knock, then paused a second before adding the final knock. He looked out the open end of the truck as if he’d heard something. “I know you have questions, but now’s not the time. Just get in.”

Bobby immediately went inside.

Tamara looked Peter in the eyes. “You’re not lying to us, right?” she asked, already knowing he wasn’t.

“I’m not.”

“And Joe is dead?”

He nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry. Now get in quickly. *Please.*”

She took a breath and passed through the opening, then watched with a nightmarish sense of the unreal as Peter closed the door behind her.



IN THE DEAD of night, the landscape of Eastern Oregon didn't look much different than that of the Mojave Desert surrounding Barker Flats. Perhaps it had a bit more scrub covering the ground, but like the Mojave, neither the flatlands nor the nearby mountains had any trees.

Chloe had done well, and had already saved them an hour by the time Ash took over driving again. Their destination was approximately fifty miles north of the Nevada border, in the southeast corner of the state. That was, of course, if Olivia had told them the truth.

What buildings they'd seen so far had been few and far between. There were stretches where it seemed as if this part of the country had either been abandoned or never claimed in the first place. None of it served to boost Ash's confidence.

"Should be five-point-two more miles," Chloe said, her gaze never leaving the road.

Ash glanced at the odometer. She was right. "How do you do that?"

She shrugged. "It's just the way my mind works, I guess."

They drove another tenth of a mile before he asked, "Do you think you could do that before? When you still had your memories?"

"I have no idea."

More silence. "Do you think they did that to you?"

"Can we not talk about this?" she asked, obviously uncomfortable.

"Sorry."

He looked over at her, but she had her back partially turned to him, her eyes staring out the side window. He started to say something else, but decided it was best to leave it alone. Besides, they were closing in on NB7, and he needed to focus so that he didn't miss anything.

According to Olivia, just ahead they would find a road that led to the West.

"It's more asphalt than dirt," she had said. "But not by much."

At the forty-nine-mile mark, Ash started scanning the left side of the road in case Chloe's mileage estimate had been wrong, but it hadn't been. The road was right where she said it would be. It had the forgotten look of having been abandoned to the elements long ago, as if its construction had been well intended, but its promise never fulfilled. Given the fact that it was literally in the middle of nowhere, Ash wondered why it had been built at all.

Even if Olivia had not cautioned them that the road would be watched, Ash would have still kept driving by just like he was doing. She had told them their only chance was if they hiked in. He didn't like the idea of following her instructions precisely, but there didn't seem to be much of a choice.

He drove on for another half mile, then pulled the car to the side of the road. In the wide open landscape, there was really no place to hide the vehicle.

As he turned off the engine, he looked at Chloe. "Stay with the car."

"No way."

"I want to make sure it's still here when I get back with my kids."

She looked outside, scanning both ways down the road. There were no other headlights in sight. "Where would it go?"

"Just stay here."

He got out and circled around to the trunk. From the weapons case, he removed another gun, filled its mag, then set it on the floor of the trunk. He grabbed his spare mags and the container of little

bangs, and distributed them between his jeans and his jacket. Picking up the spare pistol, he shut the trunk, then walked around and knocked on the passenger window.

Chloe stared at him for a moment, then lowered it.

“Here,” he said, handing the SIG to her. “Just in case.”

She pulled back as if it might bite her, but then reluctantly took it.

“You know how to fire that?” he asked.

“I’ll figure it out.”

He nodded, then said, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Her only response was to roll the window back up.

He checked both ways before he crossed the empty highway, then angled into the desert on the other side, paralleling the access road that was supposedly being watched. Olivia said NB7 was about a mile and a half in, on the side of the road Ash was currently on.

His eyes quickly adjusted to the moonless night as he made his way through the scrub-covered land. At one point he thought he heard something in the brush. He paused, listening, but the sound didn’t return. He decided it was rabbit, perhaps, or whatever other types of animals might choose to live in this nothingness.

As he passed the mile mark, his jaw tensed. Mike had warned him to be careful about believing anything Olivia said. Maybe this was just a lie. Maybe he was the only thing out here. Maybe Josie and Brandon were hundreds of miles away, and would die because he had chosen to follow the directions of an obviously deranged woman locked up in a secret prison.

If that turned out to be the case, he would go back to the Bluff and kill her.

He slowed his pace. If NB7 was here, he had to be close. Better to sneak up on it than to stumble.

Again, he heard something in the brush. It came from behind him, maybe thirty yards. He crouched down, then looked back the way he’d come, letting his eyes focus on nothing in particular.

There. Just off to the right of the line he’d been following, a shadow hovering above the brush and moving in his direction.

*A lookout, he thought. If he’s already seen me, I’m done.*

If that was the case, half a dozen others were probably closing in on him from different directions, and he was going to get taken down before he even got to NB7.

Should he run? Stay where he was? Or what?

He looked at the shadow again. It had moved to about forty feet away, then stopped. Carefully, he turned, scanning around, looking for others, but the only thing he could see was more brush. If there was anyone else out there, they had to be lying on the ground.

If he’d had time to play games, he would have kept moving to see if the shadow was really following him. But time was something he didn’t have.

He pulled out his gun, and made a beeline straight for the shadow. Before he’d even gone halfway, it disappeared. Not moved to the right or the left, or any other direction, just disappeared. But he didn’t slow until he was within a few feet of where it had been.

He was sure whoever it was had dropped to the ground, blending in with the brush, but there was no one there. He swung his gun around, angling it toward the ground, knowing the person had to be close.

“I could have killed you if I wanted to.”

He whipped around. Standing directly behind him, her gun at her side, was Chloe.

“I told you to stay with the car,” he whispered.

“And I never said I would. You need me,” she whispered back.

“I don’t need you. I can do this myself. Now just go back.”

He turned and started walking in the direction he’d been headed. After only a couple of seconds, he could hear her following him.

“Chloe, it’s not safe,” he said, turning back.

“And going into the psych hospital earlier was?”

“That was different. You were the one who knew the layout. I had no choice. But you don’t know this place. I’m not going to put you in a position where you might get hurt.”

“Not your decision,” she said. “I’m here, and I’m coming with you. Now let’s go, unless you want to stand here all night arguing.”

Short of carrying her back to the car and locking her in the trunk, he saw there was nothing he could do to stop her.

“Okay,” he said. “But you do everything I say.”

He took her silence for assent, though deep down, he knew it wasn’t.

For the next five minutes, his concerns that Olivia had been lying continued to grow. There was nothing but dirt and brush. No buildings at all.

“What’s that?” Chloe whispered a couple minutes later.

She was still behind him, so he had to look back to see what she was talking about. She pointed twenty degrees to their right. It took him a moment, but then he saw it, too.

Just ahead, the terrain dipped into a shallow wash, then rose on the other side, perhaps not high enough to be called a hill, but definitely higher than this side of the wash. At the very top was a post or, maybe, the trunk of a small tree. It appeared to be less than a half-foot in diameter, and stood two feet above the brush.

“There’s another one,” Chloe said. “About twenty feet to the left.”

She was right. After that, it was easy to pick out others. They spotted seven in all, stretching in what looked like a line blocking their path.

“A fence?” she suggested.

“Seems kind of low.”

They walked through the wash, then up the embankment, finally stopping ten feet short of the first post Chloe had seen. Though it was hard to judge color in the darkness, Ash got the sense the pole had been painted to blend in with its surroundings. Why? There didn’t appear to be anything attached to it, or anything sitting on the flat top. It was just...a post.

Chloe pulled out her flashlight and flicked it on.

“Turn that off. Someone will see it,” he whispered.

“Anyone who can see this probably watched us walk up the hill,” she told him, then pointed the light at the post.

Instead of wood, it appeared to be fabricated out of a plastic-like material. Near the top, a thin slot ran all the way around the post with what looked like curved, tinted glass covering it.

“Any idea what this is?” he asked.

“Motion sensor?”

“Could be,” he said. “Let’s see how far it goes.”

They went approximately seventy-five feet to the right before the row of posts took a sharp left turn. As they followed the new section, the hill fell away and they were on level ground again. Three hundred feet this time, then another turn to the left.

They’d gone twenty feet down this third part when Chloe touched Ash’s arm.

“There it is,” she said.

Ash had seen it, too.

Land had been carved out of the hill across from them and leveled off. Built exactly in the center of this area was a one-story, commercial-style building with no visible windows. On a large concrete slab next to it were several satellite dishes.

Exactly how Olivia had described NB7.

From their current angle, they could only see the back and west side of the building. There were no cars visible, but given the helicopter that sat on another concrete pad closer to the front of the building, maybe cars weren't necessary. The aircraft was big enough to probably carry up to ten people, not including the crew.

There was a hundred feet between the line of posts and the building, or, as Ash saw it, a hundred feet between him and his children. They had to be there. It was the only possibility. To think otherwise would be pointless.

He continued down, following the odd-looking fence until he could see the front of the building. There were still no windows, but there was a door, and in front of it sat two cars.

He was contemplating walking all the way around to get a look at the east side of the building, the only part they hadn't seen, when two people stepped out the door.

"Get down, get down," he whispered as he crouched into the brush.

They watched the two men walk over to one of the sedans, get in, then drive toward the front of the property. Along that end was a traditional fence with a gate across the entrance road that opened automatically as the car neared. A few seconds later, the vehicle was heading down the half-asphalt, half-dirt road.

That was a problem.

Figure a mile and a half on a bad road would take them two to three minutes tops to reach the highway. If they turned right, no problem, but if they turned left, once they drove another thirty seconds, they'd pass Ash's car parked suspiciously off the side of the road.

So, two and a half minutes plus the time it took to call back to the building, and those inside would know someone was there. He and Chloe had to move before then.

He was pretty sure the posts were motion detectors, perhaps triggered when something passed between them. But while breaking their invisible beam would betray his and Chloe's presence, it would come as a surprise to those inside, and they would be on the defensive as opposed to being on the hunt because they'd been warned by their friends in the car.

A hundred feet. In college, Ash could run the forty-yard dash in four-point-seven seconds. He'd been younger then, and in slightly better shape, but he thought he could still do it in five and a half. And forty yards would actually get him all the way to the front door. Even if there wasn't any kind of delay before the alarm went off, he should still be able to get there before anyone inside had the time to react.

"How fast can you run?" he asked Chloe.

"Fast enough."

"Then that's what we're going to do."

He moved over to the imaginary line of the fence.

"Wait," she said. "What's the plan?"

"The plan? Get my kids back."

He put his head down, then started to run.





THEIR NEW ROOM wasn't that much different than their old one. There were two beds and a bathroom, just like before. The only difference this time was that the door was locked.

Brandon knew the people watching over them had done something to put him and Josie to sleep before they switched rooms, but he had no idea why. The thought that the room they were now in was in an entirely different building in an entirely different state hadn't even crossed his mind. He thought they were still on his dad's base, just down the hall from the room they'd been in before.

His biggest concern at the moment was his sister. She had yet to wake up. He, on the other hand, had been awake for at least a couple hours, maybe even more.

The same guy who'd been bringing them food from the beginning had brought in dinner a while ago. He was the nice one, the guy who always smiled, and seemed to really care about them.

When Brandon asked him if he knew why Josie was still asleep, the man had said, "Because she's still getting over her illness."

That only made Brandon more worried. What if she was getting sick again? That happened sometimes, didn't it? He was sure he'd heard that before. Would she be even sicker this time? Would she even...die?

Thinking that terrified him. His mom and dad were already gone. What was he going to do if Josie wasn't around, either? He'd have no one. No one at all.

He sat on the edge of her bed, wiping her head with a damp towel from the bathroom. He didn't think she had a fever, but he wanted to make sure it stayed that way.

"It's okay, Josie. I'm here."

Ten minutes later, he fell asleep beside to her.

• • • •

NB7 WAS NOT CONSIDERED a high-priority location for project security. Its isolation was believed to be its best defense. That didn't mean there wasn't a security staff on hand, but it did mean other resources such as constant satellite observation were considered unnecessary. It was, by design after all, mainly a storage and backup shelter facility.

What additional security the building did have consisted of a state-of-the-art motion sensor grid surrounding the perimeter, video surveillance along the road that led to the property, and a car recognition system set up on the highway.

The way this last item worked was that cars traveling on the highway would trip an electronic beam twelve miles either to the South or to the North. This would trigger a hidden camera to take a picture of the car and its license plate, then, in a completely automated process, determine the make, model and year of the car. The vehicle would then be checked off when it crossed the opposite electronic eye on its way out of the area. There was leeway built in to the system to account for slower drivers, and for those who might stop to take a few pictures—something that happened more often than those at NB7 may have expected. But once these items were taken into consideration, if a car failed to trip the second beam in the allotted time frame, an alarm would be activated, and a team would be sent out to check.

Just such an alarm went off at 12:58 a.m. for a 2009 Honda Accord with Florida license plates. It was probably nothing, the head of security thought. He bet the driver had just pulled to the side of the road to take a nap. That had happened, too.

Still, protocol was to dispatch a team.

So he did.



DR. KARP WAS FEELING particularly pleased with himself. He'd been in touch with his research team, and was told all indications were that the new vaccine would work exactly as they'd hoped.

This was the fifth time they'd tested KV-27a, and only the first in which they'd run across someone with immunity. What a bonus that had been. They'd been working on a synthetic vaccine to that point and having multiple problems, but the blood running through the veins of Captain Ash and his children had proved most useful, and the previous problems quickly disappeared. Even the issue of how females versus males reacted was on the cusp of being solved.

The doctor had all but given up hope that they'd find someone like the three surviving members of the Ash family. Between the tests in Tanzania, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Alaska, Barker Flats, and the unintentional victims of what the media was calling the Sage Flu outbreak, there had been 3578 subjects, of which 3575 had died. That was a success rate of 99.9%, even better than their targeted goal of 99.85%. Which would mean there should be even fewer genetically immune survivors when the official implementation occurred, and thus making it easier for those survivors chosen by the project to control those chosen by nature.

Of course, thinking like that was getting ahead of the game. There were still many obstacles to overcome. But his part was all but done. He was sure of it. Once the vaccine was in production, he could relax and act as consultant for the others as he waited for the great day.

His most immediate task was the children. What he had to do wasn't pleasant, but he was smart enough to understand this was not a task he could delegate. These children would be giving their lives so that he and the others could make things right. In many ways, they were as important to the future as he was. Well, almost.

He would take care of them first thing in the morning before they woke—that would be best. Right now, he was content to let them have one more night of dreams.

Why not? Everything was going so well. Even the outbreak in California had given them more data to back up his work.

Yes, very well, indeed.



“WHAT TIME IS it?” Tamara asked.

Bobby turned the camera back on, its display screen lighting up their tiny room. It was the only clock they had. His cell phone was sitting on the editing console in the van, while hers was in her purse along with the wristwatch she had for work but seldom wore.

“Eleven fifty-three,” he said.

He switched the camera off to save its battery, plunging them back into darkness.

Tamara dropped her chin to her chest. Eleven fifty-three p.m. They’d been in the truck’s secret compartment for over five hours. And who knew how much longer they’d have to stay?

After the first ten minutes in the box had passed, she’d had a moment when she started to think that maybe Chavez was wrong, that maybe the soldiers weren’t there to kill them. But then an image of her brother’s face appeared in her mind. Gavin looked confused and unsure at first, then suddenly his eyes went wide and he started to scream. The bullet. It had been fired by one of the soldiers who were now chasing her.

“Should...should we check?” Bobby had asked. “Maybe they’re gone.”

“No,” she said quickly.

Another silent minute went by, then, as if to confirm Tamara’s response, the sound of several boots running on asphalt could be heard approaching the truck, then stopping at the back.

“Clear!” one voice called out.

“Clear!” a second one chimed in.

There was some scuffling around, then a new voice said, “Team one, recheck the buildings along that row. We’ll take these over here. They’ve got to be in one of them. Say whatever’s necessary to get them into the helicopter, but let’s get this done now.”

Several voices replied, “Yes, sir,” then immediately there was the sound of at least half a dozen people running off.

*Say whatever’s necessary to get them into the helicopter...*

The words stuck in Tamara’s mind. Any lingering doubts that the soldiers just wanted to talk to them were gone.

As the hours passed, they could hear groups of people running by the truck on five separate occasions. Whether they were the soldiers or not, it was impossible to tell, but it was more than enough to reinforce the idea she and Bobby were better off in their box than anywhere else.

Then an hour passed with no one running by. It was the longest gap there’d been yet. Tamara hoped the others had finally left, and that the next sound she and Bobby heard would be the three knocks on the side of the truck, telling them it was safe to come out.

But the night remained silent.

“Why don’t you stretch out on the floor?” Bobby suggested in a whisper.

Their hidey-hole was set up with cushion-topped metal boxes they could sit on at either end. In the boxes, as they’d found out by touch, were food and drink, and on the floor near Bobby’s side had been the pot for relieving themselves. So far both of them had been able to avoid the need to use it. Between the two metal makeshift seats was an area plenty long enough for either of them to lie down, just not both at the same time.

“I’m fine,” she said softly. “You can use it.”

“I know you’re not fine, because I’m not fine. Now get some rest. The sooner you’re done, the sooner I can lie down.”

“Bobby, seriously. You can go first.”

“Absolutely not. You first, or neither of us go.”

Even though she knew he couldn’t see her, she rolled her eyes, but as soon as she lay on the floor, she was thankful he’d forced her to do it. She was completely drained. The time since they’d arrived outside the roadblock at Sage Springs seemed to have blurred into one long, living nightmare.

“We probably lost our jobs,” she said as she closed her eyes.

“They won’t fire us. They’ll make us stars. ‘The reporter and the cameraman forced into hiding by...’”

“ ‘...a rogue military force,’ ” she finished for him.

“Oh, that’s good. I like that.”

They fell silent for a moment.

“Who do you really think they are?” he asked.

“I wish I knew.”

He asked her another question a moment later, but though she could hear his voice, she couldn’t make out the words as exhaustion took over, and she fell into a deep sleep.



THE LOW TONE of the motion sensor alarm suddenly pulsed out of the speaker in the security room right off the lobby at NB7. The head of security had been sitting at the monitoring desk, talking to one of his men. The moment the alarm went off he whirled his chair around and looked back at his computer.

His first thought was that the two men he'd sent out to check for the missing car on the highway had somehow triggered the motion sensors.

By the time he took a good look at the warning screen, six seconds had passed.

Cameras covered the entire grounds, but there was no sense in constantly watching them since the system would alert security to any problems, at which point the video could be reviewed.

Though he immediately saw the others weren't there, the head of security wasn't worried. They'd had these alarms in the past, and all had turned out to be animals wandering in from the desert. The beams were supposed to be elevated high enough to cut out this kind of false alarm, but it still happened.

As he tapped the link to the video, he said, "Luke, go out front and check."

The other man got up from his chair and went into the lobby.

By the time the head of security was looking at the video feed from the west side of the building, ten more seconds had gone by.

There was nothing on the screen but the same monotonous desert he'd been looking at since he'd been assigned to this post. Apparently whatever had triggered the alarm had wandered back out. As he hit the button that would take the video back a full minute, he heard Luke open the front lobby door and go outside. He almost called out to stop him, but realized he was too late.

He shrugged—no big deal.

Eight more seconds passed.

The video started playing again. He watched in real time for several seconds, then tapped on fast-forward, making the footage go at double speed.

Suddenly, he slapped the keyboard, pausing the image. "What the hell?"

Just then, out in the lobby, the front door opened again.

• • • •

ASH DIDN'T HAVE A STOPWATCH, but he was pretty sure he reached the sidewalk near the front door in less than six seconds. Not as good as he hoped, but good enough. As he stopped, he looked back and saw that Chloe was still right behind him.

The entrance was actually a double metal door that opened outward. It was taller than normal and a little bit wider, obviously designed to accommodate large items. There was a security card reader mounted on the wall next to the door, which was a pretty good sign that the door was locked.

The wear marks indicated the right half of the door was the one used most. Ash moved over to the hinges, then pulled the box of little bangs out of his pocket. His intent was to use one of the white crackers along the edge, and hoped it was enough to blow the door loose. But just as he was lifting the lid off the box, the knob turned and the door swung out.

There was no way Chloe could get out of sight, so she froze in place.

The man who stepped through the doorway saw her immediately, but hesitated for a second, caught off guard. That was all the time Ash needed to put the barrel of his gun against the man's back.

“Nothing stupid, agreed?” Ash said, giving his gun a nudge.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the guy said.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“Sure. Nothing stupid.”

“Good.” Ash glanced at Chloe. “Check him.”

Chloe stared at the man, not moving.

“You said you wanted to help,” Ash said.

She took a breath, then nodded. She first took the man’s gun from the holster on his belt, then frisked him quickly as if he might explode at any second.

“Just the pistol,” she said when she was done.

“What’s inside?” Ash asked the man.

“Lobby,” he replied.

“Anyone there?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

The man hesitated. “Not in the lobby. In the security office next to the lobby. One guy.”

Ash shoved the man toward the reader on the wall, then pulled the guy’s security card from his belt and touched it to the pad.

The latch clicked, and Ash pulled the door open.

“Let’s go.”

• • • •

THE HEAD OF SECURITY activated the general alarm then jumped out of his chair. His hand was moving to the gun at his side as he pulled open the door to the lobby.

“On your knees.”

A woman with milk-chocolate skin and fire in her eyes stood just on the other side of the door, a pistol in her hand pointed straight at his chest.

“Now,” she said.

Beyond her, he could see Luke kneeling on the floor. Standing behind him was a man with a bandaged face, and a gun very much like the one the woman was holding.

“This is private property,” the head of security said, buying time. NB7’s security force was small, but more than adequate to handle the man and the woman, even given the fact that twenty percent of his force was out on the road at the moment, looking for the lost car. “I’d advise you to put your guns down and lie on the floor.”

“Your. Knees,” the woman said again.

He moved his hands in front of him, holding them palms out. “Hold on. I don’t think you fully appreciate the situation you’re in. There’s more than just the two of us. It would be best if you’d—”

“Chloe, switch,” the man holding the gun on Luke said. “I’ll deal with him.”

“No,” the woman, Chloe, replied. “I got this.” Her gaze bore into the man’s eyes. “Knees.”

He grinned and started to shake his head. “Now that’s not going to—”

The bullet tore through his leg just above his knee. The pain was so intense he didn’t even realize he’d fallen to the ground.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” she asked, as she removed the gun from his holster.

• • • •



DR. KARP HAD JUST STARTED to drift off when the general alarm began to pulse. In his half-asleep state, it had at first confused him. He reached for the clock he assumed was on the nightstand to turn it off, but there was nothing there. That's when his eyes popped open and he sat up.

The alarm.

NB7 had always been considered a safe location, its whereabouts known only to a handful of project members. The only reason Dr. Karp and his team were there was because the outbreak in California meant there was a microscope on the state, and the Directors had felt moving the assets—the Ash children—out of state was a good idea. NB7 was the closest and most logical location. Since the doctor had used the facility a few times in the past, he had no problems with the plan.

But now the alarm was going off. Why?

He grabbed the room phone and pushed the number for Security. After the fifth ring, he hung up. His confusion was now turning to concern. He hoped it was just a false alarm, but what if it wasn't?

He pulled his clothes on as quickly as he could. If this was real, and the facility had somehow been breached, then he knew exactly what he had to do.

The children. He had to dispose of them.

Now.

• • • •

“WELL, IF THEY DIDN'T know we were here before, they do now,” Ash said, as the low pulsating alarm droned through speakers in the lobby.

“Here,” Chloe said.

She tossed him a couple of long, plastic strips she'd taken out of a pouch on the wounded man's belt. They were ties that could be used as handcuffs. As Ash bound his man's wrists and ankles, Chloe did the same with her guy.

“My leg,” the man pleaded. “I'm going to bleed to death.”

“Yeah,” Chloe said. “You probably will.”

Ash came over and looked at the man's leg. It was a mess. “You want me to tie that off?” he asked.

“Yes. Yes, please!”

Ash crouched down. “Then tell me where the children are.”

“The...the children?”

Without hesitation, Ash placed the muzzle of his gun against the man's other leg. “I'm not going to ask again.”

“They're inside. Bottom level.”

“How many kids?”

“Two,” the man said quickly. “A boy and a girl.”

*They're here, Ash thought. We found them.*

He ground the muzzle into the man's leg. “Where on the bottom level?”

Behind them, a door that led into the rest of the building flew open, and several men poured out, opening fire. Ash was in a poor position with his back to them, so he dove through the doorway into the security office. Chloe had been better situated, and was able to get a couple of shots off before she joined him.

“How many?” he asked her.

“I counted four.”

He was tucked right up against the doorjamb. “Hit any?”

“One down for sure. Maybe two.”

“You’re pretty good with that.”

“Yeah. Bet you’re glad I came along now, aren’t you?”

Instead of answering, he peeked around the edge, his gun ready. Apparently, the men who’d come rushing in hadn’t known exactly in which direction to fire. There was plenty of damage all over the room, not the least of which were the two now dead men Ash and Chloe had just tied up. Wherever the others were, though, they were staying out of sight.

“Here,” Ash said, handing Chloe his gun.

He retrieved the box of little bangs, pulled out four of the gray crackers, and checked their numbers. He then activated the controller.

“You in the office,” a voice called out. “There’s only one way out of that room and we’ve got it covered. Toss your weapons out here, then step out with your hands where we can see them.”

The man had asked for weapons to be tossed out, so that’s exactly what Ash did. He threw the four crackers into the room, trying to arc them around so that they wouldn’t all fall in the same place.

“You have ten seconds to toss your guns out here,” the voice said.

“We’re not going to wait that long,” Ash told him.

He set off the little bangs, mentally crossing his fingers that they did what Pax had promised.

They did, and then some.

Even from behind the wall where he was, the bangs were so loud Ash immediately threw his hands up over his ears. Chloe tried to do the same, but was holding the two SIGs so was less than successful.

“Gun,” he yelled.

She didn’t seem to hear him, so he grabbed his pistol from her and raced through the door.

While the lobby looked basically untouched, the four men who’d been there were all on the ground. Two were unconscious, while one looked like he wanted to be. The fourth guy still had enough wits about him to try to aim his weapon at Ash, but Ash’s bullet hit him in the forehead before the guy had a chance to pull his trigger.

Chloe found some more ties and secured the other three men.

“You all right?” Ash asked her.

She touched her ear. “Ringing. But I can hear you now.”

Ash grabbed a security card off the nearest man’s belt, then used it to open the door to the rest of the building.

• • • •

DR. KARP HAD JUST LEFT his room when a loud explosion reverberated down from the ceiling.

“What the hell was that?” someone said.

Several of the doctor’s technicians were in the hallway because of the alarm. Now most looked truly scared. Although their jobs were ultimately concerned with death, they were not interested in putting their own lives on the line.

Neither was the doctor, but he knew he couldn’t show that. There had always been the possibility his life might need to be sacrificed. It was something he understood from the very beginning. It was also expected that in the face of sacrifice, a full project member would still keep the goals of the project in mind, and carry out whatever tasks were necessary to protect it.

So, despite whatever the explosions on the floor above might mean, he knew he still had work to do.

“Learner, Ramos, I need you to come with me.”

Two of the technicians broke from the crowd and followed the doctor to the elevator.



**M**OST EVERYONE AT Cryer's Corner was asleep. The Flu Crew, as the segregated group had come to call themselves, was spread throughout the café. The only two who still seemed to be awake were Martina and Ben. They were lying on the floor next to the booth in the back corner.

Understandably, blankets were in short supply. The residences of Cryer's Corner had been able to scrounge enough so most of the girls had one, but the men had to sleep in jackets and whatever else they could find to wear.

Thankfully, though, the heater in the café worked well enough that no one had to dress like they were spending the night in the Arctic.

"Do you think this might be the last night we remember?" Martina asked.

"God, I hope not. I'm supposed to go to Europe this summer. I hate to think of all those Italian girls I wouldn't be able to meet."

"Ha ha. Funny. I'm serious. This flu is supposed to come on quick, and, and...that's it."

"Paul's still around," Ben said.

"Yeah, but he's sick."

"I'll bet you a glass of orange juice he's still here in the morning."

She couldn't help but smile. Ben had been optimistic since she'd watched him drive into the desert to get Paul. He was always trying to keep things light and put a good spin on what was happening. Too bad he was three years older than she was, and in college. Of course, she'd be in college in the fall...

Well, not of course, she realized. She wasn't likely to be anywhere in the fall.

"What's it like being on your own?" she asked.

He glanced at her. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Tell me."

He looked back at the ceiling. "Well, I'm not as good a cook as my mom. And you get bills every month from all these people for water and electricity and your cell phone and your rent. I don't like that part."

"Yeah, but you get to set your own schedule. Stay up as late as you want. Go wherever you'd like."

"True. That is nice. It's a balance, like everything else, you know? You just hope the side with the good things is heavier than the side with the bad."

She snorted. "Seems like the bad side's pretty heavy right now."

"It ain't light, that's for sure. But there are some good things."

"Doubtful."

"You learned how to use a CB. That's a skill you never had before."

Despite herself, she laughed.

"You got to climb up on top of a gas station."

"You saw me?"

"Of course. You got to meet me. That's gotta count for something."

She held her tongue, worried she'd say something stupid.

"I promise," he said. "Tomorrow won't be the last morning you wake up."

She looked at him.

"Second to last, maybe. But not the last," he told her, then smiled.

She knew he was just trying to make her laugh, but suddenly an image of her mom's face appeared in her mind. Her mom who'd been so proud of her, such a big supporter of everything she did.

Martina couldn't help the tears that began to flow, nor could she stop them.

Ben immediately moved over to her, putting his arms around her. "Hey, it's okay. I'm sorry. It was a bad joke."

"No," she said, her head tucked in his shoulder. "It was funny. I just...I just started thinking about...home."

She continued to cry as he stroked her hair, whispering, "Everything's going to be okay."

Her strength drained away with her tears, and she could feel sleep taking hold. Maybe it would be all right. Maybe it would all be fine.

She heard a noise right before she fell asleep. It didn't completely register, but somewhere in the back of her mind she knew what it was.

A cough.



ASH WAS UNDER no illusion that the six men they'd left in the lobby were the entire security contingent at NB7, but he also didn't want to waste time tracking down the other ones. He'd deal with them as they showed up.

The lower level was where he needed to get to, but how?

The hallway on the other side of the lobby door seemed to run from one end of the building to the other. To the left there were four doors, and to the right, two.

"This way," he said to Chloe, heading left.

Three of the four doors were on the same side the lobby was on. The first they came to was one of these. Ash tried the knob, expecting it to be locked, but it wasn't. The space inside was dark. He reached around the jamb, located a light switch, and flipped it on. The room was about twice as wide as the lobby. Set throughout were rows of heavy wide shelves that went all the way to the ceiling, but were all empty.

They checked the other two rooms on the same side and found identical spaces.

They then went to the door on the right. It was locked, but clicked open as he touched the security badge to the pad on the wall.

This time they didn't find a storage room with empty shelves. They found a spacious warehouse that took up the entire back two-thirds of the building. It was clean and empty, with only half the lights on, probably so that security could walk through without running into anything.

"My God," Chloe said. "It's a depot."

"A depot?" Ash asked.

"Matt said they're set up all over the place for, you know, after. To store whatever the others think they're going to need. Probably a good thing it's not full yet. Humanity's got a little more time before the plug gets pulled, I guess."

Ash wasn't sure what to make of the space, or what Chloe had said, but he'd save that for later. "Do you see a way down?" he asked.

They both scanned the warehouse.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing across the room.

There was another one of the security pads mounted on the wall, but there didn't seem to be any doors in the vicinity.

"I don't know."

They ran over to it, then Ash touched the ID to the pad. Nothing happened. He touched it again. Still nothing.

"Whatever it's for, I don't think it can help us," he said. "There's got to be a way down some—"

The sound of an electronic motor caused Ash to whip his head around. The floor just to the right of the ID pad lifted into the air like a blast door. It was thick and heavy, and had fitted so seamlessly into the floor that neither Ash nor Chloe had noticed it.

He stepped over, getting there before the door was halfway up, then smiled.

Below it was a set of stairs.



DR. KARP AND THE TWO technicians, Learner and Ramos, took the elevator to level four, the lowest level of the facility.



Since their arrival the previous afternoon, Dr. Karp had requested that two security guards be stationed on level four at all times. He really didn't think there would be a problem, but with the escape of the children's father from Barker Flats, and the earlier experience a colleague had had with Lauren Scott's disappearance, he didn't want to take any chances.

The two security men were standing just outside the elevator, guns drawn, when the door opened. As soon as they recognized the doctor, they dropped their weapons to their side.

"Do you know what's going on?" the doctor asked as he stepped out of the elevator car.

"No, sir," one of the guards said. "No word from up top yet. They're probably busy dealing with whatever the situation is."

"Did you hear the explosion?"

The men glanced at each other.

"What explosion, sir?"

"Maybe three or four minutes ago, on the top floor."

"Do you think one of us should go up and check?" the second guard asked.

"I'd rather you both stay here," the doctor said, which made it an order.

"Yes, sir." The first guard paused for a moment, then said, "With your permission, sir?"

"Yes?"

"When the alarm went off, per procedure we stationed ourselves here. But if it's okay with you, one of us could go to the substation down the hall, and bring up the security cameras so we can determine what's going on."

The doctor thought for a moment, then nodded. "Good idea. Report to me as soon as you know. I'll be with the subjects."

"Yes, sir."

• • • •

THE STAIRS ENDED IN a brightly lit room, approximately fifteen feet square. The only things there were an elevator door and a call button. As soon as Chloe joined him, Ash pushed the button.

Almost immediately, the heavy door at the top of the stairs began swinging down again, closing them in.

"I'm not sure I like that," Chloe said.

"They're probably designed so both doors can't be open at the same time," he guessed.

"I hope you're right."

The door thudded shut.

Chloe stared at the elevator, then glanced nervously at Ash. "I don't think it's coming."

"It'll be here."

She began rocking slightly back and forth. "Are you sure? Maybe this is just a trap."

"Too elaborate for a trap."

She looked around, her gaze darting from one spot to another.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She said nothing for a second, then, "I don't like enclosed spaces."

"You were fine in those tunnels at the hospital."

"There was always a way in and out. We're locked in here." Her breathing began to increase.

"Are you going to be okay?"

She gave him a single nod, but he could see it was an effort for her. Then, soundlessly, the elevator door opened. With a relieved gasp of breath, she raced in.

“This is an enclosed space, too,” Ash said as he entered.

“Yeah, but it’s going somewhere.”

There was a row of five buttons, and another security pad on the control panel. The top button was lit up. Ash touched the one on the bottom, figuring that would take them to the lowest level, but nothing happened. He tapped the security pad with the badge, then touched the button once more. This time the button flashed red, and the car remained stationary. He used the badge again, then tried the fourth button down. Flashing red, no movement. The third button down received the same response. He did it once more for the second button.

This time it lit up green, and the car began to move.

*Great*, he thought. He’d taken the badge of someone limited to only the first lower level. He hoped to God he’d find something there that would get him to the bottom.

As the car began to stop, he said, “Move to the side and get ready.”

She went left, and he went right, positioning himself so he could see out but duck quickly for cover if need be. He raised his gun, then tensed as the doors began to slide open.

There were half a dozen people just outside. None, though, was holding a weapon. They froze as a group. All, that was, except one in the back who started running down the hall away from them.

Ash stepped out quickly. “Stop!”

The man skidded to a halt.

“Don’t hurt us!” one of the others shouted.

“Walk back here now, and I won’t shoot you.”

The runner turned around, then began retracing his steps back to the group, his arms in the air.

“Who are you?” a man standing in the middle asked.

Ash moved his gaze quickly over them. “How many of you have access to the bottom level?”

No one moved.

He pointed his gun at the guy who ran. “How many?”

“We...we all do,” the man said.

“Good. You have your badge?”

The man nodded. “Yes.”

“Then you’re coming with us.”

The man’s eyes widened as Ash reached out and grabbed his arm.

“No,” Chloe said.

Everyone looked at her, including Ash.

“I want that one.” She pointed at the man in the middle who’d asked who they were.

“Why me?” he said, sounding frightened.

“Sorry, buddy,” Ash said. He moved over and grabbed Chloe’s choice. “You’re with us.”

• • • •

DR. KARP STOOD IN THE entrance to the room, watching the children. The boy had fallen asleep beside his sister, his arm lying protectively over her shoulder.

*Such a waste*, the doctor thought.

In the morning, he had planned to take sections of their vital organs before their bodies were disposed of, but now there would be no time for that. They needed to disappear to prevent any potential connection to the project.

Like most of the project’s facilities that Dr. Karp used, this one had something that could handle just such a problem. There was a biosafe level-four laboratory on this very floor. It had three

specialized chambers for the most delicate work. In the case of an emergency, a code could be entered into the system, and the chamber in question would go through a series of events designed to render whatever was in the room harmless. First, fire would be blasted into the room at temperatures exceeding 2,370° F. Though this would ensure nothing survived, the project Directors didn't want to take any chances, so next a quick hardening polymer, stronger than most metals, would be pumped into the room, filling it to capacity and sealing away forever anything that was in the room.

The chambers were not meant to serve as tombs, but the doctor knew the Directors would approve of his improvisation.

In the hall outside the patients' room, he heard two gurneys being rolled in his direction. He moved to the side just as Ramos brought the first one in. Learner followed right behind him with the second.

The doctor watched to make sure the children didn't wake up while they were being transferred, then said, "I'll meet you in the lab."

He had to stop by the medical supply room first to pick up something that would let the children slip away before the first flame licked their skin.

*Such a waste.*



AS SOON AS the elevator doors closed, Ash said, “Take us all the way down.”

“No problem,” the man said.

He touched his card to the pad, then pressed the button for the bottom floor.

Ash shoved the man against the wall. “Where are the children?”

“Your kids are in one of the rooms in back. I can take you there.”

It took Ash a second to realize the man had not said “the kids,” but “your kids.”

“You know who I am?” he said, pressing his gun against the man’s stomach.

“You’re Daniel Ash, right?” The man shot a quick look at Chloe. “You got my note.”

*Note?* Ash took a step back.

“Yes,” Chloe said. “Thank you.”

Ash stared at the man. “You’re the guy who—”

“Why do you think I picked him?” Chloe said.

Ash dropped his gun to his side. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay. I get it,” the man said.

“What’s your name?”

The man hesitated for a moment, then said, “Winger.”

“Thank you, Winger.”

Matt’s inside man nodded uncomfortably, then glanced over at Chloe. “They did a good job on you. But I still recognized you. It’s your eyes. They can’t change that.”

Chloe said nothing.

“Are my kids all right?” Ash asked.

“Last I saw them, yes. But Dr. Karp headed down here when the alarm went off. I don’t know what he’s planning on doing.”

Ash’s anxiety rose as he considered the possibility that he might still be too late.

But before anyone could say anything else, the elevator began to slow.

• • • •

ON SUB-BASEMENT FOUR, the arrival of the elevator was always preceded by the soft *whoosh* of air moving around the car as it reached its lowest point. Unlike when Dr. Karp arrived, there was only one of the security men standing in the elevator lobby, a guy by the name of Montrose. Wyle, his partner, hadn’t returned yet from checking the surveillance footage.

As soon as Montrose heard the *whoosh*, he drew his gun and tensed. From down the hall he thought he heard footsteps, but his attention was focused on the door, so he paid them little attention.

The elevator settled in place, then paused for half a second before the doors slid open.

Montrose let out a breath and relaxed a little. It was just one of Dr. Karp’s orderlies. He’d probably been called down to give the doctor a hand.

“They’re back with the subjects,” the guard started to say, but the only thing he got out of his mouth was, “They’re back—”

It seemed unnecessary to go on, given the two guns that appeared from either side of the open door, aimed directly at his chest.

• • • •

“GUN ON THE GROUND,” Ash said softly.

The security guard dropped his pistol by his foot.

“Kick it over here.”

The man seemed reluctant, so Ash wagged the SIG’s barrel to remind the guy who was in charge. The gun skidded across the floor a moment later.

“Now on your knees.”

Again, there was a hesitation, but before Ash could repeat the command, the man complied.

Carefully, both Ash and Chloe came out from the protection of the elevator. Ash motioned for her to bind the man’s hands and legs while he stood back a few feet. Once she was done, he put a foot on the man’s chest and pushed him all the way to the ground.

“Where’s Dr. Karp?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” the man replied.

Ash put his foot on the man’s neck and pointed his gun at the guy’s head.

“I *will* kill you.”

“He...he said he was going in back. To the holding rooms.”

Ash glanced at Winger. The orderly nodded once, confirming that’s where his children were.

“You here alone?” Ash asked the guard.

“Yes,” the man said quickly.

Ash immediately knew he was lying. He leaned down and put the SIG’s muzzle against the man’s forehead. “Those kids your Dr. Karp has back there? They are *my* kids.”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Don’t think for a second I won’t pull this trigger,” Ash continued. “How many other guards are there?”

“One.”

Ash pressed the gun into the man’s skin.

“I swear! Only one.”

“Where is he?”

“He...went with the doctor.”

Ash stood, then looked at Winger. “Which way?”

• • • •

MONTROSE’S PARTNER WYLE heard most of the conversation from just around the corner. Though only one person other than Montrose had done the talking, Wyle could tell there was another person with him.

“Where is he?” the voice said from the elevator lobby.

“He...went with the doctor,” Montrose said.

Wyle couldn’t help but smile. Montrose had held it together, and given him a chance to deal with the situation.

As quietly as possible, Wyle took several steps backward.

“Which way?” the voice said.

“Around and to the left.” This was a new voice, confirming that there was definitely more than one unfriendly.

Wyle raised his Beretta, his finger poised on the trigger.

• • • •

ASH WALKED TO THE EDGE of the lobby. Just beyond was a corridor that went left and right. He listened, but the only thing he could hear was a steady hum of the ventilation system.

“How far down?” he asked Winger.

“About thirty feet. Then we take the hall on the right. That’ll get us all the way back.”

“Okay. Stay close behind me.” He glanced at Chloe. “Ready?”

She nodded.

Leading with his gun, Ash ran into the hallway.

He saw the other guard a split second before he heard the double tap of the man’s gun. Just as Ash pulled the trigger of his SIG, searing pain flashed up his arm as a bullet pierced his skin. The hit caused him to twist to the side, sending the shot from his gun well to the left of its intended target.

Not missing a beat, though, Ash pulled his trigger again, moving his arm in an arc and sending five quick shots in the direction of the guard. Chloe, kneeling around the corner from the lobby, fired several rounds at the same time.

The guard was only able to get a single wild shot off before he was caught in the barrage and tumbled back onto the floor.

Ash rushed forward, his gun ready if the man even twitched. But it was unnecessary. The man wasn’t going to move, not now, and not ever again.

Ash allowed himself to look at the wound on his left arm. The bullet had grooved his skin a couple inches below his shoulder. It was painful, but not debilitating. He turned back to the others.

Chloe was helping Winger off the floor. There was blood on the man’s shirt, concentrated mainly on the right side of his abdomen. A gut shot.

“I’m okay,” the man said once he was on his feet. But he clearly wasn’t. His breathing was labored, and he was doing a lousy job of keeping the pain off his face. “Let’s keep moving.”

“Maybe you should stay here,” Chloe suggested.

He shook his head, then locked eyes with Ash. “We need to get to your children. Now.”

Ash moved up next to him, draped Winger’s arm over his shoulder, then put his own carefully around the guy’s waist.

“That hall?” he asked.

“Yes.”

• • • •

A SERIES OF AIRTIGHT rooms led into the biosafe level-four lab. Each had a greater and greater negative airflow from the room before it, meaning air would always move toward the lab, not away from it. This would ensure that any accidentally released airborne pathogen would be unable to escape the lab.

It also meant that each door not only sealed the atmosphere in, but it also greatly reduced any noise from the other side. Dr. Karp and his technicians were already two rooms in out of the three. Though there was no need to take the extra precautions they would have had to take if a level-four pathogen had been present in the lab, they still had to close each door before the system would allow them to open the next. So when the gunfight near the elevator took place, they heard nothing.

As they finally entered the lab, Dr. Karp said, “Put them in number three.”

Chamber three was in the corner, and the most logical one to turn unusable.

Ramos wheeled the gurney carrying the Ash girl into the lab first, then Learner tried to follow with the boy. Unfortunately, doing so pretty much clogged up most of the usable space.

“Roll those back into the airlock,” the doctor said impatiently. “Just carry them in.”

As they did this, the doctor set the supplies he'd picked up earlier on the counter. There were two sealed and empty hypodermics, and two small glass bottles, each with more than enough Beta-Somnol to put a grown adult into a final sleep. The children would pass peacefully. Given what would happen in the world soon enough, the doctor couldn't help but feel he was doing the humane thing, something most would be denied.

He opened one of the hypo kits, stuck the needle into the bottle, then started drawing the drug out.  
*Yes. Very humane.*

• • • •

“THAT DOOR THERE,” WINGER said, his voice weakening. “Those are the subject rooms. They're in there.”

“I think it's best if we leave you here,” Ash said. “Do you want to lean on the wall? Or sit on the ground?”

“I...don't know if I can...stand on my own.”

“Okay, no problem.”

Ash tried to ease the man to the floor as gently as possible, but the orderly still sucked in his breath and winced.

“I'm sorry,” Ash said once the man was down.

“It's okay.” Winger tried to smile. “Go get your kids.”

Ash gave him a pat on the shoulder, then he and Chloe moved down the hall to the door Winger had pointed out.

“What's the plan?” she whispered.

“Play it by ear.”

“Oh, okay. So the same plan as before.”

Ash didn't bother to respond.

He turned the knob until the latch was all the way out, then he inched the door open just enough so that he could see inside. The space appeared to be set up similarly to the wards back at the Palmer Psychiatric Hospital—central corridor and doors off to the sides.

He eased the door open some more. No shouts, no sounds of movement, nothing.

With a quick warning glance at Chloe, he pulled out the door wide enough to get through, then rushed inside. No one was there.

“Check the doors,” he whispered.

They worked from opposite sides, opening each door and looking in. Every room Ash checked had beds, but all the mattresses were bare and appeared unused.

“Ash!” Chloe called out.

She was standing in the doorway of a room near the back wall. He rushed over and looked in.

There were two beds inside. Both had blankets and sheets but were unmade. He moved in quickly, put a hand on one mattress, then the other. The bed on the left still had the warmth of a body.

He ran past Chloe out of the room, through the outer area and back into the hallway.

Winger's eyes were closed as Ash reached him.

“They're not there!”

“Wha...what?” Winger said, his eyelids barely peeling apart.

“They're not there. No one is. Where are they?”

“Not there?” The orderly looked confused. “I don't...” He stopped, then his eyes opened wider.  
“No. Oh, God, no.”



“What?”

• • • •

“OKAY,” RAMOS SAID AS he stepped out of chamber three, where he’d just laid Brandon Ash next to the girl on the floor.

At that very moment, the indicator for the door to the first airlock switched from closed to open on the lab’s computer screen.

Dr. Karp almost missed it. He had just finished activating the controls for chamber three, and had turned away to retrieve the hypos of Beta-Somnol when one of his oldest habits, his need to double-check everything, caused him to look back.

Not for one second did he think whoever had entered was one of the project members there to help him.

This was it. The end. Unless there was some kind of miracle—something he didn’t believe in—his own life would soon be sacrificed.

Before it had been just a possibility. Now, the harsh reality was numbing.

Five seconds passed without him moving at all. Then he remembered his oath, his promise to the project. The job he still had to do.

He grabbed the needles, and was halfway to chamber three before he realized there wouldn’t be enough time. He’d have to start the sequence without administering the drug. Hopefully, the children would remain asleep and feel no pain as the intense heat quickly took their lives. Not quite as humane as he’d hoped, but still better than nothing.

When he got back to the monitor, the indicator for the door between the second and third airlocks was already in the open position. As soon as it closed, the door to the lab would open.

He started punching in the code.



ASH PULLED THE door between the second and third airlocks shut, then jammed down the handle that created the final seal. Already having positioned herself at the door to the lab, Chloe began pulling up its handle the second he finished. Ash got there just in time to grab the edge of the door as it released and yank it open.

“No one move!” he yelled as he and Chloe rushed into the room.

There were three men inside. Two were standing next to a wide window that looked into what appeared to be another room, while the third was at a counter along the right wall in front of a computer. Ash knew this third man. He’d seen a picture of him at the ranch. He was the man responsible for the hell Ash’s family had gone through.

“Dr. Karp, where are my children?”

The doctor’s head tilted slightly to the side, then his eyes narrowed. “Captain...Ash?”

“Where are my children?”

“I’m impressed, Captain. I didn’t know you were this resourceful. Unfortunately, I’m afraid you’re too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“They died in the outbreak at Barker Flats,” the doctor stated matter-of-factly. “You were told that before.”

“We both know that was a lie.”

Dr. Karp lowered his hand, his fingers now resting on the edge of the counter. “Why wouldn’t we have told you the truth?”

Ash took three quick steps forward, closing the gap between them to less than ten feet, and pointed the SIG at the center of the doctor’s face. “Where are they?”

“Seriously, Captain. They’re dead. There’s nothing you can do.”

Dr. Karp’s fingers tapped nervously against the counter.

Without looking at her, Ash signaled Chloe to check the rest of the room. As she moved past Dr. Karp, he eyed her nervously.

“Where are they?” Ash asked the doctor again.

The ends of Dr. Karp’s mouth went up and down in a quick smile. “It doesn’t really matter, you know. You’ll all be dead soon enough. Well, maybe not *you*, but everyone else. The whole world will be different then.”

“They’re in here!” Chloe yelled.

Ash turned to look. Chloe was standing next to an open door that appeared to lead into the room the window looked in on. Before Ash could react, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned back just in time to see the doctor hit one of the keys on the keyboard.

Ash wanted to run over to Chloe, but he sprinted to the doctor instead, grabbing the man by his collar.

“What did you do?” Ash demanded.

“It’s closing!” Chloe yelled.

“I told you,” the doctor said. “There’s nothing you can—”

Chloe screamed out in pain. “Stop it! Stop it!”

Ash looked over. She’d put her leg between the door and the jamb, preventing it from sealing shut. But whatever was closing it was keeping the pressure on her.

“Help her!” Ash yelled at the two men cowering by the window. They hesitated a moment, then jumped up when Ash pointed his gun at them, and moved quickly over to Chloe.

“I’m not sure you want them to do that,” the doctor said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look for yourself.” Dr. Karp nodded toward the window.

Ash wasn’t about to leave the doctor behind, so he manhandled him across the room, then looked through the window. Josie and Brandon were on the floor. While his son looked like he was asleep, Josie was sitting up, her eyelids only half open.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” the doctor said. “The sound must have woken her. I was hoping they’d both just sleep through it.”

Ash turned on him, and leaned in so that their faces were only inches apart. “What did you do?”

“Once that door seals shut, they die. Moving your friend’s leg will make that happen all the sooner.”

“Open it!”

“Sorry.”

Ash jammed the gun into the side of the doctor’s head. “Open it!”

“If you’re going to shoot me, then shoot. It doesn’t change the fact that once the sequence is initiated, I can’t undo it.” He grinned. “Oh, and if the door remains jammed for more than three minutes, this entire lab will be sterilized at a nice toasty 3000 degrees.”

“Three minutes?”

The doctor shrugged. “Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Ash moved the gun from the doctor’s head, and shot the man in the hip. The doctor’s face went slack in surprise. Before he could fall to the ground, Ash caught him and dragged him around to the doorway.

The two men had made no progress in getting Chloe free. The moment they saw Ash they started to back away.

“You’re going to help me, or I swear to God I will shoot both of you, but not kill you. Do you understand what I mean?”

Apparently, they did.

Ash directed them to grab the edge of the door and pull back as hard as they could.

“More!” he said, as he watched the gap.

At first it didn’t grow at all, then suddenly it moved a quarter inch, a half. When it reached three-quarters of an inch wider, instead of pulling Chloe’s leg out, Ash shoved the doctor’s injured leg in.

Dr. Karp screamed in pain, then yelled, “What are you doing?”

Ash felt no need to answer as he then eased Chloe’s leg out. Once it was free, he said to the two other men, “All right. Let go.”

The doctor screamed out again as the door smashed against him.

“You going to be okay?” Ash asked Chloe.

She clenched her teeth, fighting off the pain. “Don’t worry about me.”

He knew her leg was probably broken, the bone perhaps even crushed. But she seemed to be in control. “Cover them,” he said.

“My pleasure.” She pointed her gun at the two men. “Sit down. Both of you.”

Ash didn’t stay to see if they cooperated. He knew if they didn’t, she’d shoot them. He moved back around to the window. It was the only other way in, but it wasn’t something he could just break

through with a chair.

He pulled out the little bangs, choosing the four special white squares. These were the ones Pax said did more than just cause noise. He quickly removed the projection sheets off the adhesive backs, and placed the crackers near each corner of the window. He thought about adding a couple of the noisemakers just in case they might help, but decided against it. He pulled out the controller, then moved back around to the side where the door was. As expected, Chloe's two friends were sitting on the floor.

Ash stepped over the doctor, then said into the gap, "Josie! Josie, can you hear me?"

"D...dad?"

"Yes, sweetie, it's me."

"Dad? But...but...they told us—"

"Josie, I don't care what they told you. I'm here and I'm going to get you out."

"Dad!" She crawled toward the door. "Dad! Oh, my God!"

"Sweetie, you need to listen to me. This is very important. We don't have any time, okay?"

"Dad. Please get us out of here."

"That's what I'm trying to do. Now, listen, I need you to grab your brother and take him against the wall that the window's on. But in the corner, off to the side. Not in front of the window. Do you understand?"

"Um...uh...I think so."

"Please, baby. If you don't do it, none of us are getting out."

"Okay, Dad. I can do it."

"Excellent. Do it now. And be ready. There's going to be a loud bang."

He moved back around, and watched Josie through the window as she pulled Brandon into the front corner. Once they were there, he returned to the door.

"Cover your head," he said.

He didn't look to see if Chloe and the others did the same; he just hit the button.

• • • •

THE TWO SECURITY MEN who'd been sent out to check for the missing car came back after fifteen minutes. They'd found the car ten minutes earlier, abandoned at the side of the highway not far from the road to NB7, but when they called it in, no one had answered. After being unable to reach anyone for five minutes, they decided to come back.

Everything looked the same out front as it had when they'd left, so they were starting to think their boss had just gone on a bathroom break without feeling the need to have anyone fill in for him. That was, until Collins, the younger of the two, opened the front door.

"Oh, Jesus," he said.

His partner, Edwards, started to push by him, but pulled up short when he caught sight of the scene inside. "What the hell?"

The lobby was riddled with bullet holes. And there were five bodies that they could see. The two men moved in and checked for pulses. Two of their colleagues were still alive, their hands and ankles cuffed with the same ties the security team used.

"What happened?" Collins asked.

Edwards shook his head, then headed over to the security room. That's where he found their boss sprawled across the threshold, cuffed and dead.

"Do...do you think whoever did this is still in the building?" Collins asked.

“I have no idea.”

The younger man hesitated, as if he didn't want to say what was about to come from his lips. “Should we check?”

Edwards looked down at his boss, then at the other men strewn across the lobby. “I'm not sure that would be a good idea.”

Four minutes later, with the pair of unconscious men slumped in the back seat, Edwards and Collins pulled out of the compound then headed south on the highway as fast as they could go.

• • • •

EVEN THOUGH ASH HAD covered his ears, the noise was deafening. Debris flew across the room, smashing into the wall where the counter was, and destroying the monitor the doctor had been using.

Ash immediately jumped back to his feet and returned to the window. However strong the glass had been, it wasn't strong enough to stand up to the little white squares. He climbed through the opening and went to the corner where Brandon, awake now, clung to his sister.

Ash couldn't believe it. He was looking at his kids. They were alive.

He grinned broadly and held his arms out, but instead of hugging him, they drew back.

“Who are you?” Josie asked, sounding scared.

“It's me, baby. Dad.”

“You're not my dad,” she said.

The bandages. The surgery. Even the contacts. He must look like a stranger to them.

“It's me. I swear. I've just had...an accident. We can talk about it later. We need to get out now.”

Reluctantly, they let him guide them out of the room.

He had no idea how much time they had left, but he knew it was probably less than a minute.

“You see that door?” He pointed at the airlock.

They nodded.

“Go in there. I'll be right behind you. I just have to help my friend.”

They both looked over at Chloe, then back at their father, more confused than ever.

“Go!” he said.

That got them moving.

He knelt down next to Chloe. “Put your arm around me,” he told her.

Once she did, he started to lift her, but then remembered there was one more thing he had to do.

He moved over to the doctor.

“I hope you enjoy your trip to hell.”

The doctor forced a smile. “You can't stop anything, you know that. Your kids would have been better off to go now instead of being alive to witness the world they know melt into nothing.”

“I have a feeling you're the only one who'll be doing any melting in the near future.”

“Humor's not one of your best traits, I'm guessing.”

Ignoring him, Ash said, “Before I go, I have a message for you from an old friend.”

The doctor looked at him, a smirk on his face.

“Olivia says hi,” Ash said. “I got the feeling from her she wasn't too happy you left her to die. Pointed out something about the irony that you'll be dead before she is.”

“Olivia? But she's—”

“Goodbye, Doctor.”

Ash lifted Chloe off the floor and headed for the airlock. Just before he passed through the door, he yelled to the other two men, “Once we clear this airlock, I suggest you get in it, if there's still

time.”

It turned out there wasn't.





IT WASN'T THE starting of the truck that woke Tamara and Bobby. It was the pothole they hit sometime later. According to the clock on the camera, it was 7:12 a.m.

"Do you think whoever's driving knows we're back here?" Tamara asked.

"I don't know," Bobby replied. "I would think so, though. Wouldn't you?"

The world seemed to have flipped on its end, so she didn't know what to think anymore.

"I wonder where we're going," Bobby said several minutes later.

"Can't be far." The quarantine would prevent any long travels.

But either they drove around in circles or she was wrong, because six hours passed before the engine was turned off for the first time. After a few moments, they could both hear fuel flowing into the tanks.

"Maybe we should get out now," she suggested.

"We haven't heard the knock."

"Maybe there's not going to be a knock. We're not on the base any more."

But neither of them made a move to open the door, and soon they were on the road again. Nearly seven more hours passed before the engine cut out once more. This time, though, there was no sound of tanks being filled. In fact, except for the opening and closing of the cab door, there wasn't much sound at all.

After thirty minutes of not moving, Tamara said, "I'll bet we're in another parking lot."

"If nothing else, we're going to get a great story out of this," Bobby said.

"If we have a job."

Bobby was quiet for a second, then, "Do you...do you really think Joe is dead?"

She was silent for a moment. "They killed Gavin, didn't they? And those kids in the desert. So..."

A few silent minutes passed.

"How far do you think we've come?" she asked.

"Impossible to know."

They broke out some food, and had a dinner consisting of apples, bread, and some kind of deli meat. As she'd done all day, Tamara only took a couple sips of water. Even though it was dark in their hiding space, the idea of peeing in front of Bobby had zero appeal to her.

*Tap-tap. Tap.*

The knock had been on the side of the truck, right behind her head. Tamara nearly leaped forward in surprise.

*Tap-tap. Tap.*

She wanted to scream, "We're here! We're here!" But she held her tongue.

She could hear Bobby already working the door latch. As he opened the door, they could see that the back of the truck was still open, and outside it was night.

"You wait here. I'll check," Bobby said.

"Hell, no. You wait here. *I'll* check."

She pushed past him and walked stiffly to the back of the truck. It was cool out, much cooler, in fact, than it had been when she and Bobby entered their sanctuary, making her realize that the box had actually been heated. She crossed her arms and ran her hands up and down her biceps as she stepped onto the back bumper, and then hopped to the ground.

They seemed to be parked on a small grass clearing in the middle of an evergreen forest. Pine trees encircled the part of the clearing she could see. One thing was for sure—they were certainly not in the Mojave Desert any more.

She looked over her shoulder as Bobby stepped down to join her.

“Where the hell are we?” he asked.

She was about to say she had no clue when a voice from near the front of the truck called out, “Hello?”

Tamara and Bobby exchanged a look, then walked over and peeked around the side.

Standing by the cab were a smiling man and woman.

“Oh, good,” the man said, taking a couple steps forward. “I was afraid you guys might have wandered off. I wasn’t looking forward to hunting you down.”

“Hunting?” Tamara said.

“Oh, no, no, no,” the man said with a chuckle. “Bad choice of words. Searching is more what I meant. Come on. You probably want to get out of here.”

Still leery, Tamara and Bobby stepped around the side and walked halfway up to the cab.

“Who are you, exactly?” Tamara asked.

“Me? I’m Mike.” The man closed the distance between them and extended his hand.

Bobby shook it automatically, while Tamara did so with more reluctance.

“And that’s my wife, Janice.”

Janice waved, but didn’t come closer. She looked as cold as Tamara felt.

“So what are you doing here?” Tamara asked.

Mike shrugged. “Offering you a ride.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Janice called out. “I’m going back inside. It’s too cold out here.” She started walking around the front of the truck. “Coffee should be ready by now, so whenever you’re ready.”

“Coffee?” Bobby said.

Mike smiled. “Sure. Janice makes the best on the highway.”

When Bobby gave him an odd look, Mike smiled and motioned for them to follow him to the front of the truck. From there, they could see an old Winnebago RV parked fifty feet away.

Bobby glanced at Tamara. “Come on. They’re obviously here to help us.”

Tamara looked at the Winnebago. “Do you have a bathroom in that thing?”

“We do,” Mike said with a smile.

She could feel her tension ease. “Then a cup of coffee sounds great.”

“Excellent,” Mike told her. “After you.”



IT WAS A struggle for Martina to open her eyes. When she did, the brightness of the new day made her shut them almost immediately. She could feel the congestion in her nose, and the rawness in her throat. When she'd fallen asleep, she'd felt fine. Now, not so much.

Her last morning. She was sure of it.

She worked her eyes open again, then rolled over and looked at the spot where Ben had been sleeping. He wasn't there.

*Probably decided to move when he realized I was sick,* she thought.

She raised herself up on her elbows. She could hear sniffing elsewhere in the dining area, and even a couple of coughs, her friends all dying with her.

"You're up."

She looked over her shoulder. Ben was standing behind her. He must have been in the kitchen. Though he was smiling, she could tell by his red nose that he was sick, too. That depressed her even more. She liked him, and had been hoping that maybe he'd be the one to survive.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're all sour face."

She lay her head back down. "I guess I was kind of hoping we wouldn't get it."

"Right," he said, his smile widening. "You've been asleep."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on. I'll show you."

With more than just a bit of effort, Ben helped Martina to her feet, then led her to the front of the café. Most of the others were there, all but one or two showing signs of the flu. The TV on the counter was on, tuned to PCN. At the bottom of the screen was a banner that read: *Quarantine Partially Lifted.*

"Lifted?" Martina said. "But we're all sick here."

"Yeah, and we're still in the quarantine zone, but not for long," Ben told her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Maybe he can tell you," he said, nodding at the next booth over.

She turned and saw Paul sitting on the end of the bench seat. He looked tired—exhausted, actually—but what other signs of the illness he'd had seemed to be gone.

"You owe me a glass of orange juice," Ben said. "I believe that was our bet."

"He's all right?" she asked quietly.

"He's recovering from the illness, but I don't think he'd say he's all right."

Of course. His brother and his girlfriend.

"They're saying on the news that there have been over five hundred new cases in the last thirty-six hours, but most haven't resulted in death. People are being asked to voluntarily stay home until the flu has disappeared, but the quarantine is expected to be fully lifted by tomorrow night."

"So...what? It just stopped killing people?"

"Apparently."

She couldn't believe it. "We're going to live?"

Ben smiled again. "Didn't I tell you this wasn't going to be your last morning?"



“WOULD YOU LIKE me to play it again?” the Director of Preparation asked. There were head shakes all around the table.

“Do you really think she’s alive?” the Director of Facilities asked.

“How would Captain Ash have known her name otherwise?”

They had just watched Ash and an unidentified woman rescue his children from NB7. The video had lasted right up to the point when the flames flared up. Ash had clearly stated the name Olivia and mentioned she’d been left for dead.

At the end of the table, the Principal Director leaned forward. “I think it would be unwise to assume Olivia is still alive based solely on a single brief conversation. But I also think it would be unwise not to try to find out more.”

“Yes, sir,” the DOP said. “I’ll get a team right on it.”

“There are several things, though,” the Principal Director went on, “that concern me more at the moment, lapses of security on this operation that were totally unacceptable. The loss of the NB7 facility, in particular, does not make me happy.”

“Yes, sir,” the DOP said. “I agree with you one hundred percent. Though it should have been unnecessary, we will definitely learn from these mistakes. To that end, if I may…” He glanced at the Principal Director, who gave him a nod. “Bring up channel four, please.”

The monitor came back to life, this time showing what looked like a conference room.

Sitting on one side of the table was Mr. Shell, and on the other, the soon-to-be former Director of Recovery. Ostensibly, the meeting was for the DOR to critique Shell’s performance during the outbreak. That in itself was highly unusual, given that project members almost never met face to face with the Directors, but it was not entirely unprecedented. Given the gravity of what had just played out over the last several days, neither man questioned its necessity.

The DOP used the remote to turn up the volume.

“...more. You must understand that,” the DOR said. “These kinds of slips are completely unacceptable.”

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Shell said. “I understand. There were problems that were unforeseen.”

“Nothing should be unforeseen!”

The DOP couldn’t resist the opening. He touched the button for the microphone that was clipped to his collar. “You’re absolutely correct. Nothing *should* be unforeseen.”

Both men on the screen looked up toward where the voice must have been coming from.

“The Directorate would like to thank the Director of Recovery and Mr. Shell for their contributions to the project,” the DOP went on. “It is our unanimous decision that neither of your services will be further required.”

“What?” the Director of Recovery said. “Wait. You can’t—”

The DOP hit the mute button. “Terminate,” he said.

He waited until the two men in the other room started choking as the air to their room was cut off, then had the monitor turned off. He looked back at the group.

“Even with these unfortunate incidents, there is much good news. From Dr. Karp’s own calculations, we know that the effectiveness of KV-27a exceeds our hopes. Even the safeguard that he encoded into the virus of turning it into a simple flu after the fifth or sixth host worked perfectly. And with the discovery of the Ash family’s immunity, we should have a working vaccine within weeks. It

is unfortunate that the doctor isn't with us anymore, but his work still goes on. I think we can safely designate stage one of the delivery agent complete. That is, unless anyone has any objections?" He looked around the table, but no one said a word. "We will concentrate on stage two now, which is already well on its way. At this time, I see no threat at all to the implementation timetable."

The Principal Director leaned forward again. "What about Captain Ash? He's still on the loose."

"He is, sir. But I don't believe he's any kind of problem. He only wanted his children."

"And these missing journalists?"

"We believe they were scared off, sir, and will resurface soon. When that occurs, they will be dealt with."

"Yes, but who is helping these people? They couldn't have done this all on their own. And if Olivia is alive, where is she?"

"We're looking into all of that, sir, but, again, we don't think any of it is a serious threat. The boulder is running downhill. It's too late for anyone to stop it."





AS THEY SPED away from NB7, Chloe called Matt, requesting a safe house and a doctor. They were directed to the home of an elderly woman in a small, Western Idaho town. Despite the fact the sun had yet to come up when they arrived, she smiled at the children and told everyone to make themselves at home, then disappeared into a room in the back.

Ash hunted down some aspirin for Chloe, then found a couple of bedrooms upstairs and told Josie and Brandon they could use them. But instead of separating, they chose to share a room. He could tell they were still unsure if it was really him, but he didn't want to push himself on them.

After they were settled, he cleaned out his wound again. The first time he'd done it had been in a gas station restroom, not exactly the most sterile of places. This time he found some rubbing alcohol in the medicine cabinet, and poured it into the groove on his arm. It burned worse than when he'd actually been hit, but he knew he had to do it, and dumped nearly half the bottle over the wound before he stopped.

When he returned downstairs, he found Chloe propped up on the couch.

"Why don't you get some sleep," he suggested.

"I tried, but this isn't going to let me," she told him, touching her leg.

He wished he could do something more for her. The pain seemed to be hitting her in waves. She'd be fine for a bit, then, with no warning, would close her eyes tight and cringe.

Just short of an hour after they arrived, there was a knock on the door. It was Pax and Billy. Billy quickly checked both patients, then gave Chloe a sedative that allowed her to fall asleep. As soon as she was out, he dealt with Ash's wound.

"Clean this yourself?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Remind me not to use you as a nurse."

More burning, then a bandage to cover the gash. When he was through, Billy examined Ash's face, looking at the scars of the surgery from what seemed so long ago.

With a simple "It looks like nothing's going to fall off," Billy went to see what he could do about Chloe's leg.

"You got 'em," Pax said, once he and Ash were alone.

"Yeah, I did." Ash knew he should be happy, but the worry he'd had for his kids' safety had turned into worry for their mental well-being. Sometimes being a parent sucked. "Thanks for your help. Those mini-explosives you gave me, I couldn't have done it without them."

"Don't even worry about it."

They talked a little longer, but at some point Ash fell asleep. How Pax and Billy got him into a bed upstairs, he had no idea. But that's where he woke to an afternoon sun shining through the window.

He showered, put on the new clothes someone had laid out for him, and headed downstairs. He found Pax and the old woman in the kitchen, laughing and having a cup of coffee.

"Where's Josie and Brandon?" he asked, alarmed.

"Your kids are fine," the old woman said. "They're out back, playing with the dog."

Ash walked over to the open back door and looked out the screen. Josie was sitting on a picnic bench, petting the head of a golden retriever while Brandon was trying to coax the dog away with a ball. It seemed so...normal.

“And Chloe?” Ash asked.

“Billy took her back to the ranch,” Pax said. “Said she needs surgery on the leg, but that she should be fine.”

Ash hadn’t told her thank you. He should have done it already, but he’d been too drained to even think about it.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” the woman asked.

Ash shook his head. “Not right now, thanks.”

He opened the screen door and stepped into the backyard. Both his kids looked over and stared at him. He wondered if their uncertainty would ever go away, if they’d ever truly believe he was their dad.

As he walked toward them, the golden retriever ran to him. Ash knelt down and petted the dog’s head. “Hey, buddy.” He looked over at his children. “What’s his name?”

Neither of them said anything for a moment, then Brandon took a step forward. “Strider.”

“Hello there, Strider,” Ash said to the dog.

Strider wagged his tail and licked Ash’s hand.

“He likes to play catch,” Brandon said.

Ash stood up. “You have a ball?”

Brandon nodded and showed him the tennis ball in his hand.

“Throw it for him,” Ash said.

Brandon tossed the ball across the yard, and Strider took off after it. As the dog was bringing the ball back to the boy, Ash casually walked over.

“Can I try?” he asked.

“Sure,” Brandon said, handing him the ball.

They played toss with the dog for several minutes, alternating turns, with neither of them really saying anything. While they did this, Josie sat quietly on the bench watching them.

As Ash was about to throw the ball again, Josie said, “Why did they tell us you were dead?”

Ash paused for a moment, then let the ball fly. “I don’t know, sweetheart. Because they weren’t very nice, I guess. They told me you were both dead, too.”

“They did?” Brandon said.

Ash nodded.

Strider returned with the ball and dropped it at Brandon’s feet, but the boy didn’t seem to notice. Brandon looked at his father for a moment, then glanced at his sister and whispered something just low enough so Ash couldn’t hear it.

Josie seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then looked up at their dad. “Is...Mom alive, too?”

Ash could feel his heart suddenly break. He sank down to his knees so he was closer to their height, tears forming in his eyes. “No, sweetie. She’s not.”

“But you’re here, and they said you were dead,” she countered.

Ash could hear Brandon’s breath become ragged as he fought his own tears. “I know, Josie. But your mom was gone before they even took us out of the house.”

“But...but...are you sure?”

He nodded.

Brandon was the first to fall into his embrace, sobbing into Ash’s shoulder, but Josie wasn’t far behind him.

“I love you guys,” Ash said, then repeated “I love you” over and over.

“I love you, too, Dad,” Josie said, once her tears had finally lost their strength.

“Me, too,” Brandon added.

The hug that followed seemed to last for hours.

The End

CONTINUE with the next book in this epic series, [\*Exit 9\*](#).

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

BRETT BATTLES IS A *USA Today* bestselling and Barry Award-winning author of over thirty-five novels, including the Jonathan Quinn series, the Project Eden series, and the time bending Rewinder series. He’s also the coauthor, with Robert Gregory Browne, of the Alexandra Poe series. He lives and writes in Southern California.

You can learn more at his website: [brettbattles.com](http://brettbattles.com)



# JENIFER RUFF: THE NUMBERS KILLER

---

The numbers killer

BY jenifer ruff

**Author's Rating:**

**Language: \* Sexuality: \* Violence: \*\***

**F**or your convenience each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

# **THE NUMBERS KILLER**

Copyright © 2019 Greyt Companion Press

JENIFER RUFF

An Agent Victoria Heslin Thriller Book 1

All the characters in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead is a coincidence.







**YOU'LL NEVER VIEW ODD numbers the same way again.**

When a key witness in an organized crime trial turns up dead in his kitchen with liar and the number two scrawled on his forehead, the FBI assumes the murder was a hit to silence him. Then the calls start coming in—more victims with similar markings and no connection to the mob.

As agents Victoria Heslin and Dante Rivera struggle to catch a break in the case, they receive a series of cryptic, personal messages from the killer, complicating the investigation. Something disturbing and frightening is underway, and anyone might be next, including the agents, unless they uncover the common denominator.

Jenifer Ruff delivers a gripping psychological thriller that will appeal to fans of the *Woman in the Window* by A.J. Finn as well as serial killer favorites like *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris and *Kiss the Girls* by James Patterson.



In the dark, decaying woods behind the Sonesta Hotel, fierce gusts of wind cracked brittle branches, and Beth Dellinger's trembling hand tightened around a 9mm Glock. As she pulled the trigger, something snapped deep inside her brain. Two terrible incidents occurred. A murder—the end of one life—and the inescapable new beginning of another.

Twisted brambles tore into her skin as she fled down the narrow path toward the parking lot, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm. Only one instinct fueled her. *Get away.* With ragged breaths, she counted her hurried steps in fours.

*Four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-two.*

She slipped on the incline at the edge of the woods and her bare feet flew out from under her. Windmilling her arms, she hit the ground with a thud and slid down the wet earth, dirt smearing the back of her bare legs, filling tiny scrapes with grime. She scrambled up, looking back over her shoulder, stumbled, and kept moving. Pebbles and beer caps littered the rough pavement and a broken bottle shard sliced the edge of her dirt-caked foot. She had yet to register the pain.

A nearby train barreled down the tracks with an overbearing whoosh and grind, its horn blaring, intensifying the pulsing blood in her eardrums.

*Four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-two.*

When she reached her car, she stared blankly at a tube of lipstick she was carrying. She had no idea why it was in her hand. With a violent shudder, she hurled the lipstick back toward the woods as if she'd been clutching a hot coal.

Fumbling for her keys, she yanked the door open, and plopped down behind the wheel. She tossed her purse on the seat beside her, struggling to catch her breath. With a death grip on the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield, seeing nothing.

What did she remember? Fleeing the hotel. A beautiful woman holding the back door open for her. She remembered screaming, and a fiery pain erupting from her cheek. Nothing more. What had happened next? All she knew was that she had done something bad, something she couldn't undo. *Had anyone seen?* She slumped forward on the edge of her seat, hung her head, and covered her face with her dirty hands, wincing when she touched the bruised skin around her eye. A burned stench emanated from her hands—the smell of gunfire. Blood dripped from her foot onto the floor.

*Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . .*

A sudden noise made her jump in her seat.

“Beth, Beth, Beth. What am I going to do with you now?” Danny bent over and stared from outside the car, his blood-shot eyes level with hers.

Beth shook her head, squeezed her eyes shut, bit down on her bottom lip between her teeth. A tremor coursed through her veins. When she opened her eyes, he was still peering in at her. He rapped his fist against the glass. “Roll down the window.”

She turned on the ignition and lowered the window half-way. He glowered at her as wheezy breaths constricted her chest.

“Are ya happy now?” He pounded the roof of the car with his hand. “What you just did, it's a whole lot bigger than one of your little identify thefts. You might not get away with it. This time, you might really pay for what you've done. As in going to jail for the rest of your long life.”

Beth clutched the neck of her shirt, gripping it tight.

“They saw you. You know that, don’t you?” His harsh whisper made his words all the more terrifying.

She didn’t want to answer him. She didn’t want to have this conversation. But she couldn’t help herself. She had to know what he meant. A lump had formed in her throat. Struggling to swallow around it, she leaned farther away. “Who saw me?”

“All of them. They all saw you.” He made a sweeping gesture toward the windows lining the back of the Sonesta Hotel. Most were large blackened squares. Some had light peeking out around the edges of the blinds.

“No. They couldn’t have.” Her voice shook. She studied the windows for a shadow or a flicker of movement, any sign of life behind them. *What did they see?*

He gritted his teeth. “Yes, they did.” Each word was like a slap, punching through the air and smacking her in the face. He shifted his weight, still towering outside her window, seeming larger than he really was. “They know because you were screaming like a . . . like a . . .” His face flushed red. Vocabulary was never his strength. “Like a damn crazy lunatic. You know what you have to do now, don’t you?”

She stared out the window, away from him and the sadistic grin he was sure to be sporting.

“You’ll have to take care of them before they betray you, too.”

Her heart picked up a rapid rhythm again. “Ta—take care of them?”

“What part don’t you understand? For someone who thinks she’s so clever—.”

Beth cringed. Shoulders hunched, she gazed through the front windshield toward the creepy hotel. She hadn’t liked much about the place since they checked in earlier that evening. It was all dark shadows and ugly carpet. And now, she didn’t think anyone had seen her. But they must have. For a long time, starting soon after their honeymoon, Danny had been dismissive to her, sometimes even cruel. When he was in one of his moods, his brutal honesty—words that seared her soul—delivered more pain than any kick or slap. It had been a long time since she’d seen the once charming man who made her believe she was special. But she didn’t believe he had ever outright lied to her. At least not to her face.

“I see you’ve still got my gun. And you know how to use it.” He laughed and threw his head back.

She glanced at the brown metal grip just visible at the top corner of her purse. Another shiver rocked her body.

Danny spit on the ground. “Now, you have no choice. Unless you’ve got a better idea. Which I wouldn’t bet on. And for Christ’s sakes, don’t do it here. Wait for them to leave or you’ll draw the police right to us.”

“If I don’t do it here, then how will I find them?” she whispered.

He laughed, a crazy, maniacal sound. “Use your head. You’re supposed to be the expert hacker. Figure it out.”

Clenching her fists, she tried to think.

He pounded on the roof again and startled her. “I have to tell you everything, don’t I?”

*If I’m so unbearably incompetent, how come it’s my hacking jobs that pay for everything we do? Our apartment. This vacation. Your new business venture with its many expenses and no income. Huh?* Jamming her finger on the window button, she rolled it up and yelled, “Just let me think!” She squeezed her eyes shut again and covered her ears with her hands. Another train rolled by, drowning out anything else Danny may have said.

*What am I going to do? What should I do?* And then, after taking a deep breath, another option occurred to her—*what do I want to do?*

One thing she knew for sure—the prospect of jail terrified her. But was she strong enough? What would it take? She straightened in her seat and glanced at the gun again. She would do it. She'd show him once and for all. And more importantly, she'd show herself. She couldn't be pushed around. She wouldn't be caught by surprise. Not anymore. This was the new Beth. And she sure as hell wasn't starting off by going to jail.

She opened her eyes again. Danny was gone.

Yes, she could do this. She'd go after them one by one until she was safe again.

She climbed out of the car and rummaged through her purse for her phone. Hunched over and almost walking on her tiptoes, she crept around the parking lot with cold, dirty bare-feet, taking furtive pictures of each license plate, as good a way as any to get started. There were only twelve cars. The Sonesta Hotel was no one's dream destination.

When she finished, Danny was waiting at the car. "We have to get out of here. Now. Before *you* get caught. Go get our stuff and meet me back here."

"Why can't you—"

"Just go! Now!"

Beth hustled inside the hotel. She returned only minutes later with drops of sweat rolling down her temples, lugging two small stacked suitcases, one with a broken wheel, and a cooler. They climbed in their "borrowed" Honda and sped off, driving past the nearest hotel, *too close*, and parking at the second one they saw. The Vista View sat just off a busy road without a vista worth mentioning in sight. But even before entering, she knew it would be a step up from the Sonesta, which Danny had chosen.

"Get us checked in," Danny grunted.

Beth trudged through the automatic sliding doors and inside the quiet lobby. A man in a navy suit walked in through a door behind the desk. "Checking in?" He couldn't have been older than twenty-five and his smile indicated he had the energy to be charming despite the late hour. His name tag read, "Ahmad."

"If you have a room available." Beth adjusted her large dark sunglasses. "We don't have a reservation."

Ahmad narrowed his eyes, looked at Beth and then toward the door.

"My husband is with me." She cupped her hand around her chin, self-conscious of her tear-stained face, blossoming bruise, the dirt on her clothes.

"Okay. I'll be right back. I have to finish . . ." He wiped his nose with the back of his finger. "Just one minute."

Ahmad disappeared through a door behind the desk, leaving Beth to shift her weight from one leg to the other and twirl pieces of her hair.

"You didn't get a room yet? What's taking so long?" Danny had apparently grown tired of waiting for her outside.

Ahmad returned. Beth let out a loud sigh.

"Sorry about that." Ahmad dropped his head and tapped on his computer. "How many nights?"

*How long will it take? One day? Two? Can I even go through with it?*

"Better do three," Danny said, standing too close for her comfort.

"Four days." Beth lifted her chin. She scratched at the raised bump protruding on her arm. Had to be a bug bite, although it was too late in the year and too cold for mosquitoes. Something had attacked her in the woods and her body was just starting to react.

“You’re in luck. We do have a room and it’s available for four nights.” Ahmad smiled at Beth, but his eyes were traveling elsewhere, and she recognized the judgment in his smug expression.

She frowned and squeezed her fingers into the flesh around her bug bite, simultaneously experiencing pain and relief from the itch. “What number is it?”

“Two twenty-seven.” Ahmad smiled.

Her face twisted as if she’d just been bit again. “Do you have something with an even number?”

Ahmad stared at her for a second longer than necessary, but his forced smile had returned before he dropped his head again. “Let me see.” He poked at his keyboard and leaned closer to his screen.

“You could have two thirty-four. It’s across the hall. Would that work for you?”

Beth let out a sigh. “Much better. Here.” She handed over a new credit card, not the same one they used at the Sonesta. It should work for at least a few weeks.

Ahmad took her card. “Thank you, Mrs. Malone. And by the way, if you were planning to use the gym, it’s closed. Leaks. Too much rain the past few days. I’m wondering if it’s ever going to stop.”

Once inside their room, she scrubbed her hands and gently washed the dirt off her face, dabbing at the crust of blood on her lip. What a sight she had been. Staring into the mirror, she tilted her head at different angles, killing time before she emerged.

With his head resting in the cradle of his hands behind him and his boots on the coffee table, Danny leaned far back on the worn pull-out sofa. Beth stood as far away from him as possible, between the window and the bed. She peeled back an edge of the curtain panel and stared out. A cloud of specks flitted around under a hazy floodlight and the wind tugged at tree branches. More than a dozen cars were parked between painted lines, their flat roofs stretched out long below her. What kind of person owned each of those cars? Grandmothers and grandfathers? Mothers and fathers? Waiters? Salespeople? Assistants and executives? No—not executives, not at this place. And, more importantly, what kind of people owned the cars in the Sonesta parking lot? With a bit of internet research, she was about to find out.

*I can’t do this.* “What if I just go to the police and turn myself in?”

“Ha!” Danny tipped his head back further. “Like I said, you won’t survive a day in jail. But if you do go to the police, I’ll pay a visit to your sister’s house. Have a little private chat with her kids.”

She scratched the back of her head. Her sister complained incessantly about those kids. Maybe he would be doing her a favor by scaring the crap out of them.

“Don’t believe me, eh? Remember what happened to her little dog when she crossed me? What was his name? Cootie? No, Coobie. Poor little Coobie. Ha!”

She shrugged, her shoulders moving the slightest fraction of an inch. *It was just an animal.*

“If you don’t do this, you’ll have to spend the rest of your life in a filthy prison. And don’t count on me for any conjugal visits. You’ll be alone forever. Cuz who else would visit you?”

Beth kept her mouth shut and didn’t respond, even though it was killing her to be quiet. Threats toward her sister’s kids could be rationalized—they’d survive. But she wasn’t going to prison. Prison meant being surrounded by meaner, crazier people than the ones she already knew.

Danny rattled on. She almost couldn’t bear the sound of his voice, each word dripped with his imagined superiority. She hated him. She also loved him. Didn’t she? She could strangle the life out of him with her bare hands if she had the strength. How she would enjoy watching him struggle and gasp for air until he finally shut up for good. But then she would be alone, and she didn’t want that either. She stormed back into the bathroom and locked the door. She began counting the diamonds on the wallpaper. *Four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty . . .* The tension across her forehead intensified

until she reached ninety-six at the top corner of the wall. She pivoted around and opened the bathroom door.

The room was quiet and empty.

He was gone, leaving her to pace around and pull at long strands of her blonde hair, coarse from too much coloring. She pulled open the small fridge. A laminated sign stuck to the front said, "You use it, you pay for it." Her hand shook so hard, a mini-bottle of liquor slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor. She picked it up, opened it, and tossed it back. It probably cost more than a whole six-pack, but she didn't care. Not tonight. Not when she was using someone else's credit card number. Not with what she was about to do.

After emptying two more mini-bottles, she opened her computer and got down to business, somewhat surprised by her determination. Danny wasn't going to leave her alone about this situation until she did what needed to be done. She'd think of it as an opportunity to finally show him who she really was. If she could kill once, she could do it again.

And again.

She *would* survive this.







### *AND NOW IT BEGINS.*

Morning drizzle coated the windshield. Beth started the car to let the wipers clear the glass. After four noisy swipes—they needed replacing—she turned the car back off and drained the last of the hotel lobby’s burnt coffee. Three sugar packets and five containers of fake creamer made it barely palatable. Too bad it hadn’t helped shut off the throb of her hangover.

Eyes on the young couple, she turned her key in the ignition as soon as their car began to move. With one hand, she reached underneath her seat and felt the metal of the gun, making sure it was where it was supposed to be. This was it. Game on. She was really doing this. Her stomach cramped and demanded a trip to the bathroom, but she had to ignore it. Knew it was just her nerves.

Kelly and Jason Smith. Twenty-somethings. Married for just over a year. Kelly was petite and curvy with thick, wavy, light-brown hair right out of a shampoo commercial, big brown puppy-dog eyes, and a beautiful smile full of perfect white teeth. Her pink sweater looked soft. Jason wore wire-rimmed glasses, had neat short hair, and didn’t look much older than one of those prep school boys who wore striped ties and navy coats to school.

*Aren’t they just adorable?*

It had been easy to figure out which hotel room they occupied.

Beth sneered as she followed their candy-apple red Jeep onto the main road. Their heads bobbed. Kelly’s long hair swung from side to side. What was going on inside their car? Oh, for God’s sake—seriously? They were dancing in their seats. Probably lip syncing too. Beth rolled her eyes. A clever, mean thought entered her mind and she almost shared it aloud for Danny, before remembering she was alone.

She trailed behind the Jeep, maintaining a respectable distance. The drizzle changed into a steady rain. She flipped on her lights and wipers. Following all the rules. Not attracting attention. There was too much at stake.

Jason was on his way to make a sales pitch to a company in town; his wife came along for moral support. Beth knew this because she was *that* good. Of course, it helped that people were so willing to share their lives on social media with whoever might be interested. And Beth was very interested in the information Kelly Smith had to share. Kelly’s propensity for posting made Beth’s task of tracking them so much easier. Their every activity was announced online. “Business trip with a side of pleasure because I’m coming with!” is what Kelly wrote on her very public Facebook site. She might as well have hung a sign on her door: “We’re both out of town. Come rob us!” Because it was a simple feat for Beth, or anyone, to find the Smith’s home address. And if they didn’t have anything worth stealing, well, a frustrated thief might vandalize their place for wasting their effort. Beth knew this from experience. The time she and Danny broke into a house and found absolutely nothing of value—nothing they needed, nothing they wanted, and nothing they could resell—they’d taught those homeowners a lesson all right.

What would Beth’s posts look like if she shared her daily life? “Great day! Hacked into an online account and opened three new credit cards with the info! Whoopee! Oh, yeah, and then Danny smacked me and broke a tooth because he was wasted and I didn’t know where the TV remote was. Can anyone recommend a dentist?” Ha! The world would love knowing her dirty little secrets. She never made her comings and goings public and never would. People should know better, not be so

trusting. Otherwise it served them right if someone made off with their flat screen TV, spread toothpaste over their walls, syrup on their furniture, or borrowed their identity until their credit was maxed out.

After a couple of minutes, Jason's right blinker light began flashing and he pulled the car into a complex with stores and restaurants: a Target and Best Buy, but mostly small franchises, the kind that lined most strip malls in America. Was this where he would make the sales pitch? Beth's heart beat a bit faster, like it was warming up for the main event.

Cars chugged along slowly in every direction, up and down the crowded parking lot lanes, no one wanting to make the trek from the empty spaces farther from the stores, not now, with the steady rain approaching a downpour. Beth prayed Jason would drive behind the stores where the trucks unloaded their cargo and there wouldn't be any people. And then what? Shoot them in the shopping mall's parking lot? How was that going to work? Maybe she hadn't thought this out as well as she could have. Until that moment, identifying her targets and following them had seemed like a big enough accomplishment.

With so much traffic meandering through the shopping center, and some of them being damn aggressive—*it's not Black Friday, lady!*—Beth had no choice but to stay close behind or risk losing the Smiths. Jason steered right up to the curb and stopped. Beth hit her brakes behind him, just in time. The Jeep's passenger door swung open and Kelly's shapely legs appeared, clad in tight yoga pants. With her head down, Kelly made a run for the nearest store, the Plush Nail Salon. It didn't look very plush. The H and the N hung sideways off the sign. One fierce gust of wind would send them flying away. So, Kelly wasn't going to the sales pitch with Jason after all. She was going to get herself all pretty while her man did the hard work. Beth frowned, rolling her bottom lip into her mouth. That wasn't good. Not good at all. She needed them to stay together.

Inside the doorway, Kelly blew her husband a kiss. But it wasn't aimed toward the driver's seat of the Jeep. Beth jerked her head back, following Kelly's gaze, knowing she'd missed something.

Jason was out of his car. Covering his head with a magazine, he hurried straight toward Beth, staring at her through the windshield, his face a determined grimace. A spike of adrenaline edged Beth toward a full-blown panic attack. What was he going to do? He must have recognized her. She yanked the steering wheel to her left, but a line of barely-moving bumper-to-bumper cars prevented a quick escape. Her eyes flew to the rearview mirror as she jammed the gear shift into reverse, but behind her, another car boxed her in.

Jason was only a few steps away.

Heart racing, she doubled over and grabbed the Glock from beneath her seat. Her stomach lurched as she gripped the handle. He was probably at her window now. There were too many people around. This wasn't the right place! She'd be caught for sure if she tried to shoot him here. She shoved the gun under her T-shirt, wincing in terror. Her hands were shaking so much she didn't trust them on the gun, especially not with the weapon against her own body.

A knock on her window made her bolt upright, still gripping the gun under her shirt.

"Hey." Jason stared right at her.

No choice. She eased the gun out from under her shirt.

Hunched over in the driving rain, Jason pointed toward the front of her car. "Just wanted to let you know that your right headlight is out. Didn't want you to get a ticket."

And then he trotted away, still covering his head with the sodden magazine, the shoulders of his coat dark from the drenching rain.

Beth sat stunned, staring into but not seeing the sheets of rain, not hearing the incessant hammering of drops on the roof. Danny was right. She couldn't do it. And right then, she didn't even have the wherewithal to drive her car, never mind follow anyone and do what needed to be done without being caught. But that wasn't all that had her freaked out. Something else about the brief encounter bothered her. Jason didn't act like he knew her. Not a bit. Unless he was playing some sort of game to screw with her head. Maybe that was it. Maybe her headlight was working fine, and the broken headlight story was just a ruse to get her out of the car. She whipped her head to her left and to her right but didn't see anyone else.

Jason was already pulling out into the slow-moving traffic.

She drove back to the hotel, below the speed limit, her breath coming in fast gulps, murmuring a rhythm to herself, counting every fourth scraping swipe of the windshield wipers.

"Four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-two. Four, eight, twelve, sixteen . . ."

• • • •

"I KNEW YOU COULDN'T do it." Danny sneered. "Your screw up only made things worse for yourself. You're kinda . . . noticeable, you know. Ya stick out like a witch with the dark roots in your hair and that purple bruise."

Witch? She wasn't ugly. She'd always thought she was sort of attractive—average height and maybe she could have been in better shape, but it's not like she was overweight—until Danny started making a point of telling her otherwise. "The bruise—whose fault is that?" She sunk down into the corner of the hotel room couch and grabbed a pillow to protect her face, just in case. Danny always found a way to reason that everything was her fault. Like if it weren't for her he'd be living-it-up in luxury, driving a Mercedes, sitting in the front row ordering beers at the Wizards games. As if.

"So now he got a good, close look at you. He knows exactly what you look like. It will be real easy for him to pick you out of a line up once the police come for you. Set you up there with four other chicks past their prime—"

"He didn't act like he knew me. I mean, he—"

Danny grunted. "Have yourself a good time in jail. Not sure how you'll manage. You can't stand to be alone, can you? Makes you all freaked out and you start counting stuff like a fricking nut case. You're really a piece of work." He sneered and threw his head back. "They won't give you a pen because you might poke your eyes out, but you can use your own blood to make tic marks on the cement walls, one for each day. Ha! You'll have plenty of those, you'll be counting them tic marks until you're an old hag. One, two, three, four, five . . . no—not five! I can't end on an odd number because I'm a psycho! Unless . . . unless they hang you, shoot you up with electricity, or whatever it is they do to get rid of bat-ass-crazy killers these days."

Clenching her jaw, she faced away from Danny. She'd been counting the up motions of her bouncing leg. She pressed her hand down hard against her knee and kept it still, but the numbers didn't stop, they only grew faster and louder inside her head.

*I'm not going to prison.*

The day was only just getting started. She would wait until the Smiths were together again. In the meantime, there were more people on her list. She knew exactly how many—seven. She'd been counting them over and over again.

Next time, she wouldn't fail.





VICTORIA HESLIN'S SKIN tingled in the cool October air as she walked the wet trails. She inhaled deeply and stepped over a rushing stream on a newly constructed bridge of logs, heading towards the mountain trails. There was no place she would rather be than outside, hiking with her dogs.

The rain had ceased, although the clouds were determined to keep out the sun. At the end of a pink leash, Izzy trotted down the path with her head up, alert for any movement or rustling in the bushes. Like a stealthy hunter searching for prey, the Spanish greyhound never stopped scanning her surroundings. Eddie, a large retired racing greyhound, lagged behind, nose toward the ground, sniffing and marking every few yards with a casual lift of his hind leg as if it was his sworn duty.

"Come on, Eddie. Keep up." Victoria gave a gentle tug on his leash. The big dog tore off a mouthful of grass and ambled after her.

Victoria's phone buzzed, an unwelcome interruption that made her grimace inside. She pulled the device from her hip pocket, glanced at the screen, and sighed. It was her boss calling. It was Saturday, but that didn't matter with her job. She answered. As she expected, it quickly became clear her walk would be cut short.

"Oh, no. And he's definitely dead?" she asked, already turning around to head back the way she came. "Okay. I'm just out on my property. I'll be there as soon as I can. I have his address."

She jogged home with the dogs, unlocked the heavy iron gate, and let them loose in her backyard. Inside the mudroom, while she pulled off her hiking boots, the rest of her pack of Greyhounds, Galgos, and Podencos surrounded them, wagging their tails, snorting, and sniffing Izzy and Eddie as if they had been transformed into brand new creatures during their walk.

"Hey. Hey. Calm down everyone." Laughing, Victoria wove through their wagging bodies and into the house. "You act like we've been gone a week." Their tails smacked back and forth against the entryway walls in response. "I'm so sorry to tell you all this, but I've got to go out again."

Seven wagging tails followed her into the master bedroom, Eddie and Izzy leaving faint traces of mud in their path. Victoria tore off her shorts and T-shirt and hurried into the shower. Less than three minutes later, she was putting on a white camisole that covered her sapphire necklace, her mother's birthstone. She ripped open a dry-cleaning bag and pulled on gray slacks, a blouse, and a jacket in a fast, rehearsed manner. Amidst strokes and head rubs for the dogs, she hustled into the kitchen and handed out treats and apologies. She checked the dogs' bowls, grabbed the prepacked bag of human snacks, slipped a water bottle into her backpack, locked the doors, and then jumped in her customized Suburban. Cruising down her long driveway, she hooked up her phone to the car and dictated a text message for Ned.

"Hi. It's Victoria. I had to leave on short notice and I'm not sure when I'll be back, so definitely plan to come around dinner time to feed my dogs and give them some attention. I'll keep you posted once I know more. As always, thanks for your help. And text me that you got this."

A soft chime indicated an incoming text. Victoria read Ned's reply at the next stoplight. *Got it. Monday still good for our dinner?*

She pressed the speaker button on the steering wheel. "So far so good." Victoria sighed. Was that apprehension she was feeling, just a little, or was it possibly a hint of nervous excitement? She wasn't sure. It wasn't a real date, was it? After all, Ned was her employee. She rarely dated. She'd been attracted to a few men, and recognized when it was mutual, but . . . then she kept her distance.

Somewhere deep inside her subconscious, not getting romantically involved with anyone felt like the right thing to do, at least right now. A long time had passed since she'd given anyone a chance. She barely remembered her last awkward dinner. She'd been called away right in the middle of it. Should have shut her phone off, and she knew it, but maybe she wanted to have a possible excuse to bolt. She shook her head, remembering, and not impressed with her behavior. Perhaps it was time to give it another go, give someone a try. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the dinner with Ned *was* a real date. Or almost like one.

Ned sent another message. *Good. So we can talk about what I should bring when we go to the shelter in Spain next month.*

She dictated again. "Yes. I'm glad you're going with me. It's going to change your life. And you'll make a big difference there." After sending the message, she dropped her phone into the center console.

She was definitely nervous about having a back-up dog walker for so many days. She'd really learned to count on and trust Ned, finding him was nothing short of a miracle, but everything would work out. The trip to Spain was important. She had a long list of things to check on while she was there.

She pressed the home button again. "Send Ned a text."

"What would you like to say to Ned?"

"I can't remember if I told you this, but Myrtle seems to despise the new herbal toothpaste. Use the poultry one in red tube or she might snap at you." That was her subtle way of reminding him to brush their teeth after dinner.

Ned responded with a thumbs-up.

Thirty minutes later, thanks to non-existent traffic, she parked behind three police cars and an SUV. A chilly wind hit her as she stepped out of her Suburban. She pulled her jacket tight around her chest. A uniformed officer approached. He held up a hand. "This is a crime scene, Miss, you need to get back in your car."

Victoria lifted the edge of her coat and looked down at her waist. "I'm Agent Heslin with the FBI."

The officer followed Victoria's eyes to the badge attached to her pants. "Oh. I didn't—"

"Not your fault. I'm not wearing my jacket."

The officer rocked back and forth on his feet, then turned toward the small, ramshackle house behind him. "We've been keeping the scene secure for you. The other agent just arrived."

Victoria moved her badge from her waist to the collar of her shirt where it would be more visible, in case any of the other authorities had any initial doubts that she belonged there. "Thank you." She smiled, walking past the yellow crime scene tape, toward the home that was currently the center of attention. Paint peeled off around the windows, gray mildew coated the exterior, and a broken gutter pipe hung loose at an odd angle. Aside from the weeds, the small yard was mostly dirt. Puddles of muddy water filled the ruts and depressions. An empty yellow potato chip bag and a blue ice cream sandwich wrapper provided the only color. Everything about the property shouted shoddy construction that had seen better days, except for a gleaming black Range Rover that just barely fit under the rusty carport.

The neighbors' homes all conveyed the same message—those living there had either given up caring or never cared much at all. They might not even be aware of the neglect they were loudly advertising—almost abandoned but not quite.

Agent Rivera stood inside the open doorway, one hand running over his short dark hair. His FBI coat was also absent. He wore a crisp white tailored shirt under a charcoal suit jacket and pants. His outfit was nearly identical to Victoria's, male and female versions of the same colors and materials. Oops. Someone at the office was bound to make a crack about their matching attire.

As she walked toward the house, he saw her and his eyes lit up.

"Hey, Tory." He stepped outside the splintering front door and let it creak closed behind him. "Forensics aren't here yet. Busy day for them."

"First off—nice to be working with you again. I didn't expect it to be so soon."

"Yeah. I'm not complaining."

"So, what have I missed?" Victoria bent down and pulled on shoe covers.

"Well, the state's best witness took a bullet to the head. No sign of a gun, so not likely his own doing."

"There's going to be a lot of angry agents and prosecutors." She pulled a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and put them on. "What do we know?"

"Shot to the temple at close range. Bullet went in and out. Cops found it under the counter."

Victoria opened the door and stepped inside. "Really?" She frowned. "A bullet was left behind?"

"Yep."

The agents walked into the house along the edge of the hallway. A trail of dark red partial shoe prints stained the tile floors and led outside.

She bent down to get a closer look at the narrow tread marks. "Who stepped in the blood?"

"According to the neighbor who found him—she's still inside—the prints were there when she arrived." Rivera lowered his voice and leaned toward Victoria. "We'll have forensics get shoe prints to make sure, but at a glance, they're too small for any of the officers here."

Still crouched, Victoria clasped her necklace through her shirt. "Whoever it was left during the day, out the front door, where they were more likely to be seen."

The agents entered the living room from the hallway. Three uniformed officers, all men, stood together in the room. A tall man with broad shoulders lifted a hand in greeting.

"Hey, Sully." Rivera gave his friend a half-smile. "You've met Agent Heslin?"

Detective Sullivan nodded, his expression slightly grim, as appropriate for a crime scene. He was a big guy who used to spend a lot of time at the gym, sometimes with Rivera when the agent was in town. He'd had his share of troubles and heartache, and Victoria hoped he was doing well. With his skin looking as flushed as deli ham, she wasn't sure. His eyes were a little bloodshot, but that could be from working a double shift and not getting enough sleep.

The detective introduced the other two policemen and said, "I just got here a few minutes before you."

The officer with glasses stepped forward. "No sign of a break in, although the doors might have already been unlocked. He was obviously dead, so we didn't touch anything and called forensics."

"Yeah." A very young officer with red hair nodded. "Only thing we touched was the microwave. It was beeping, so I opened it to shut it off. He was cooking something when he got killed."

Rivera smirked. "So you didn't touch anything except what you touched. Got it."

Sully snorted, repressing a laugh.

The young officer spoke again, his face now almost as red as his hair. "We were told to wait here until the Feds—until you came—because this guy is special."

"Yes. He was." Rivera headed toward the small kitchen and the reason they were all huddled inside the small home—the victim—Todd Meiser.

Light filtered in through a dirty window over the sink, casting a ray of dancing dust specs over the kitchen table and two chairs. The Range Rover key fob sat in plain sight on a small Formica topped island. The smell of cigarettes mixed with the smell of the meal that was still sitting in the microwave.

Victoria scanned the room, taking in the sad, gory scene. Wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, Meiser was lying on the worn linoleum, legs bent to one side, as if he'd been on his knees praying before he was knocked sideways. Dark stubble coated his chin, and his mouth hung open in the shape of an O with his lips pursed, a shocked grimace. A blood-soaked woman's silk scarf, black with gray and pink flowers, covered his right eye and drooped down across his nose. A chunk of his skull was missing on the left side of his head, exploded into the mess of bone chips, brain matter, and blood now covering the kitchen floor, with bits plastered against the cabinets.

Victoria tiptoed around the perimeter of blood and pulp, studying the victim and his surroundings. "The last time I saw him, he was a nervous wreck, wringing his hands and pacing around the FBI office, when he wasn't excusing himself for another cigarette. But his behavior was understandable. He was a key witness for the prosecution of Raymond Butler."

"I know we've been after Butler and his organization for years." Rivera's eyes moved slowly and carefully over the corpse.

"Not sure how you missed out on all that fun, but now is your chance to get in on the messy tail end." Victoria placed her hands on her hips. "This is not what I expected to see."

"I know," Rivera answered quietly. "Someone got the job done . . . and dead is dead, but this doesn't look like a professional hit."

"Right." Victoria frowned. "Looks like the scarf was used as a blindfold. Strange to blindfold someone if you're going to kill them, isn't it?"

"Maybe the kill started out as just a threat for him not to testify."

Victoria crouched close to the body. "And what's this about?" The number two was scrawled in black ink above Todd's left eyebrow. Directly below it, the word LIAR. "Written after he was shot. And whoever wrote it must have stepped in his blood while doing so." Balancing as she squatted, Victoria used her phone to snap a picture of Meiser's head. She leaned forward to study the shoe track marks in the blood and took another picture. "Let's keep that info from the press and public for now. About the writing."

"Good call." Rivera walked into the next room. Sully was on the phone but covered it with his hand as Rivera addressed the officers. "Hey, guys. Don't say a word about the number or the writing on his head. Make sure no one else does either. That will be the thing we keep under wraps."

Sully nodded. "Got it. We were thinking the same." He returned the phone to his ear.

One of the officers followed Rivera back to the kitchen and waited until Victoria glanced up. "So, this guy is involved in the Butler case? That's why you guys were called in?"

"Yes. Well, he was."

"What'd he do?"

"He unwittingly helped the Butlers traffic illegal goods for over a year. He was key to putting Butler away." Victoria sighed. "Poor guy. He couldn't wait to get through the trial, start his new job, and leave his past life behind him. Only a few more days and it would have happened." Victoria dropped her head and stared at what was left of Meiser's face.

"Hey. I know what you're thinking." Sully shook his head. "But it wasn't you who got him into the whole mess and it wasn't you who murdered him while he microwaved his lunch."



“I know.” Victoria offered a sad smile. She also noticed the slight tremor in the detective’s hands, the flush on his light skin. “Who found him?”

Sully gestured back toward the living room. “Neighbor. She’s in the next room. Hope you don’t mind smoke.”

“Let’s go talk to her.” Rivera walked past Sully toward the living room but stopped after a few steps to wait for Victoria.

An old woman in sweatpants and a sweatshirt sat on one end of a ratty couch. She wore white slip-on shoes. Purple rollers wound her gray hair into tight cylinders around her scalp. Her wrinkled cheeks sunk inward as she pulled long inhalations off her cigarette and stared with a blank expression at the stained carpet. On a side table next to her sat an ashtray overflowing with butts.

“Ma’am, I’m Agent Rivera and this is Agent Heslin. We’re with the FBI. Can you answer a few questions for us?” Rivera took a small leather-bound notepad out of his pocket.

The woman’s cigarette dangled from her mouth. She mumbled, “You’re the Feds?” Her gaze traveled from agent to agent, up and down their bodies.

“Yes.” Rivera nodded. “And your name, ma’am?”

“Shirley Woodard.”

“Ms. Woodard, please tell us how you came to find the deceased.”

She took a drag on her cigarette, turned her head, and blew a long white stream toward the window. “I heard a gunshot, so I came over here. The door was unlocked.”

“Just one gunshot?” Rivera asked.

“Two. One right after the other.” Shirley fidgeted with the hem of her sweatshirt.

“And you came over here and entered the house by yourself after hearing a gun go off?”

Shirley’s eyes darkened. “Guess I ain’t got much to lose no more.”

“And what did you see?”

“I saw him . . .” she cocked her head toward the kitchen, “. . . on the floor, just like he is now. I didn’t touch him. Didn’t touch nothin’. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist or a special agent to figure out he was dead. I called 911 and I sat here until the cops came. Helped myself to his cigarettes, they was right here on the table. He won’t be needing them now.”

Rivera jotted something down with his pen. “Anything else you saw or heard?”

“No.” She blew out another lungful of smoke.

“A car driving away? Someone running down the street?”

“There weren’t nothin’ else I heard or saw to tell ya. He was just lying there dead and I expect whoever it was killed him was long gone.”

Victoria clasped her hands together, elbows tucked by her sides. “How much time elapsed between when you heard the gunshot and when you left your house to come over here?”

“I don’t know.” She took another puff of her cigarette, her face growing even more haggard.

“An estimate.” Victoria shifted her weight. “A few minutes? Ten?”

“I was getting out of my shower when I heard a bang. I came over to have a check on things after I got dressed.”

“After you put your hair in rollers?” Victoria asked.

The woman patted the rollers above her temple. “I have to go out this afternoon.” She frowned at Victoria. “I came over, didn’t I? We got other neighbors younger than me. I don’t see any of them here, none of them came rushing over.”

Rivera put his notepad away. “Could you lift your shoes up off the floor, so we can see the bottoms?”

Shirley rolled her eyes but leaned back against the couch and lifted one foot at a time. There was no sign of blood on her scuffed, smooth soles.

Victoria leaned forward. “Ms. Woodard, sometimes the authorities need to keep certain pieces of information about a case from the public. The information we withhold can be critical in helping us identify the killer. We’d appreciate if you wouldn’t share any of the details about Todd Meiser’s death. You can say you found him, but that’s all we’d like you to share until we’ve found out who shot him.”

Shirley nodded. “I know. Cops already said so. I got it. And I can keep my mouth shut real good.”

“Thank you for being a good neighbor.” Victoria reached into her pocket and withdrew a business card. She handed it to the woman. “Please call us if you think of anything else that might be helpful in finding whoever killed Mr. Meiser.”

“That mean I can go now?” She stood up, pinched her cigarette between two fingers, and dropped it on top of the other butts.

“Yes, you can go home now.” Victoria walked back to the other officers. “Can one of you escort Ms. Woodard back to her home so she won’t be bothered on the way?”

The young red-haired cop stepped to her side. “Right this way, Ma’am.”

After Ms. Woodard left, the agents scanned the outside area through the grime-streaked living room window. A small crowd of onlookers stood on the edge of the muddy lawn, blocking the sidewalk. “Let’s go talk to some of those other neighbors,” Rivera said. “See who else might be out there.”

The police activity had attracted attention beyond the neighborhood. A local news van had parked behind Victoria’s Suburban. Amanda Jones, the ubiquitous young reporter from Channel 14 News was putting on a sweater. The tall brunette looked like she’d just stepped off the beauty pageant circuit. Her equally young cameraman stood next to the van, scanning the area. Amanda spotted the agents, alerted her cameraman, and rushed forward. As the agents walked down the front path, Amanda met them, holding her microphone outstretched. “We heard there was a murder and FBI agents were called in. Can you tell us who you are and what the FBI is doing here?” She spoke in such a rushed tone; her words almost ran together.

Instead of waving Amanda from their path, Victoria stopped to answer. “I’m Agent Victoria Heslin and this is Agent Dante Rivera.”

“Thank you for speaking with us, Agent Heslin.” Amanda’s tone was more relaxed, like she’d just realized she didn’t have to spit out all her questions in one burst. “We know this is the home of Todd Meiser and that he was dead. Murdered. Can you tell us what happened here today?”

“We can’t share information at this time. But, if anyone has information that could help us with this case, please call your local police department.”

“We’ve also learned that Todd Meiser was a—” Victoria raised her hand, but Amanda continued. “—witness for the prosecution against Raymond Butler, a notorious drug smuggler and money launderer. Did you know Meiser’s life was in danger? Shouldn’t he have been in witness protection?”

Rivera approached the cameraman. “You’re not going to air that yet,” his voice was low but authoritative, a voice that people were used to following. “Give us some time before you include that. We’ll make it worth your while when we can. We still have to notify his family.”

The cameraman lowered his equipment.

“But—” Amanda frowned.

“Thank you very much for your cooperation.” Victoria held the reporter’s gaze and then the cameraman’s. “We’d appreciate a copy of your footage, so we can check out the crowd.”





BETH HELD HER SHOE upside down under the bathroom faucet. Diluted trails of blood ran in pink rivulets from the treads down the sides of the white sink.

“Damn, woman. I really didn’t think you’d do it. I didn’t think you had it in you.” Intruding on her personal space in the small bathroom, Danny snorted, the way he did when he begrudgingly said something almost nice. Like when he called her kitten—*go to the store and pick up a case of Bud, kitten*. How long had it been since he called her kitten? Didn’t matter anymore. She didn’t have to be his errand girl any longer.

She felt his rough hand patting her on the back. “You might have more guts than I thought. Or you really, really can’t bear the thought of rotting away in jail. I gotta say, you’ve surprised me.”

Yes, she had. She most certainly had.

Meiser had been easy to find. He only lived a few miles from the Sonesta Hotel. People locked their doors at night, when they went to bed, but not always during the day. That was her advantage. And yet, Todd Meiser didn’t seem all that surprised when she entered his back door with a gun. Terrified—yes. Surprised—not so much.

When he was on his knees, his features contorted with shock and disbelief, a surge of power coursed through her veins. Now she knew how Danny felt when he knocked her to the ground and watched her crawl under a table, apologizing and begging for him to calm down and back off. Too many men from her past had made her feel that way, starting with her own alcoholic father—*get your ass out of my sight before I make you sorry, Beth*. It was long past time she turned the tables.

And she had to admit, she liked how it felt once the tables had been turned. She couldn’t help it.

But she didn’t like all of it. Meiser’s fear and raw vulnerability were all too familiar. They crept in, poking away at the armor she erected for the big moment, ruining her power trip, reminding her that she’d spent more of the past years cowering in fear than she ever intended. She couldn’t look away from Meiser, but she couldn’t bear to see those pleading eyes another second. She’d yanked her scarf off her neck, threw it at him, and yelled—*tie this around your eyes! Do it now!* And because she’d been weak, her scarf got ruined, sodden with the horrific mess that exploded from his face. She’d had to leave it behind.

Danny rubbed her mistake in. “You left something of yours behind at a murder scene? You know that show about stupid criminals? That’s going to be your claim to fame, Beth.”

She desperately wanted to shower and wash away the disconcerting sensation gnawing away inside her, the lingering image of Todd Meiser’s terrified face, his desperate eyes. But Danny was in the next room now, still going on about the scarf, everything she still had left to do, and how she better hurry. She tried to block out his voice. She wasn’t going to let him ruin everything for her. She had done it. And despite Danny’s recriminations, he was impressed. And that, in itself, was something. A big, fat, huge something to be proud of.

*But can I do it again?*

“I’m going out to take a walk. I need to. It will help me concentrate.” She edged past him to grab stretchy pants and a T-shirt from her bag. Danny was all for telling her to exercise, practically every day, while managing to ignore his own steadily expanding gut. *You got to get rid of that damn cellulite, those ugly dented cheese holes, before it spreads and takes over your whole ass*. At home,

he insisted she walk on the treadmill. The tiny Vista View gym had water dripping through the ceiling and yellow tape across the door. She'd have to go for a walk outside.

"Make it fast." He pointed. "You have to take care of the rest of them. Tick tock, Beth. Tick tock. You're running out of time."

"I know that." She was just procrastinating, putting off the inevitable, but she didn't care. Shouldn't the small milestone moments be celebrated too? Like their three-year anniversary? Ha! Some vacation it was turning out to be. She deserved a break to settle her nerves before she had to go out there and eliminate another name from her list.

She scurried out of his reach and back into the bathroom. If he was trying to drive her crazy, it was working. She changed her clothes and studied herself in the mirror. Lifeless eyes stared back, like there was nothing behind them. She patted concealer around her bruise; she didn't need to advertise the deep purple ring. Her lips were pale gray, like a cadaver. They desperately needed color. She rifled through her stuffed purse for her lipstick, pulling out tissues, a wallet, pens, receipts, a comb, pain pills, tossing everything to the side and yanking the inside of the lining forward.

Where was it? Where was her damn lipstick?

A jolting current shot through the center of her brain then branched out in alarm-inducing tendrils. She froze, overcome by a wave of unexplained terror. Her knees grew weak. A dark cloud swelled around her sight, closing in, squeezing her vision smaller and smaller, down to nothing. She grasped the corner of the sink, but her hand slipped off as she sank to the floor. "Danny," she moaned as her head smacked the edge of the bathtub.

She woke moments later on the hard tiles, covered in a sheen of sweat, aware of a painful lump above her ear. Crawling up the side of the tub and then the wall for balance, she stood and exited the bathroom with cautious steps in a cloud of confusion. Her head felt foggy, her body shaky. "Danny? Are you here? Danny?"

She walked on unsteady feet toward the window, stopped and started again, focusing on the bit of space between the curtain panels and the floor, searching for shoes, socks, or toes. She cautiously pulled the curtain all the way back to one side, bracing her body for a blow. Ridiculous, but she had to make sure.

No one was hiding there. Her shoulders relaxed a bit. "Good riddance," she whispered, in case he could somehow hear her, like if he was hiding in the closet, which he did once to spy on her. Who did that, right? Danny did. She should have checked there first. But when she slid open the closet door and jumped away from it, she found it empty.

She straightened, managed to push her shoulders back, feeling stronger. He was gone, and that was good, mostly, except for the all-encompassing loneliness. Like she didn't quite know what to do next without him around to tell her. A glance down at her T-shirt and exercise pants rekindled her plan to go for a walk. She'd feel better after a walk.

Outside, it was no longer raining, but the air was still nice and cool. She tried to pretend everything was normal. Walking down unfamiliar streets toward the town center they had driven through earlier, she absentmindedly rubbed her forearms. They had cramped earlier from the recoil of shooting Meiser, or maybe just from gripping the gun so tightly.

She tried to free her mind of all the stress building up around her, focusing on counting each division between the sidewalk squares. But without warning, Todd Meiser's desperate pleas came rushing back, filling her mind. Up until the last minute, she wasn't sure if she would go through with killing him. Even as she parked her car a block away and snuck into his backyard, even as she crept into his kitchen, she still wasn't sure. But then he convinced her she had no choice.

As soon as he saw her standing in his doorway with the gun, he knew exactly why she was there. And he didn't want to die. He begged her not to kill him. "Please. Please don't do it. I didn't see anything," he insisted. And when she came closer, gripping the gun with all her might lest it drop from her shaking, sweating hands, he kept on pleading with her, sounding more desperate, more stricken with each second. "I won't testify. I promise. I'll just forget everything I saw, and I'll disappear, somewhere far away, where no one will ever find me. I won't tell. I promise I won't tell."

Yeah, right. As if she believed him.

Danny hadn't been lying. Todd Meiser *had* seen her. He knew what she had done. Which meant they all did. And it sounded like he'd already formulated a plan to tell the authorities.

Beth shivered. Thank goodness she had gotten to him first.

She was so freaked out when she left his house, she didn't even think to steal anything. She'd barely noticed her surroundings and couldn't even recall anything about his home. But the image of his desperate eyes and the sound of his begging—those were seared into her memory.

Her thoughts were jerked back into the present when a man and woman around her age blocked the entire sidewalk by holding hands with fully extended arms. Instead of walking around them, Beth stopped to watch. The woman peered into a furniture store window without letting go of him, then laughed as he twirled her around and into his arms. They kissed. It seemed to happen in slow motion, like a scene from a movie. The couple reminded Beth of Jason and Kelly Smith. Those foolish lovebirds now had every reason to appreciate their last few days. Too bad for them, they didn't know those days were numbered, but it didn't seem to matter. They'd acted unrealistically happy every time she saw them.

Beth pretended she was also interested in the strange contemporary art chairs in the display window while she thought about the Smiths and spied on the hand-holding couple out of the corner of her eye. A pang of jealousy struck her, followed by a deep sadness, a hard pit forming inside her stomach. Her life could have been like that of the smiling woman in front of her. Wait—it still could be. It wasn't too late. But it was never going to happen if she went to jail.

The door to a café opened and a family exited together. A little girl held her mother's hand, both wore matching yellow sun dresses. Beth wove around them, past a souvenir shop, a coffee store, and a donut store. In front of her, someone held the pink, brown and orange waxed bag she remembered from when she was young. Her father used to bring home bagels and coffee for him and her mother and donuts for Beth and her sister. Strawberry frosted with sprinkles used to be her favorite. Every Sunday he did this, to make up for his binge drinking the night before, until he left them for good.

Without thinking, she stopped and backtracked into the store, looking over her shoulder. Brightly lit bins of colorful donuts filled the shelves. She scanned each neat row. Blueberry cake, nine of them. Double chocolate, eight. Boston Krème, seven. Powdered Sugar, thirteen. There were no strawberry frosted donuts on the shelves. Maybe the donut store didn't make them anymore.

"What can I get you?" asked the unsmiling, acne-ridden boy behind the counter.

"Two double chocolate." She peeled a folded bill out of her jacket pocket and handed it over in exchange for the donut bag. She moved to a corner booth and sat down with her back to the rest of the store. Removing the first donut from the bag, she stared at it before finally taking a small bite, savoring the sweet richness. The next bite was bigger. She chewed faster, counting. Four chews, a swallow, and a bite. Four chews, a swallow, and a bite. All of it happening with a mechanical efficiency as if she had been given a maximum amount of time to consume the food.

The second donut didn't taste as good as the first. She gulped it down with a furtive glance toward the door. She was almost finished with it when Danny's barking smashed her reverie. "What

the hell are you doing here?"

The remaining donut dropped from her hand and onto the table. She stared at it as heat flooded her face. "You're following me?"

"Do you have any self-control? You have a job to do. Get to it. Before they get away and you can't even find them."

"I know what I'm doing," she hissed. A fat man in a navy-blue T-shirt with Munchkins and a large coffee stared at her, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, yeah?" Danny laughed, a mean sounding huffing noise. "How long do you think a body can stay in the woods before it starts to smell?"

An uncomfortable electric current shot through her brain again, just like it had in the hotel bathroom. Beth jumped out of her chair and ran toward the ladies' restroom, counting her strides. The fat man watched her run past.

"Don't run away from me," Danny yelled after her.

She locked the door and crouched down on the dirty cement floor in front of the toilet. She gagged once. Twice. The third gag released a hot lumpy torrent of brown processed carbs.

She gasped and tried to catch her breath. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she slumped down on the dirty floor, her face hot and clammy, an irritating vibration occurring inside her, like she'd drunk one too many Red Bulls. Her breath came in hitching gasps. She shuddered and dropped her sweaty head back against the wall, letting her knees rest against the toilet. Her esophagus burned, and the taste of vomit repulsed her.

*I hate you, Danny.*







BETH HURRIED BACK TO the Vista View hotel, focused on what she needed to do next. Danny wasn't there. She brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth before her stomach acid ate its way through her tooth enamel and she needed to visit the dentist again. So much for the walk making her feel better. She hadn't set out to eat donuts and vomit, but hey, she hadn't set out to become a killer either. *Look at me now! Ha!* She laughed aloud, without the slightest sense that anything was funny. *I may be a killer, but I'm not going to jail.*

After a bit of research on the internet—two YouTube videos on how to load a gun—Beth took the weapon apart. She filled the magazine with new bullets, painfully pinching her finger somehow during the process. Seeing the gun in pieces made her temporarily vulnerable, but it had to be done to make sure it was full. She wasn't going to be like the dumb asses in horror movies who walked away from their kill before it was really dead. Those who didn't or couldn't finish the job almost always ended up being sorry. The magazine slid back into place with a loud click. She sighed with relief. *Good work.* Using a tissue, she scraped a sticky dark splotch from the muzzle. Danny's gun was quickly becoming her good friend.

Without changing her clothes, she grabbed her laptop and keys and hurried back to her car, hoping to avoid Danny. She drove back to the same spot they had parked in last night. She would wait. It would only be a matter of time before someone came out. Had to be. She'd done her research.

Only a few empty spaces separated her from the Smiths' shiny red Jeep, waiting dutifully and somehow looking as irritatingly cheerful as its owners. Kelly Smith hadn't posted anything else yesterday, not since sharing a picture of her fresh manicure, a deep dark purple, almost black, with tiny silver moons on two of her nails. Maybe Jason had bombed his sales pitch and Kelly just wasn't in the mood to pretend their life was one big, happy, romantic adventure. Because no one's was. But from what Beth had seen of the Smiths, they were doing a commendable job fooling everyone. And it had to be an act, didn't it? Or were they still in bed, holding hands, legs intertwined, snuggling under the covers after making love? Was Jason whispering in a sexy voice that she was the only woman for him? The only woman he needed? The only woman he would ever love? Were they so happy they didn't even notice that the hotel was a dump?

Beth cringed, scrunching up her nose in disgust. Even with the windows down, the pungent smell of her unwashed body wafted through the car. Wishing she had showered, she gnawed at her cuticles one finger at a time until she drew blood. She frowned and closed her hand into a fist, as if that could repair the ragged mess. Danny would find something nasty to say about it. Oh yeah...she didn't care what Danny thought any more. To hell with him. She stretched out her fingers, the flaking pink polish in dire need of a fresh coat. She smiled. Killing each witness may have been his idea originally, but she was the one doing it now.

Lucky for her, the Sonesta Hotel hadn't been booked to capacity and the back side was barely occupied.

*What's wrong, people? The Sonesta isn't your cup of tea? Was it the ugly carpets? The lobby from the seventies? Afraid you'll go the way of Jack Torrance in the The Shining when you get there? No reason to worry...it's only me following in his footsteps. Just me. Jason and Kelly Smith are having a fricking second honeymoon in there...I'm the only one sitting alone in my car, counting the seconds, counting the future corpses, and waiting to kill the next person on my list.*

*One down, six to go.*

She viewed her surroundings. The parking lot was quiet. She was still alone. Sighing, she woke up her cell and pressed the news icon. Her feed contained mostly national headlines—politics and more politics, Russia, China, trials for people whose names she recognized but nothing more, food recalls, accusations against politicians—articles she'd never cared about and never would. She read about one celebrity's suicide and another's overdose, then moved on, tapping and swiping and occasionally looking up, until a story grabbed her undivided attention. She stopped chewing on her nails and bit down on the tip of her finger, holding it tight between her teeth as she read the headline written to grab everyone's attention—*Homicide in broad daylight, victim shot inside his own kitchen!*

Todd Meiser had been found.

Beth smiled, and wished Danny was there to witness her achievement. She played the accompanying video, staring intently at the image of Meiser's street lined with police cruisers, a television station van, two black SUVs, and a crowd of spectators. The scene was jumping with activity, a whole lot busier than earlier in the day.

The camera honed in on two people wearing gray suits and white shirts. They were walking away from Meiser's house. The woman was very pretty, but there was also a steely determination in her eyes, a seriousness that said, "don't mess with me or you'll be sorry." Her eyes drew Beth in like magnets. She was slim but muscular with flawless skin, perfect eyebrows, and a pert nose; one that had never been broken like Beth's. Her silky, shoulder length blonde hair parted to one side.

The handsome man beside her had short dark hair and a chiseled chin. If he tore off his shirt and posed, he could grace the cover of one of Beth's steamy romance novels. The couple stood a few feet away from each other while the female reporter asked them a question. The blonde introduced herself and Mr. Sexy as Agent Victoria Heslin and Agent Dante Rivera.

*Agents?*

The reporter asked them what they had found inside the house. She looked excited and sounded almost breathless. And all because of Beth.

Beth leaned forward, absorbing every bit of the scene. This was all about her! They were all gathered there because of her. The reporter wanted to tell the world what she'd done. What would the agents say? What did they think about Todd Meiser's death? Did they find any clues? That last thought wiped a bit of the grin from her face.

The agents said nothing about what they had discovered inside, nothing at all, although they were professional and polite and sure looked damn good doing it, and then it seemed the interview was cut short as the reporter asked another question.

That was it? Really? That was all they had to share? Perhaps they just needed more time before they could tell people what they found. And anyway, why was the FBI there? Didn't they only get called to work special cases?

Beth watched the video again, this time focusing more on Agent Rivera. He had a tough edge to match his hard body and projected a comfortable confidence in his suit, but it was something about the way he watched his partner that caused a stir deep inside her. A pang of . . . what was it . . . longing? She recognized what she'd seen in him. Something that was sorely lacking in her life, but she still knew it when she saw it. He cared about that woman. It was obvious. Did Agent Heslin feel the same about him?

She played the short video clip two more times, scrutinizing the agents. FBI agent—that was an unusual occupation for a woman. Beth felt a kindred spirit with Agent Heslin. They were both

special. Even if Beth didn't have anyone to tell her so. Even if Danny sometimes went above and beyond to tell her otherwise. She and Agent Heslin even looked a little alike. They both had blonde hair. Beth's came from a box at Walmart, but that didn't matter.

Beth unzipped her purse and fished around for her comb. After combing her hair forward, she changed her part from the middle to the side. Turning her head right and left, she studied herself in the rear-view mirror, eventually tucking her hair behind her left ear just like Agent Heslin. With one last glance at her new look, she settled back against the driver's seat and shut off her phone. But images of the agents replayed in her mind.

The air inside the car was stagnant and stale. She opened the windows to let in some cold, fresh air, started the engine and the heat to counter the chill, and plugged her phone charger into the cigarette lighter. She fiddled with one of the studs on the top of her ear, twirling it until it started to hurt. Bored, she typed Agent Victoria Heslin into her browser and opened the agent's FBI profile and headshot. She was really beautiful. And obviously smart. You could see it in her eyes. No wonder Agent Sexy respected her. And a Georgetown grad. Fancy, fancy. There wasn't much else in the profile. She closed out and returned to the other links, opening one that intrigued her.

*Well, what do you know! Who would have thunk it!*

Victoria Heslin, the lovely FBI agent, was also the daughter of Gardener and "the late" Abigail Heslin and heir to the massive Heslin family fortune. Beth huffed at their elegant picture, a beautiful family with one of those tall skinny hounds on each side. The mother, daughter, and the son all had the same golden blonde hair. The father was handsome, with a strong jaw and an air of importance to him. His thick silver hair had probably been cut and his face shaved in one of those salons for rich guys. Their smiles were relaxed and self-assured. Like it was nothing to be part of this strikingly beautiful family, dressed and groomed to sophistication, perfectly posed, right down to the dogs. Nothing at all.

Beth sneered. Agent Heslin was damn lucky.

But now the mother, Abigail, who didn't look very old, was dead. Why? But even more interesting than that question, she wondered what compelled Agent Victoria Heslin to track down criminals if she didn't even have to work. Earlier that very morning, when Beth fled through Todd Meiser's front door, doing her best to choke back the overwhelming urge to vomit, Todd had looked like something straight out of a gory horror flick. Who would choose to visit dirty, disgusting crime scenes day after day, buzzing with flies crawling on corpses and stinking of blood and puke and urine? Who'd do that when they could be sipping a piña colada on daddy's yacht in the Caribbean?

Beth shook her head and stretched out her fingers, gazing through the window. What would she do if she were rich like that? If she could do anything at all and didn't have to scramble to make ends meet? Inhaling deeply through her nose, she let her imagination run wild. First, she'd make up a new identity. Disappear completely. And once she got there—massages. Definitely. Swedish massages every week, maybe every other day. And facials. And vacations at luxurious resorts surrounded by celebrities. She'd get a new nose, a perfect nose like Victoria Heslin. And a new car. One with valid license plates so she didn't have to constantly worry. She slapped the steering wheel. This piece of crap would be the first thing she'd leave behind. After Danny, that is. Unless he wanted to come with her.

An older man and woman exited through the front entrance, jolting her from her daydream. The Cossmans, room 383, on their way to an afternoon hike with their two mangy little fur balls. They'd told their families and friends as much on Facebook, right above yesterday's image of them smiling with a waterfall as the backdrop. Hands full with bags and water bottles, they crossed the parking lot,

their faces animated as they alternated speaking and smiling. At least they would die happy. If they really were. Who really knew just how many times Robert Cossman had betrayed his wife when they were younger. Beth didn't know he had, but she didn't know he hadn't.

After both dogs walked in ridiculous circles and peed, and after the couple took their sweet time arranging stuff inside their Subaru Outback, they were on the move. Beth started her car and pulled out of the lot after them.

As expected, after a few miles, their little SUV made a left from the business road, onto a long, winding country road with gradually increasing elevation. They drove past picturesque farms, and rustic barns, and fields of fat cows grazing on grass made exceptionally green by the recent rains. How far away *was* this National Park place? Beth grimaced. All of it smelled like manure. She'd never been an outdoorsy person.

Would Agent Heslin and her handsome partner be the ones called to the scene once someone found the Cossmans? Beth sure hoped so. Perhaps she should leave a message for Heslin. The idea intrigued her. But what should she say?

Beating a red light by a fraction of a second, the Cossmans drove straight through a small-town intersection. Beth flexed her foot, about to ram the gas, noticed the police cruiser on the other side, and slammed on the brakes instead.

"Damn it!" She drummed her fingers against the dashboard. *Two, four, six, eight, two four, six, eight . . .* "Come on. Come on. I can't lose them."

She had to keep herself from going to jail, she had something big to prove, and now she had a new, added purpose. If she wanted to get to know Agent Heslin better, she had to hurry up and create another crime scene.





VICTORIA AND RIVERA walked toward their boss's office. The Butler case constituted years of work and it was almost over, or so Victoria had thought. Figuring out how to keep it from going under with one less witness would become one of her boss's priorities. Victoria wasn't looking forward to briefing him.

"Don't you two make the perfect couple." A fellow agent smiled at them.

"Yeah, well, I called him this morning to see what we should wear." Victoria laughed, but inside she was doing her best to be tolerant. Her colleagues' attentions sometimes bordered on immature. Maybe that's what stress did to them.

The only door with an embossed plaque—Larry Murphy, Special Agent in Charge—jerked open. Head down, wearing cowboy boots under his jeans, Murphy and his military posture marched into the shared space in the middle of the building, carrying his ever-present Georgia Bulldogs insulated thermos. Victoria wasn't sure if the thermos ever got washed but attempts to replace it at Christmas with a newer model had not fared well. Murphy claimed his conviction rate went up to ninety-five percent after he got it. He wasn't messing with that sort of luck.

"I don't need this right now." Murphy pushed his rolled shirtsleeves up over muscled arms as he paced around the other agents' desks, speaking to no one in particular. A former drill sergeant, he liked to think out loud and he wasn't particularly considerate of others' space or concentration. He spotted Heslin and Rivera. "Agents, in my office, please." He slapped Rivera on the shoulder and corralled them forward.

Rivera and Heslin entered his office and stood on one side of his large desk. "Tell me Todd Meiser isn't really dead. Because that's what I want to hear. I want you to tell me that he's in the ICU right now and pretty soon he's going to be able to think and speak even if we have to wheel him into the courtroom on life support."

Rivera shook his head. "Isn't it still a crime to lie to FBI personnel?"

Murphy chewed on his lip. "Too many people are already breathing down my neck about this." He ran a hand over his buzz cut like he was pressing his scalp into place. "We've got too many other things going on for this case to implode after years of putting it together. It's not going to happen." He stared at each agent. "We're going to make damn sure it doesn't."

Every time Murphy opened his mouth, Victoria caught a distracting glimpse of dark green on one of his front teeth. Lettuce? That meant he was eating greens, even if it was just a few leaves on top of his hamburger, and something she didn't want to discourage. Not that he wasn't fit, he kept himself in great shape, but he was known to ignore the fruit and vegetable food groups. She wouldn't mention it. Somehow, it would disappear on its own. When Murphy paused to breathe, she seized the opportunity to get a few words in. "Meiser's death didn't seem like a professional hit. There were a few things that didn't feel right about it. It was careless, for one. He had the word 'liar' and the number two written on his forehead and—"

Murphy interrupted her mid-sentence. "The Butler case goes to trial in three days. Three days. Of course it's a hit. Writing 'liar' on his head—the Butlers are sending a clear message that Meiser's testimony is fabricated. Which is BS." Murphy wrung his hands, his eyes roaming from the pile of papers on his desk to the agents.

Rivera opened his mouth, but Murphy cut him off, too.

“So, do we want to know exactly who pulled the trigger on Meiser?” He pushed some papers aside and snatched one.

“Yes—”

“Of course we do. But is it more important than making sure the rest of the witnesses are safe?”

“No—”

“Of course it’s not. I’ve already put protection on them. That’s the first thing I did when I got the call on Meiser. Would have had it on them all along if the damn budget had allowed. Believe me, I asked.”

“So—”

“But the rest of them, we’re not going to let any of them even take a crap alone. I want eyes on all of them. Local PD is going to lend us a few bodies.” He lifted his eyes toward the ceiling. “We’ll see if they actually do.” He pointed his finger from Rivera to Heslin. “And the two of you will split up and do a shift tonight. I already made a schedule.” Murphy narrowed his eyes at the paper in his hand.

Victoria rushed to share her thoughts. “The reason I think Meiser was—”

She wasn’t fast enough. Murphy went on as if she’d never spoken. “For now, go inform Meiser’s family. That brother. The only one who seems to have his head on straight. Get a sense of how angry he might be, see if he blames us. See if he knows anything we should know—about anything. Threats, that sort of thing. I want evidence to add this murder to the charges against Butler.”

Victoria nodded. They would need more proof before speaking to Murphy again about something he didn’t want to hear. He was definitely stressed out. In the meantime, it wouldn’t hurt to have law enforcement watching the other witnesses.

On her way back to the parking garage with Rivera, she reviewed her mental notes. Sometimes, with hits for hire, the victim’s body disappeared, never to be seen again. Other times, the body was left on display, arranged as a brutal message of what happened to those who fell out of favor or displeased the wrong person. Professional hits were often executed with precision and grace, a testament to the killer’s skills, because practice made perfect. Todd Meiser’s murder was devoid of skill and caution. Yet . . . every hitman had to start somewhere. And if the killer was a novice, they had a good chance of catching him or her with forensic evidence. But . . . if the killer was a hitman, he had more than likely been contracted by Raymond Butler or one of his associates. And if anyone had options that included experienced hit men, Raymond and his guys did. Victoria rubbed her chin, bothered by the apparent contradiction. If it was a hit, it didn’t appear to be ordered by Butler. And it wasn’t a robbery, not with the keys to a luxury vehicle sitting in plain view on the counter. So what was it?

Rivera slid behind the wheel of a black sedan and dropped his container of spearmint gum in the center console. Victoria slid her leather backpack off her shoulder and lowered herself into the passenger seat next to him. “Lots of things are odd about this.” She waited until Rivera put the car in gear and backed it out before continuing. “The blindfold for one. Like the killer felt guilty and didn’t want Todd to look at him. Professional hit men don’t usually feel guilty, do they? The woman’s scarf, that was odd, too. Someone is trying to confuse us, or . . . they have no idea what they are doing.”

“Or both.” Rivera flipped his sun visor down as they exited the garage, even though the sun wasn’t shining. “Hope James Meiser hasn’t listened to the news yet.”

Todd’s older brother owned his own accounting practice. They located his office inside a brick building full of small, professional businesses and waited for ten minutes until his client left before gently breaking the news of his brother’s murder.

James Meiser leaned back in his chair as the wind went out of him, his shoulders slumping as he closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. His voice shook as he spoke. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but . . ." He swallowed hard. "Butler." His eyes went to Victoria's. "You have to stop that guy."

"It's possible Butler was involved."

"Possible! Come on. Who are we kidding here?"

Rivera leaned forward in the office chair. "We'll explore all angles. The Medical Examiner and a forensic team will look into everything. We'll let you know what they find."

James placed his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "Toddy." Reaching for a tissue, he coughed then wiped his nose. "I guess you're saying you want me to wait to make funeral arrangements."

"Yes. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions now?" Rivera removed his notepad from his coat pocket.

"Of course not." James closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. "But you catch the bastard who did this. Butler or not, you get this guy."

Rivera gripped his pen. "When did you last see Todd?"

James shook his head, scanning the desk top. "Oh, I haven't seen him in weeks. Not since the last time he visited our mother. But I spoke to him yesterday. I called him. I just arranged palliative care for our mother. She has terminal cancer. I had some things I needed to tell him. Oh, God." He covered his eyes with his hand. "Now I have to tell her Todd is dead."

"I'm sorry about your mother, James," Rivera said. "Did you and Todd talk about anything else?"

"Yes." James sighed loudly. "Nothing I would mention under normal circumstances, but this isn't normal, so I'll throw it out there. Todd said he was meeting an . . . escort."

*Bingo*, Victoria thought.

"A prostitute?" Rivera asked.

"Yeah." James kept his eyes lowered.

Rivera opened his notepad and made a note. "Is that a habit for him?"

"It wasn't his first . . . appointment. I gave him a hard time about it, but now I suppose I'm glad he lived it up before he died. He had a lot of stress, you know, with the case. It was eating him up. Or—wait, when did you say he was killed? I mean, could she have . . .?"

"He was shot around ten this morning. Someone heard the gunshot. Do you know who he called? Was there a service, or—?"

"No. I don't know. Sorry."

"Did he say where he was meeting her? Would she have come to his house?"

"I don't know. I have no idea how it's done." He let out a sad sort of snort. "My brother and I led very different lives."

"Do you know who Todd may have been seeing—a significant other?" Victoria asked.

"He never mentioned one to me. I mean, if he did, why would he be calling a prostitute?"

"No angry girlfriend, upset about him seeing hookers?" Rivera asked.

"I—like I said, I just don't know." James ran his hand over his head.

"Did he mention receiving any threats? Specific threats?" Victoria asked.

"No. But it's pretty obvious why someone wanted him dead."

"I'm very sorry for your loss." Victoria met James' gaze. "Sorry Todd won't have the chance to live a different life." She got up from the chair. "We plan to catch whoever did this to him. We'll keep in touch."



James Meiser led both agents to his office door and shut it behind them. They walked to the car and got in before speaking again.

“I’ll call Sam, so we can establish a time line for Todd Meiser’s last few days with his phone and credit card records.” Victoria tossed her bag into the back seat. “I think there has to be a girlfriend. But we also need to find out who he arranged to meet last night. Maybe she stayed into the next day.”

“A woman does fit with the bloody shoe prints we saw.” Rivera started the engine and a second later, his phone rang. “It’s the boss.”

“What now?” Victoria murmured. “Impatient for our update?”

Rivera pressed the answer button.

“Where are you?” Murphy’s voice would have carried through the car even if the phone wasn’t on speaker.

“We’re just leaving James Meiser’s place.” Rivera merged the car into traffic.

“I’m about to text you something.”

“What is it?”

“The address of a double homicide. It’s an elderly couple. Both dead at the scene. No idea who they are yet.”

“And you’re giving it to us because—?”

“Gunshot wounds. The numbers three and four on their foreheads. And another message.”





NED PARKED HIS SUV in front of PawTiques, the all-organic pet store. He could have ordered everything Victoria wanted for less online, but Victoria preferred to support local businesses. He attached Izzy's leash and went inside. He walked straight to the shelves with the supplements and grabbed what he needed.

Wearing a tight, V-neck T-shirt, the beautiful young girl at the register leaned over the counter. "Hi, Ned."

"Hmm? Oh, hi Jenny." Ned scanned the bakery shelf. It was filled with dog treats people would want to eat. "I'll take seven of those frosted things."

"Oh! I love that dog. Which one is that?" The girl pressed her palm against her cheek and smiled at Ned.

"Izzy. She's a good dog."

"She's a greyhound, right?" She moistened her lips and ran a hand through her hair.

"A galga. A Spanish greyhound."

"Can I pet her?"

"Uh, sure."

The girl walked around to the front of the counter and crouched next to him. The light, floral aroma of nice soap and fragrant shampoo filled the air. While she stroked Izzy, she looked up, batting her eyes. "Oh! So cute!"

Ned stepped back and nodded. If Jenny was of legal drinking age, she was just barely. "So, how much do I owe?"

After the store he ran with Izzy on the greenway, filled his truck with gas, and stopped at Lowe's to pick up some wiring to patch up a hole he'd seen in a fence on Victoria's property. She hadn't asked him to do it, but he wanted to anyway.

When he returned to Victoria's house, the red hatchback delivering for Farm Fresh Meals stopped at the main entrance in front of him. Ned pulled up next to the car and got out of his SUV.

"Hey, Kristin? Right?"

"Oh, hi, Ned."

"I'm on my way in." He gestured toward the gate. "I'll take that from you."

"Great." She got out of her car and removed a large insulated bag from the back. "Here you go. We put in extra of the root veggies Victoria liked. And the French cobbler. Could you be sure to tell her? I know she doesn't always get a chance to eat what we prepare."

"I'll tell her. No worries about the food. It's all appreciated and none of it ever goes to waste." He patted his stomach and grinned.

"Good." Kristin smiled and kept staring at him like she was in no hurry to leave.

"See ya." Ned got back in his truck and placed the bag of food on the passenger seat. Izzy jumped into the front and stuck her nose into the bag. Ned pushed her back. "Not for you." He waved at Kristin, opened the gate, and drove through.

Entering through the back door, he stopped to size himself up in the hall mirror. He had to bend his knees, since the mirror hadn't been hung for someone six-feet-two. All his time training outside over the summer had turned his brown hair golden.

In the kitchen, he opened his laptop and logged his run. He'd swim tonight and bike early tomorrow, putting his training right on track for the upcoming triathlon. He was ready to refuel in a big way, but the dogs would eat first.

He dug his hands into the giant container of raw lean beef, vegetables, rice, and vitamin supplements, kneading the moist mixture until it was evenly distributed. He scooped measured amounts into labeled bowls and added some premium dog food. Eddie stuck his nose on the counter. "Excited, buddy?" Ned laughed as they danced around him, spinning and leaping in attempts to earn their food quicker.

Working for Victoria wasn't a huge challenge, but he thoroughly enjoyed his job and it left him with more free time than he would have working anywhere else. Two afternoons a week he was able to volunteer as a vet at a not-for-profit clinic for low income people. As long as he stayed with Victoria, he could continue to pay off his graduate school loans faster than he had ever previously imagined *and* help pet owners who otherwise might not be able to afford care.

And then there was Victoria.

He smiled.

The dogs inhaled their food in seconds, barely chewing. By the time he set down the last bowl, he was back to collecting the first and depositing them all back in the dishwasher.

After cleaning up, he walked outside and sat down on the back patio. Absentmindedly rubbing Eddie's ears, he gazed out over the back of the property. The whole set up never ceased to amaze him—the acreage and trails, the agility course, a pool just for the dogs—it was like a canine Disneyland. He had an entire wing for himself—a "nanny suite"—bigger by far than his own condominium. He stayed there when Victoria went out of town. But when she came home, he left.

It was hard to keep his thoughts from turning to Victoria. There were just too many reasons to admire her. She worked hard every day to rid the world of trouble, make it an easier place for others to live in. Who would ever imagine someone with her privileges and background wanting to do that? She once told him that being the recipient of a huge trust fund was simple but incredible luck but being an FBI agent was an earned honor. He agreed and his respect for her went through the roof. He'd tried to ignore his daydreams of running his hands through her hair, kissing her . . . but they were only growing, along with his determination. Not a one of his friends would ever say that he wasn't determined. He had six ironman triathlon finishes to prove it.

His phone rang.

"Hey, baby brother. Just calling to see if you can come over on Tuesday night. My friend Katie is in town visiting. She's smart and adorable."

"Can't. I have plans."

"What sort of plans? Actual going out plans or more of babysitting those dogs?"

"I'm going out to dinner with my boss to talk about our trip to Spain."

"Ah. All my joking aside, don't mess things up. You've got a great thing going there. If you're happy that is."

"Yeah. I know. But would it be so bad if we shared a bottle of wine and ended up—"

"Are you paying attention to the world right now? She could accuse you of sexual harassment, fire you, and try and sue you just for—"

Ned laughed. "She's not like that."

"Look, you can have wine with Katie and me. I've got a case I brought back from vacation that I'm excited to share. How about we switch it to Sunday afternoon instead? Brunch?"

"All right, all right."

“If there’s ever going to be something between you and your boss, you need to let her make the first pass. And make sure it’s loud and clear. That’s all I’m saying. And you’d be wise to listen to me and take my advice whenever you are so lucky as to receive it.”

He chuckled. “I know. I’m not going to do anything stupid. But if she ever makes a pass at me . . .”

“She’s crazy not to be madly in love with you by now, so maybe she’s not quite—”

Ned laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with her. She just doesn’t get close to many people.” He thought about the one time he’d asked Victoria about her mother’s death. Her reaction had given him all the information he’d needed for an armchair diagnosis of intimacy issues. “But, hey, I will take your advice.”

“Good because I’d never steer you wrong. Love you, Ned. Gotta go.”

“Love you, Lori.”

What would it take to change Victoria’s mind about him? Would she ever come home at the end of the day and be as excited about seeing him as she was about her dogs?

He had to tread carefully. And be patient. Victoria was worth whatever it might take.





VICTORIA SETTLED BACK against the leather seat, watching the road ahead. “I can’t believe there was a murder on the Triple Falls trail. It’s a popular hiking destination.”

Rivera draped his arm over the top of the steering wheel. “Wonder who got killed.”

“Murphy said ‘older couple’. I interviewed a witness from one of Butler’s warehouses awhile back, can’t remember his name now, but he was on the old side. Maybe his wife was with him. What a shame.” She tapped her phone. “I still need to call Sam.”

Rivera stayed silent while Victoria spoke to one of their intelligence analysts, Sam, her favorite person in the office because he was always polite and pleasant, no matter that everyone’s requests came in as emergencies. He was ideally suited to weather the ongoing stress in the office.

“What can I do for you?” Sam asked, as if he was idling his time when in reality, he was multi-tasking for a dozen agents.

She updated him on the murder scene and asked for information on Todd Meiser’s phone records and anything to help them identify the prostitute James Meiser mentioned.

“I’m on it. You be safe out there.” Even over the phone, his smile traveled through his words.

Knowing Sam would get back to her soon, she ended the call and slid her finger down her phone screen, searching through her mail. “Nothing from forensics yet.” She set her phone down against her leg and looked at Rivera. “What do you think the message at this crime scene says?”

“We’ll find out soon enough. You always hike alone?”

“Me and my dogs. And my pistol.” She patted the holster at her side.

“And you get cell reception in those woods?”

She grinned. “Sometimes.” She knew he worried about her. She was lucky they had been assigned to work together increasingly more often lately. Rivera could be gruff. He was a man of few words. Nothing wrong with that. On the contrary, sometimes working with him was almost as good as being alone.

“We’re almost there. I just have to make a quick call.” She pressed the contact button for Ned. After a few seconds, she said, “Hey Ned, it’s me again. So, I’m going to have to work over night. Can you stay?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks. Something came up. It might last a few nights, but I’ll keep you posted on my schedule as soon as I know.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

“I will. I’ve got to go. Thanks again.”

Rivera tightened his grip on the wheel. “So, whenever you tell Ned to stay at your house, he’s automatically available?”

“Yes. Because it’s part of his job.” Why did Rivera sound condescending? Her unpredictable schedule was the reason she paid Ned a salary that exceeded her own. He was always expected to be on call. “To do my job well—”

“Which you do—”

“I need to know my dogs are well cared for. Most of them were rescued from horrific situations.”

“I know.”

“So he’s essentially expected to be on call 24/7. And if that’s so ridiculous, then why have we pretty much signed up to do the same?”

Rivera’s face broke into a smile. “Touché.”

The agents drove in silence past scenic farms. Victoria stared out her window, taking in the scenery in a way she hadn’t on previous trips with her dogs, because she had always been alone and driving. The rolling acres and white fences made her think of her mother, mainly her mother’s love for dogs and horses—all animals, really. If only she’d said yes to more hikes with her mother when she’d been alive. With a sigh, she switched mindsets, reviewing every detail of the scene at Todd Meiser’s house. And then somehow, she sensed Rivera was looking at her, even as he drove.

“What?” She fiddled with the buttons on the dashboard, turning down the heat and having it blow out only from the bottom vents.

“Nothing.”

“Think these crimes are related?” She grabbed her bag and found an elastic band in the inside pocket.

“Yes.” He grimaced. “Unless a group of psychos sent out a memo with a special signature for today.”

“Let’s hope that’s not what’s going on here.” Victoria gathered her hair back and fastened it into a ponytail.

“Meiser’s death reminded me of something, but I’m not sure what. Like I had a déjà vu when I first saw him on his floor.”

“Another case? Was it the blindfold? The number on his forehead?”

Rivera shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Well, we’ve got a two, a three, and a four so far. I’m wondering if there’s a number one out there that we haven’t found yet.”

Rivera frowned. “I was thinking the same.”

Victoria peered out the window at downed trees from last night’s storm. The forest had thickened, marked by an occasional trail entrance. “Okay, the parking area is coming up soon. It’s not well marked and easy to miss.”

Rivera slowed down. Victoria leaned forward. “There!”

Two giant stone pillars marked the entrance to the gravel lot. A news van was parked near two police cruisers and a sheriff’s car.

“Oh, jeez,” Victoria said, unfastening her seat belt. “They got here before us.”

Rivera parked, and the agents opened their car doors. Amanda Jones rushed toward them as if running from a fire.

“What do you think is the chance of them holding on to the information about Todd Meiser, like we requested?” Victoria asked as she shut the car door.

“Are you kidding?” Rivera formed a zero with his thumb and middle finger.

Murphy’s car squealed into a nearby spot and stopped with a lurch.

Amanda flipped her long hair carefully over her shoulders, framing her face. She was still catching her breath when she spoke, which added to the drama of the scene her sidekick was recording. “Two homicides in one day, Agents? What’s the story? Can you tell us anything about the double murder on the Triple Falls Trail? Is there an unknown killer on the loose?”

Rivera stepped to the side and Victoria answered. “We just arrived, and what we know we can’t disclose at this time. But as soon as we have information we can share with the public, you’ll be the



first to know. If you don't mind waiting here in the parking lot, we'll be sure to give you something you can broadcast when we're done here."

"Fair enough. Thank you." Amanda continued to walk alongside them, the video still rolling.

With an angry expression, Murphy edged between the agents and Amanda, essentially bumping Victoria out of his way. Victoria stepped backward and almost stumbled over something on the ground. Rivera's arm shot out to support her. She steadied herself and mouthed "thank you."

Murphy barked at the reporter and videographer. "I'm the SAC on this case. You can't be here. This is an active crime scene. You need to leave." Holding on to his jacket, he raised his arm, pointing to the parking lot exit.

"Agent Heslin said we could wait here until you've finished your investigation. We won't go beyond the area that's been taped off."

Murphy glared in Victoria's direction, then glared at Amanda. He shook his finger toward the main road, causing his jacket to wave up and down beneath it. "Leave. Now."

Victoria offered a discreet apologetic look to the reporter and camera man, who retreated back toward their van. After all, they were only trying to do their jobs. And if there was any danger, the public had a right to know about it as soon as possible so they could take proper precautions. Like not go hiking for a few days until they figured out what had happened here.

There were three other cars in the parking lot, a Honda Odyssey, a Toyota 4-Runner, and a Subaru Outback. Their owners could be in danger, or, one of the cars might belong to the killer, still hiding somewhere in the woods.

"I'll get the plates." It only took a few seconds for Victoria to take pictures of the makes, models, and plates. Rivera waited for her, eyes roaming the area.

The trail ahead had been cordoned off with crime scene tape. A young female deputy guarded the opening.

Putting on his FBI jacket, Murphy spoke to the officer. "How far up the path are they?"

"Not far."

Murphy ducked under the police tape. "Make sure to keep everyone off the trail, especially the media."

The deputy nodded. "I've already had to turn a few people away. They weren't happy,"

"There are trails on the other side of the main road, about a half mile up. Maybe you can direct them there." As soon as Victoria said the words, she wanted to take them back. What if the killer was still out there? She scanned the area, looking for people. "Watch your back, okay?" she said to the deputy as they passed her.

Murphy led the way, grumbling, "my team is losing right now because I forgot to wear my lucky shirt."

"Did you forget last week, too?" Rivera asked, grinning.

"I'm not in the mood," Murphy said, checking his watch. "Three murders in one morning tend to do that to me. I'm supposed to go to my kid's chorus concert tonight. I swear the school moved this thing to the weekend because of my wife's insistence. She wants me there. I've got to leave here before five."

A short walk up the trail, Murphy sauntered up to the Sheriff and put his hand on his shoulder. He introduced himself and his agents to the two other male officers crowding the trail. One of them stepped back, nudged the other, and whispered something. They both looked at Victoria and grinned.

Victoria ignored them and focused on two panting dogs that were tied to a nearby tree. It wasn't warm. They were stressed. They stood alert in their matching leash and collar sets, protecting their

owners, who also weren't going anywhere. A surge of anger mixed with compassion temporarily distracted Victoria. She forced down her emotions and turned her attention away from the dogs and to their owners. This job was one of the ways she could make a difference in a world with too many awful people, too many awful circumstances.

The bodies of a man and a woman were sprawled across the dirt path. In their sixties or seventies, both had silver hair, wrinkled bronze skin, and lean bodies. Victoria wouldn't have called them elderly, as one of the first cops on the scene apparently had. The word elderly reminded her of fragile senior citizens with walkers and canes. This couple wore hiking boots, shorts, and lightweight shirts. Their backpacks were still attached, as were their broad-rim hats, secured by strings underneath their chins. Their wide-open eyes and shocked, pained expressions wrenched at Victoria's heart.

Victoria always asked the same questions at a crime scene. What motivated the killer? Why this couple? Why here? Why now? Because answers to the *how* and *why* questions almost always led them to the *who*.

The husky officer stepped forward. "This guy found them and called 911." He gestured to a thin man with a hiker's strong calves leaning against a tree. In a tie-dyed shirt and bandana, he looked like a hippie hold-out from the seventies. A backpack with a sleeping roll and tent attached lay next to him on the ground. He straightened up to speak to the agents. "I was camping overnight. I found them when I was leaving this morning."

Murphy studied the hiker. "Did you see anyone else?"

He shook his head. "The only other people I passed before I found them were a group of women. Three of them. Don't know that they came this way. Two other trails intersect with this one farther up."

The Sheriff's eyes traveled from Murphy to Agent Heslin as he spoke. "Two officers went to find them."

"Can I go now?" asked the hiker. "The Sheriff said I had to wait for you, but now that you're here . . ."

Murphy set his hand on the man's shoulder. "Give Agent Rivera your contact information. We'll be in touch and we might need you to identify the women when we find them, make sure we located the ones you saw."

"Sure." The man gave his information to Rivera. "So, I can go now?"

"One second," Victoria held up a finger. "I just tried to send a message. No reception. How were you able to call 911?"

"I had to walk back to the parking lot and call. They told me to wait for the cops."

"What kind of car did you drive here?"

"A white Toyota 4-Runner."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Like gunshots? Or people screaming? No."

"Okay. Here's my card. Call if you think of anything else." Unless he suddenly remembered he had seen someone running down the trail with a gun, she couldn't imagine he would think of anything else that would be helpful, but it never hurt to make the request and hand out her card, just in case.

Once the hiker left, Murphy walked around the couple, studying the scene from all angles. "From the surrounding pool of blood, they were definitely shot here. The man was shot first, in the heart at close range, possibly trying to shield his wife. He was facing the shooter when he died."

Blood soaked the man's torso. Only his shirt collar indicated his top had once been white. The number three was written on his head in black ink. Below the number, the word CHEATER was scrawled in the same ink.

Behind him, the woman was lying on her side. She had also been shot in the chest. The number four was written on her temple.

"No attempt to hide the bodies." While Victoria studied the scene, she was annoyingly aware of the Sheriff's eyes on her. Wearing gloves, she swatted at the insects honing in on fresh blood, removed the woman's backpack, and examined the contents. It held a collapsible dog bowl, several bottles of water, dog treats, granola bars and trail mix. "It's pretty clear what they were doing out here." Her face was set in stone as she glanced at the dogs, whining to get closer to their masters. She focused hard on them to make sure a tear didn't escape her eyes.

Rivera opened the man's backpack. He found their wallets and car keys, more water bottles and two rain ponchos. "Robert and Anne Cossman. They're from Baltimore." He held up a blue and green hotel key card. "If this is current, they were staying at the Sonesta Hotel and Suites."

"If they're still checked in, I want you to search the room," Murphy said. "Find out what connection they have to the Butlers and Todd Meiser."

Rivera nodded.

Victoria walked slowly toward the dogs, crouching down. "We're going to find out who did this to your parents. And meanwhile—"

"Heslin." Rivera cocked his head and gave her a warning look. "Don't even think about it."

"You sound just like my father. Are you going to take them, then?"

Rivera sighed and shook his head but said, "Sure, why not?"

Victoria straightened with her hands on her hips. "Why not? Because for one, you have terrible allergies. We also work too many hours a day and you don't have anyone to take care of them." She squatted down, allowing them to sniff her. Untying their leashes, she read the tags on their collars. "Come on Leo and Bella. You'll be okay with me for a little while." With their leashes in hand she spoke to the officers. "I live near here. I'll take care of the dogs until we know where they're going, until we find out if the Cossmans have family that wants to take them."

Murphy narrowed his eyes at Heslin. "You've got work to do. You can't be babysitting dogs today. Someone can take them to the pound."

"No, sir. It's not necessary." Victoria's response was quick and firm. There was no question about her determination.

Murphy glanced at his phone. "Forensics is still half an hour out. They're going to want to comb those dogs for evidence. I need to go. You got this?"

Rivera nodded. "Got it."

"Yes." Victoria glanced down at the dogs. Leo tipped his head back to look up at her. She smiled at him.

The sheriff and the officers stood to the side, watching the agents interact.

Looking his agents in the eyes, Murphy's voice was forceful. "Figure out who is doing this and stop them before there's another victim."

Rivera folded his arms. "About our watch on the other Butler witnesses tonight—"

"I'll find someone else." Murphy grumbled. "You've got three murders now, don't let this thing blow out of control. Can't believe this . . . this . . . whatever it is and the Butler case fiasco." Murphy stared down the trail, one hand on the fingers of the others, getting ready to pull off his gloves. Taking a last glance around, his eyes settled on a small dot of white in the corner of Mr. Cossman's mouth.

“Wait. What’s that?” Murphy stooped to part the dead man’s lips. He slid out a small piece of paper and studied it. His scowl deepened. He looked up, stared straight at Victoria, and said, “What the hell?”

“What is it?” Rivera asked, walking over to his boss.

Murphy glared at Rivera. “It says—'Dear Agent Victoria Heslin – Does your partner treat you well?'”

Victoria’s mouth dropped open. She thought she must have heard wrong, but Murphy’s expression told her otherwise. “My name is really on there?”

Murphy narrowed his eyes. “What partner, Heslin?”

“I have no idea. I don’t really, I don’t have a . . . a partner.”

With a deep frown, Murphy pointed at Rivera. “They probably mean you.”

Rivera shrugged as a flush of red colored his cheeks.

Still frowning, Murphy slid the note into an evidence bag and held it out for Rivera. “Give this to forensics when they get here.” He turned to the Sheriff. “I want my agents to talk to this couple’s family first.”

“All right.” The Sheriff didn’t look happy, but he agreed.

Murphy pointed a finger and moved it from Rivera to Victoria. “Find out why someone says this man is a cheater. Find the connection to the Butler case.” The SAC left without looking back.

Victoria stared at the corpses, an unsettled feeling growing inside her stomach. She didn’t want to be the focus of anyone’s attention, especially not a killer’s.



Forensics arrived shortly after Murphy left. They scoured the scene for fibers, hairs, footprints, anything that might be meaningful to help them hunt down the killer and send him to prison. They finished with the dogs as the rain began—wiping out any last traces of evidence—and handed them over to Victoria. With the two dogs leading the way, she headed back to the parking lot leaving the forensics team and the Sheriff behind.

Rivera started after her but stopped and wheeled around. “Be right back, I’ll catch up to you.” He took a few steps back to the crime scene. “Sheriff, can I speak to you for a sec?”

The Sheriff walked over. “What?”

Rivera lowered his voice so no one else could hear. “Think you and your men can not drool next time Agent Heslin is present? Let’s try to be professional here. I’ve got new shoes. I hated getting your slop on them.”

“Hey, now, we didn’t—”

Rivera glared at him. “No, I’m sure I imagined it. And now that we’ve had this nice little chat, I’m sure I won’t imagine it again.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to the men.” He held out his hand. “I didn’t get your first name.”

“Agent.”

Rivera walked away without shaking hands and caught up to Victoria. Her blonde ponytail swung back and forth from shoulder to shoulder as she walked. Her movements had the athletic grace of a long-distance runner. She hopped over the ditches in stride, climbed over the large rocks and bulging tree roots effortlessly.

The note addressed to Agent Heslin was bugging him, like he’d been caught red-handed doing something he shouldn’t have been doing. He’d done nothing wrong—wishful thinking didn’t count—yet he had the sudden urge to confess. For all he knew, he wasn’t even the partner the note mentioned. He had to drop his paranoia. It might send them down the wrong track of thinking. If Victoria had a partner, it wasn’t him.

From ahead on the trail, Victoria interrupted his thoughts, her voice kind and gentle.

“What’s that?” He called out. “What did you sa—”

Victoria was leaning over, talking to the dogs.

“Oh.” He frowned, continuing down the path, his cheeks suddenly warm.

She straightened again. “We’ll be talking to your family soon. And we’ll get you some water.”

Rivera couldn’t help but smile. “What kind of dogs are they?”

“I don’t know. Mutts. I think one is part Boston Terrier, one looks part Labrador.”

They settled the dogs into the back seat of the FBI vehicle and buckled up. “Glad you don’t have to babysit the witnesses tonight?”

Victoria stared out the window. “Sure. I mean, yeah, I’d rather be home than watching someone else sleep.”

Rivera sneezed once and then twice more in succession. He opened his window all the way and leaned his head toward the fresh air.

“Told you.” Victoria smirked.

His stomach growled. “Want to grab some dinner? We passed a burger place on the way.”

“No. I’m not hungry.” She exhaled loudly. “Their lives revolved around those people.”

“What?” He furrowed his brow. “Whose lives?”

“The dogs. They just lost everything. Their little world was just tossed upside down, and they don’t understand what happened.”

“Neither do we. Too bad they can’t tell us.”

“Did you know, they’ll never forget the voice or scent of whoever harmed their people. Never.” She rifled in her bag and offered Rivera a tissue. Bella, the little black terrier, was still panting. Victoria held out her hand. He edged closer, sniffed her hand, and allowed her to pet him. Leo, the lab mix, was lying on his side holding his head up and watching every move in the front seats. “I know.” Victoria said, still focusing on the dogs. “It’s very hard to lose someone you love. It sucks. It really does.”

Rivera sneezed.

Victoria rubbed the dog’s head. “Shh. He doesn’t mean it, Leo.” She faced forward and attached her seat belt. “Let’s go straight to the Sonesta Hotel.”

Rivera nodded as Victoria’s phone rang.

“It’s Sam.” Victoria put the call on speaker phone. “Hey, Sam. I was just about to call you.”

“Beat ya to it.” The noise of shuffling papers came to them over the speakerphone. “I combed Todd Meiser’s phone records. I’m pretty sure I found the prostitute’s number, called on Friday at three in the afternoon, a ten-second call, probably asking him to call her, and then a return call from that number later in the evening. I left a message. It’s a woman’s voice, very sexy, suggestive, asks callers to leave a message if they are trying to make an appointment for—well, she doesn’t say what for. I’m waiting to hear back from her. It’s not a registered phone. No way to trace it.”

“Thanks, Sam. Call as soon as you hear from her. Get us an address and we’ll go talk to her.”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Unfortunately, yes. We were just at the scene of a double murder. Also shot at close range with numbers written on their foreheads. The husband had the word cheater written on his.”

“Same killer as Todd Meiser, then?”

“Certainly seems likely.”

Sam whistled.

“Their names are Robert and Anne Cossman from Baltimore. First, can you find us a close relative? Children, maybe?”

“Sure. What’s the connection between the Cossmans and Meiser? I mean, besides the MO, the numbers, and the words?”

“Don’t know yet. I’d like to know who they’ve seen and called since they arrived in Virginia. Check their credit card statements, too. Look for anything that he could have cheated on—taxes, a business deal, his spouse...”

“I’ll try to help you find something. Talk to you later.”

“Thanks, Sam.” Victoria pressed end and stared out the window. “We have a series of victims, all killed during the day, with close-range gunshots . . . all with the writing on their foreheads. Does a stone-cold killer for hire do that? Or a wacked-out nut case?” She toyed with the end of her ponytail, eyeing the passing scenery. “What connects them? Could they just be random murders?”

Rivera answered only with a nod. She hadn’t asked what the deal was with the note bearing her name, the question now at the forefront of his thoughts. Someone was toying with them, or at least with Victoria, trying to send her a message. But why?

“Meiser’s connection to the Butlers is still the most likely motive. We just have to figure out how the Cossmans fit into the whole Butler scenario,” he said.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same.”

An itchy feeling spread over Rivera's face. He twitched his nose. It was just getting started. His sneeze cut through the sound of his phone ringing. "Rivera." He sniffed.

"Hey. This is Sheriff Montgomery. We located the three women—the ones our hiker saw. Looks like they were unaware of the couple who were killed. The women took a different entrance to the trail."

"Thank you, Sheriff." Sniff. "Keep us posted. We'll do the same. And I'm sure our SAC will arrange for all of us to meet soon."

"Okay. Oh. About your request. I spoke with the men. It won't happen again."

"I appreciate that." Rivera ended the call and dropped his phone in the center console.

"What do you appreciate?" Victoria asked.

"Just him getting back to us."

Victoria picked up her phone from where it rested next to Rivera's and checked her messages. "Sam already sent me information on the Cossmans' son, Frank. He lives nearby and apparently works from home." She rubbed her chin. "Wonder why the parents weren't staying with him."

"Maybe he couldn't have the dogs there."

"Maybe," Victoria said.

"Get the directions. Let's see what he has to say." Rivera sneezed again and swallowed back the fluids swiftly accumulating in his throat.

• • • •

VICTORIA STUDIED THE row of modern condominiums while walking up to Frank Cossman's unit. Everything about the shiny new homes said upscale, pricey. She glanced back at the SUV. "We can leave the dogs in there with the windows open for now. It's nice and cool."

"You're the expert."

She rang the doorbell and waited. A man opened the door partway and stuck his head through, like he was just popping out to tell them to go away, they had the wrong address. He had thick hair and looked neat and sharp in a light gray suit. His eyes moved from Rivera to Heslin and their solemn expressions.

"Frank Cossman?" Rivera met his gaze.

The man nodded.

"I'm Agent Rivera and this is Agent Heslin. We're with the FBI."

Continuing his wary glances between them, Cossman opened the door fully.

"Can we come in and sit down for a moment?" Her question left no doubt that this was serious business, but there was a warmth to her words.

Frank led them into a sparsely decorated, modern living room. He and Victoria sat down. Much the same way she had with the dogs, Victoria kept her voice kind and compassionate when she broke the news of his parents' death.

"What? I just . . ." The color drained from his face. "Are you sure it's my parents?"

Rivera leaned his weight against the doorframe. "They had their wallets with them, their license photos match up. But we will need you, or someone else in your family to make a positive ID."

His voice cracked. "They were here to see me, but also to go hiking. They were always hiking. It was their favorite pastime. Always brought the dogs."

"We have their dogs with us now," Rivera said.

"Huh? Oh." He gazed past the agents toward the front door, then down at his shoes. "Are they going to a pound?"



“No.” Victoria took a quick look around the condo and out through the back window. No sign of a yard. “Is there someone in your family who could take them?”

Frank sighed. “I’ll um—I’ll see if my aunt will.”

“All right.” Victoria shifted her weight and crossed her legs. “They’ll be at my house until she can get them. I have a separate enclosure for them with access to the outside. They’ll be properly cared for.”

“To say the least,” Rivera murmured.

Frank fidgeted with his hands in his lap. “So, you’ll hold on to them for a few days?”

“Sure.” Victoria’s shoulders shifted forward as she studied the victims’ son. It upset her that Frank Cossman hadn’t seemed to know the dogs’ names, at least not right away, and wasn’t rushing to get them.

Frank asked a few more questions. They couldn’t tell him much about an active case, which worked out well because aside from the circumstances of the Cossmans’ death, the agents had little to share.

Rivera leaned forward. “Do you have any ideas on who might want to hurt your parents?”

“No one. They were the least likely people . . .”

Rivera clasped his hands. “Somebody thought otherwise and made their point with a few bullets. You sure? Any recent arguments they mentioned? Any neighborly disputes?”

Frank shook his head. “No. Nothing like that I’m aware of.”

“Did he play tennis, bridge, golf? Any activity where someone might have gotten bent out of shape about him cheating?”

“No. And if he did, he wouldn’t cheat, and he wouldn’t even be playing with people who would take it that seriously. He’s not like that.”

Victoria didn’t correct Frank’s use of the present tense when talking about his father. “Did they have debts?”

“No. I’m pretty sure their house has been paid off for years. They buy their cars with cash. They live a simple life. Gardening and hiking, doing yoga. What kind of debts do you mean?”

She thought of all the illegal activities the Butlers oversaw—trafficking of drugs, people, money laundering . . . she wasn’t about to mention them all. “Gambling?”

“Definitely not.”

“Would you know if they are in any way familiar with Raymond Butler or his family?”

“Who?”

“He’s about to be on trial for—”

“Oh. That Butler. No.” Frank crossed his arms and rocked forward. “My parents might know who he was from the news. They’re news junkies, but that’s it. My father is a retired dentist, he wouldn’t—they wouldn’t—why are you asking?”

“We’re exploring the possibility that your parents’ deaths were related to the upcoming trial.”

“Not possible.”

“Your father had the word ‘cheater’ written on his forehead,” Rivera said. “Sounds personal.”

“Do you know what that might be about?” Victoria touched her necklace.

“I have no idea what it could be about or who could have written it.”

“Were you aware of any infidelities in their marriage?” Rivera asked.

“Absolutely not. Absolutely no way.” Frank lifted his eyes toward the ceiling and his face contorted with a wave of anguish.

“Do they visit here often?”

“I don’t know.” Frank’s gaze moved back to the agents. “I just moved here not too long ago from DC, but I’m pretty sure they’ve come to the area to hike before. They wanted to see my new place, my mother brought a few things, like house warming gifts. It’s not big enough for them, I mean, they insisted on staying in a hotel.”

“Can you give us a list of their closest friends, people they did business with, so we can start talking to them?”

“You mean, right now?”

“Yes, whatever you can come up with right now. If you could also list their habits and routines, that would help. I’ll give you my email and as you come up with more, you can send them to me.” Victoria slid a card from her bag.

“Why? They weren’t involved with anything, they don’t even live here, this must be some random mistake, like mistaken identity, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. . . I don’t know.” His voice grew quieter and cracked as he spoke. “No one would have a good reason to murder my parents.” His voice quivered. “I’m sure of that.”

“It’s our job to find out what happened.” Victoria handed Frank her card.

“Was—was anything stolen?”

“Not that we’re aware of. You can let us know if anything is missing when you confirm their identities.” Rivera stood up.

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.” Frank stood and wiped his palms on his pant legs. “I’ll get you the names. I’ve got an address book. This is . . . I can’t believe this.”

“We’re very sorry,” Victoria said, as Frank left the room.

The agents exchanged glances. Rivera shrugged and folded his arms. Victoria sensed they had accomplished all they could with Frank Cossman.

Frank came back with names and numbers on a piece of paper. Rivera took the paper. “Last thing—where were you this afternoon?”

“Me? You can’t possibly—” Frank lifted his eyes toward the ceiling. “I was here, I’ve been on the phone with clients all day. I can give you a list of names and times.”

“Please do. We’re heading to the hotel where your parents were staying. You’ll think of other things. Send them to us. Agent Heslin’s email is on the card.”

“Of course I will.”

“Please call your aunt. She can contact me about Leo and Bella,” Victoria said. “We’re very sorry for your loss.”

Frank led them to the door. “Thank you, I mean, thanks for coming out here.”

The agents stepped outside. At the car, Victoria whispered, “I know you believed him. But we’re still going to find out if he or any of their children had a reason to want them dead.”

“Yep.” Rivera typed the address for the Sonesta Suites into his phone, took out a few pieces of his spearmint gum, and started the car.

• • • •

AT THE HOTEL, VICTORIA took the Cossmans’ dogs for a quick walk then put them back in the SUV. They hung their heads out the window, watching her as she walked away. She spotted Rivera standing in front of the cash register at the Sonesta Suites Hotel kiosk. He stuck his wallet into his back pocket and peeled the plastic off the top of a Benadryl bottle.

Victoria couldn’t imagine anything much worse than being allergic to dogs. But Rivera wouldn’t complain. He never did. The only time she caught a glimpse past his emotional armor was at a sports

bar. Near the end of the Xavier game, Rivera let loose with some uncharacteristic outbursts of encouragement for his alma mater.

She went over to him, placing her hand on his upper arm. “Sorry about the allergies.”

Rivera shrugged, holding up a plastic card. “Got a room key.”

“Let’s check it out then.”

They walked down the corridor over worn turquoise carpeting. The agents put on gloves and Rivera slid the plastic card into the slot at room 383. A green dot lit up and he opened the door.

Inside, Victoria took in the room—two closed suitcases, pairs of shoes lined up side by side, dog bowls and dog beds. Nothing on the surface indicated the people staying in the room had just been brutally murdered. Inside one of the small suitcases, under a neatly folded sweatshirt, Rivera found a laptop. He slid it into an evidence bag for the IT department.

Victoria scanned the small space again, looking for anything. “Should we have techs come in?”

Rivera shook his head. “Doesn’t look like anything happened here.”

“I’ll take this.” She pulled a large, yellow bag down from the top shelf of the closet. She unfolded the top, peered inside, and moved the contents around to make sure it really contained dog food. “This is excellent.”

“I figured you had a year’s supply at your house.”

“If they switch food suddenly, they’re likely to be sick. Now I can mix some of theirs with some of mine.”

Rivera rolled his eyes, but with the hint of a smile. “I’m starving,” he said as they left the room. “Do you want to grab dinner now then call the Cossman contacts?”

“I’d like to get back to the office, get my car and get home. Let’s split up the research.” Victoria sighed. She’d be thinking about the murders long into the night, focusing on every little detail. The day had started out so well, a long walk in the woods with her dogs after the cleansing rain, and ended so terribly, with three murders and a note for her from the killer. She was determined to find out who had ruined the day for so many people.

Rivera nodded. “I’ll be up late. Call me if you find anything.”





THE GARAGE DOOR ROSE in silence, revealing Ned's black Ford Explorer inside.

Victoria pressed her fist against her lips. "I forgot to call him."

She parked her car and glanced at the dogs. "You stay here. I'll be right back. I need to introduce you to the pack one at a time. Just don't show any fear and things will go well. They're all very accustomed to newcomers."

Entering the large mudroom, she inhaled the fresh scent of lemon and vinegar. The floors were gleaming thanks to the visit from her cleaning crew.

Her pack crowded the room to greet her. Izzy wiggled in and out between her legs. Eddie smiled, his gums pulling back to reveal his teeth. His tail curled up into a circle behind him. Myrtle jumped up and down. Charmer sniffed in cute, quick little snorts.

"I'm home. Yes. I know you smell new dogs. We have visitors. Calm down and you'll get to meet them."

The house phone rang. Victoria headed to answer it. Ned walked around the corner shirtless, wringing water from his dripping hair with a towel. He saw Victoria and stopped short. Their eyes met, and both were silent.

Victoria smiled, shifting her gaze away from Ned's chest and to the phone. Something tingled inside her stomach.

Ned pointed at the phone. "I'm guessing that isn't you calling to say you'll be back soon."

"I'm sorry, Ned." She shook her head, her cheeks still a little hot. "Sort of a last-minute change of plans and I forgot to call you."

"No problem. Hold on. Just let me finish getting dressed. I just went for a run and—be right back."

Victoria opened the fridge and poured herself a glass of water.

Ned returned wearing a T-shirt, skin still glistening from his shower. "I can . . . I mean, I can stay if it helps, or I can go and come back tomorrow . . ." His eyes moved from Victoria to the dogs, a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Um . . . I guess it's whatever is most convenient for you. I'm going to be up really late working on some new cases . . . really, whatever is best for you."

Ned crouched down to rub Myrtle's side and scratch Cooper's neck, keeping his eyes on them. "Sounds like you're beat, and you've still got work to do . . ."

*It might be nice to be in his arms.* "Yeah, it was quite a day." She started to bend down to take off her shoes, but remembered she had a reason to keep them on.

"I saw you on the news today. You and another agent."

"Really?" She frowned, thinking about what might have been revealed to the public.

"Coming from a crime scene in front of a small house. Then again later near the Triple Falls Trails, another murder scene." He let out a low whistle.

Victoria chewed on her bottom lip. If Channel 14 had aired footage of her after the first crime scene, that might partly explain the note left for her at the second. Although the content of the note was still a complete mystery.

Ned straightened up and smiled. "I should probably go home and water my plants."

"Oh, you have plants?"

“No.” He laughed. “I’ll just come back tomorrow after you leave for work.”

She nodded. “Ned . . . Thanks. For this. For everything. I—”

“You think your new case will be wrapped up before the trip?”

“Yes, absolutely. I mean—hopefully—but remember, if for some reason I can’t leave, you’ll still go to Spain without me?”

“I will.” He laughed. “I promised, didn’t I?”

“Good. Just making sure. Actually, before you go, can you just help me with something?”

He smiled again. “Of course. What is it?”

She tilted her head toward the garage and offered a sheepish smile. “We’ve got some temporary guests.”

A hint of confusion crossed his face, but only for a fleeting second. His eyes lit up and he smiled. “Ahhh, sure . . . let’s see what type of guests you’ve got out there.”

They both started toward the garage at the same time. His arm grazed hers, startling her with a tingling sensation. She stopped, putting more space between them, still thinking about the feeling. For right now, that was enough. She didn’t want to lead him on. He was too important to her.

“Sorry.” He stepped aside and extended his arm. “Lead the way, boss lady. Can’t wait to see what you brought home.”

She walked ahead of him, and in spite of the day she’d had, couldn’t help but smiling as his warm laughter echoed through the mudroom.

Victoria opened the back of her SUV. “They’re from the crime scene.”

“Really?” Ned stood still, letting the dogs sniff him. “Look, you’ve had a long day. Let me take care of these guys and you go settle in.”

“Thanks.” Victoria exhaled loudly. “That would be nice. I can’t wait to change. My clothes were wet half the day.”

“Go ahead. I’ve got this.”

She stood under the shower spray, letting the heat soothe her shoulders and cascade over her low back. She didn’t know what she was feeling or what she wanted from Ned. She didn’t want to lead him on and make him think there could be something more than there was. She liked him. She really did. Everything about him. He was handsome, smart, fit, loved her dogs—what more did she need? But was it stupid to try and see if there was more? Because she sure didn’t want to risk losing what he was already providing—peace of mind, trust, reliability. None of them small things to be taken for granted.

After the shower, Victoria put on a silky robe and left her bedroom suite to see how everyone was getting on. In the family room, Ned was kneeling next to Leo and Bella. “How are the little ones doing?”

Ned laughed. “They’re only little compared to your pack. And they’re doing great.” That’s when he looked her way. His eyes opened a little wider, he covered his mouth with his hand, and quickly turned his attention back to the dogs. It was his turn to blush.

Victoria pulled her robe tighter over her camisole and sleep shorts. “Good to hear. I knew they would be okay.”

“Yeah, they’re going to be fine here.” Ned stood up. “So, guess I’ll be going.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

He walked from the room and the door to the garage closed quietly behind him.

Victoria took his place, crouching down with the new dogs and murmuring to them. “I shouldn’t have done that, come out here in my robe, should I? He’s a gentleman and I’m sending mixed signals, aren’t I?”

Leo licked her chin.







KELLY SMITH ZIPPED up her coat and shifted her feet from side to side. Her fingers wrapped around the door handle as she scanned the dim and quiet parking lot and settled her gaze on her husband, who was walking toward the car. “We’re going to be late.”

Jason pressed the unlock button on the key fob. Something inside the Jeep honked and the locks flipped up. “No, we’re not. There’s at least twenty minutes of previews.”

Kelly opened the passenger door and slid into the seat. “I love the previews. They’re sometimes more entertaining than the movie. We have to hurry.”

“I want to stop at a store and get some candy on the way. It’s too expensive at the theater.”

“No.” She gave Jason her cutest pleading face. “We don’t have time.”

Jason started the car. “I’m pretty sure there’s a CVS on the way. I’ll be quick. In and out.”

Kelly turned on the heater and rubbed her hands together. “No, sweetie, you’re never just in and out. That’s why we missed the nine-thirty show.”

Jason grinned. “I’ll get you red licorice.”

“Fine. And something with caffeine. Like if they have a cold Starbucks latte in a bottle. I don’t know if I’m going to make it through the whole movie. It’s so late.”

“Not my fault.” Jason grinned. “I’m just trying to satisfy my bride.”

Kelly licked her lips, smiling.

Putting the car in gear, Jason placed his hand over his wife’s. As they pulled out of the parking lot he glanced in the rearview mirror. A gray Honda with one headlight followed close behind. The Smiths made a right turn and then at the next stop light, a left.

“Hmm, that the same car?” mumbled Jason.

“Hmm, what?”

“That car back there. I saw that same car when I dropped you off to get your nails done. That lady was behind me. I got out and told her she only had one working headlight. Guess she didn’t get it fixed.”

“That was nice of you to tell her.”

“Lot of good it did.” Jason snorted. “I got drenched doing it. And now she’s following us.”

“No good deed goes. . . unnoticed.” Kelly tossed her long hair over her shoulder.

“It’s no bad deed goes unpunished.”

“You don’t do bad deeds, so all you need to know is my saying. If it wasn’t a saying before, then it is now, because I just made it up.”

“Well, okay then. Notice away.”

Kelly laughed and leaned toward her husband to peek in the rearview mirror. The car was still behind them, looking unbalanced without two glowing circles in the front.

“Strange how that car pulled out of the parking lot exactly when we did.”

“Just a coincidence,” Jason said.

Kelly pushed a button for the radio and twirled the knob until she found something she wanted to hear. “There it is!” Kelly pointed to the CVS as they were about to pass it.

Jason hit the brakes and jerked the wheel to the left. Praying he wasn’t about to cause an accident, he glanced up in time to see the Honda make the same quick turn. Frowning, he parked the car directly in front of the store.

Kelly's eyes met his. "I'll wait here. Be quick."

"I won't let you down." Jason leaned in to give her a quick kiss on the cheek before jogging into the store. The automatic doors slid open, but Jason stopped to peer back at Kelly inside the Jeep. The Honda had parked right next to their car. Jason crossed his arms. The woman behind the wheel stared straight at him. He stared back. He hadn't paid much attention to her in the pouring rain yesterday, but he was pretty sure he recognized her as the same person. He only needed a minute or two inside the store, but he didn't want the candy badly enough to leave Kelly out there with a potential stalker.

Another car caught his attention. A police cruiser drove into the shopping center and parked right behind the Honda, blocking its exit. A policeman got out of the cruiser, his eyes on the Honda. He walked to the driver's side and gestured for the woman to roll down the window. The woman's expression immediately changed in a way that struck Jason as unusual. Not annoyance or resignation, but pure terror. Eyes wide, stricken, a deer in the headlights, like how he must have looked that time in high school when he was pulled over. His car held a keg, drunk friends, open bottles and nowhere to hide any of it.

The officer said something to the woman. He walked around to the front of her car and pointed at the broken headlight. Kelly was also watching from inside the Jeep.

Glad the cop had arrived when he did, Jason shook off the uncomfortable feeling—probably just being paranoid—and headed into the store. After Jason paid, the officer passed him heading to the register, carrying a bottle of aspirin.

Outside, the one-headlight Honda and its driver were gone.





ROCKING BACK AND FORTH against the cloth seat, hardly noticing the cars passing on either side, Beth chewed away on her lower lip. When that uniformed officer appeared out of nowhere and stepped right up to her car, panic overwhelmed her. She could barely think, barely move. She was lucky her heart hadn't stopped then and there. She'd sat paralyzed, aware of the gun on her lap like it was a smoldering coal. Her first thought—someone from her list, someone she hadn't yet killed, had finally taken his or her butt down to the police station and provided a detailed description of her and Danny.

Her stomach roiled thinking about what could have happened if the stupid cop had been more thorough—if he'd lowered his gaze from her face and seen her gun, if he'd asked for a license and registration instead of issuing a polite warning to fix her headlight. What would she have done if he ran her plates? She didn't know exactly what he would have found. She seriously doubted Danny had bought the car the way most people did, with actual money handed over to a rightful owner.

*That was a narrow escape. I'm done following them. That cop was a sure sign it's time to quit for the night and hightail it back to the hotel. Stupid headlight.* Danny was supposed to take care of that sort of thing, but he almost never did. Lately, she had to do absolutely everything while he was away on his business trips—where he spent money but had yet to make any. And when he was home, he sat around drinking beer after beer and complaining.

And the Smiths were proving to be a royal pain.

After glancing behind her for what seemed like the hundredth time, she snapped on the radio and scanned through the stations, in search of news on a channel with an even number.

She settled back against the seat and was starting to relax a bit, her shoulders no longer tense and tight. The news came on. She cranked up the volume on the radio. They were reporting the day's most mentionable events—three homicides. All of them happened to be perpetrated by her. It was almost surreal, hearing the serious, reverent tone of the announcer, knowing she alone had made it happen.

“Todd Meiser, a key witness in the Raymond Butler prosecution—”

Who the hell was Raymond Butler? What did he have to do with anything? Fuming, racking her brain for where she'd heard that name before, she missed the rest of the report about Meiser. The news anchor prattled on about the old people she killed at Triple Falls and asked for anyone with information related to their deaths to contact the FBI.

She tipped her head back and laughed. The cops and FBI didn't seem to have any idea who had killed any of them. A few of the news reports she'd heard had referred to her as a male—bunch of sexists. No one, aside from Danny, seemed to have a clue that she was the one responsible.

But why didn't the news report say anything about the note for Agent Heslin? Didn't the authorities know it was left by the killer? Wasn't that interesting and newsworthy? Had Agent Heslin even seen it? Frowning, Beth twirled the ends of her hair. She'd have to do better. She sighed and bit into her lower lip, chewing the side that wasn't yet tender and raw. At a stoplight she checked her reflection in the rearview mirror and swiped at the hint of blood on her lip. She opened her mouth wide and slid her jaw from side to side to loosen it.

*Chin up, Beth!* Three murders so far—not counting the first, the one she wouldn't think about, didn't quite remember, and didn't want to. Not too shabby. She'd accomplished quite a bit for one day. “Why did I doubt myself?” But she knew exactly why and whose fault it was.

She wasn't receiving credit for what she'd done, but if getting credit for the murders meant going to jail, she could live without it. The important thing was that Danny now knew what she was capable of doing. She had shown him. And herself.

Grinning, she remembered how she felt running down the trail after killing that couple. Her heart pounded, her skin tingled, her muscles were fueled with a strength she hadn't even known she possessed. She felt wild and . . . alive. For years she had stolen information online, hunched over her computer, always looking over her shoulder. A slight adrenaline rush had always accompanied the niggling fear, but nothing like what she experienced today. Today had been different. More exhilarating. More real.

She relived the scene in her imagination, picturing her escape down the hiking trail without a soul around to stop her, her blonde hair flowing in the wind. Everything she saw and heard had been amplified, heightened—the twigs snapping at her sides, birds chirping in the sky, yet distant and separate. She was the only thing that mattered. In her mind, she had on dark pants and a fitted white shirt, the same ensemble worn by Agent Heslin, instead of the jeans and sweater she actually wore. “I did it,” she whispered.

The giant yellow arches of a McDonalds came into view on the busy road ahead. The dashboard clock told her it was close to eleven. Her empty stomach cramped. She hadn't eaten much all day. She doubted Agent Heslin ever ate at McDonalds. But Beth didn't have the luxury of time to figure out where Agent Heslin *would* eat, so she steered into the drive-thru lane and ordered a salad, French fries, and a diet Coke.

She ate the hot, salty fries driving back to her hotel and they were gone by the time she reached her room. *Oh, no. Damn.* She stopped outside the door, her key hovering above the slot. Would Danny be angry because she hadn't brought him any food? A little too late to be thinking of that now. She still had her salad and would share it with him, but he wouldn't be interested. And she couldn't very well eat it in front of him. Not if he was hungry and in one of his moods.

“Danny?” She balanced her drink against her chest and held the door partway open. A sliver of weak light filtered in through the slit in the drapes.

Silence.

The muscles in her shoulders and chest tightened as she stepped inside the dark room, flicked on the light switch, and tried to look everywhere at once. The room was empty and still, appearing as she left it, except the bed was expertly made. No empty cans or bottles littered the tables or counters. No signs of take-out containers or empty pizza boxes.

She crept to the bathroom and peeked inside the open door. The used towels had been replaced with folded ones. New packaged soaps had been positioned around the sink. A white curtain hid the interior of the shower. *Better safe than sorry.* Almost holding her breath, she gripped the edge of the shower curtain, braced herself, and yanked it aside like she was tearing off a Band-Aid.

The shower was empty except for brown mildew stains in the tile grout.

Beth left the bathroom, both puzzled and relieved. Where was he? She had the car, so wherever he went had to be on foot. Maybe he'd hooked up with a younger woman he met randomly in the hotel. Wouldn't be the first time. An aching pit began forming in her stomach and a heavy cloud of hopelessness descended over her like a shroud. She pressed her lips together and squared her shoulders, willing herself not to care, to stop thinking about it. *Let him. Just let him. You don't need him. Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . .* The counting made her feel needy and pathetic, but rarely could she stop once it started. She walked back to the front door, turned the lock, and flipped the bolt.

Sinking into the couch, she pulled off her shoes and threw them across the room. She grabbed the remote and pressed down hard on the buttons, flicking through channels until she found some local news.

“Heavy rain in the forecast yet again for tomorrow. Stay alert for flash flooding. If you see standing water, do not attempt to cross it.”

*Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . .*

She tapped her fingers on the table, unable to finish listening to the meteorologist. He was trying hard to make the rain sound like the end of days. With more force than necessary, she mashed her finger against the remote and changed to another news program, a sportscaster wrapping up his piece.

*. . . twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-eight, thirty . . .*

She put her feet on the table, set her salad in her lap, and started eating. After a few bites, the picture on the screen switched to a woman with lush red hair, a plunging V-neck sweater, and an intense look in her eyes.

“Breaking news today—Is Virginia facing a serial killer’s spree?”

All counting ceased. Beth dropped her plastic fork, swung her feet off the table, and bolted to an upright position. *Serial Killer*. Was it her? Is that what they were calling her now? An image of Todd Meiser’s dumpy yard and home filled the large screen in front of her. Yes! A flush of pride warmed her skin. A surge of power radiated through her body. Maybe this was how Danny felt and why he got off on hurting her.

But then the news reporter brought up Raymond Butler. Again! They were all suggesting a connection. “I don’t even know who the hell Raymond Butler is, so there’s no damn connection! He has nothing to do with this. I did it! I did it! All by myself! Me!”

Without taking her eyes from the television, she pushed aside the remains of her salad.

The image on the television changed. There they were again. Agents Heslin and Rivera in the parking lot near the Triple Falls Trail with the same reporter Beth had seen on her phone earlier in the day.

She scooted to the edge of the couch and leaned closer to the screen.

Agent Heslin’s smooth blonde hair had been pulled back into a ponytail. As she approached the reporter, a military-type guy claiming to be the SAC, whatever that meant, edged her right out of the way, stepping in front of her. Agent Heslin teetered a bit, looking down as if she had stepped on something she didn’t expect to be there. In an instant, Agent Rivera was at her side, his hand on her elbow. It wasn’t a big deal, not like she would have fallen off a cliff or anything, but he was there to protect her nonetheless, as if he were her knight in shining armor. Beth narrowed her eyes and caught the split-second flash of anger on Rivera’s face as he glanced at the overbearing guy. When Rivera turned back to Agent Heslin, his expression softened just a bit, despite the determined set of his jaw.

“Hmmm.” Beth’s mouth spread into a smug smile, like she knew his secret. “There’s no mistaking it. He’s in love with her.”

The news story on the television changed to angry, egotistical politicians in suits arguing about a budget, but the snapshot of the agents standing side by side remained clear at the forefront of Beth’s mind. She rolled it over and around, savoring the image like a mouthful of expensive wine. “Rivera.” She said his name aloud, letting it roll off her tongue.

Did Heslin love Rivera back? She should. He was handsome enough. Took care of his body. And it looked like he cared for her so much, like he would never hurt her. But the female agent didn’t appear to be paying attention to him the way he did to her. They didn’t act like Jason and Kelly Smith,

going out of their way to touch and make googly eyes at each other. Of course, how could they? They were at work. They had to look professional. Perhaps their after-work behavior told a different story.

Beth dragged her laptop across the table until it was in front of her. What else was there to learn about the lovely Victoria Heslin? Typing in Victoria's name produced several links about the death of her mother, Abigail Heslin. Eyes gleaming, Beth scanned from line to line, soaking up the information.

*After three days in captivity, heiress Abigail Heslin succumbs to a heart condition.*

Captivity? Beth hit the back arrow, selected another article, and kept reading. The story said tragedy struck one of America's wealthiest families. Billionaire heiress Abigail Heslin was kidnapped for ransom. After three days of captivity, under the stress of her captors and without the medicine for her heart condition, she suffered a heart attack and died within hours of the FBI tracking her down.

The story must have been huge when it happened ten years ago. Victoria Heslin would have been around nineteen or twenty years old at the time. She must have been so worried, but maybe she trusted the FBI would do their jobs and find her in time. How interesting that Victoria ended up working for the very same organization that failed to save her mother. Interesting indeed.

Within a few minutes, Beth had access to the county tax records database and Agent Heslin's home address. Shortly after, she had control of the agent's security system. She was no longer tired. With a determined smile, she stuffed her feet back into her shoes, snatched her car keys off the table, and rushed out the door.







AFTER THE NEW DOGS were settled and Ned left, Victoria got the outdoor fireplace going, turned on a heating lamp and sat on the patio with a soft blanket over her legs and a mug of hot tea. The dogs lay down one by one around her and she gazed out at her property, remembering the first time she'd seen it, many years ago. Fortunately, as much as she avoided social gatherings, she had agreed, for once, to accompany her father to an afternoon party in late spring. Some sort of fundraiser, she'd forgotten what or who it was for.

On that day, elegant women in sundresses sipped flutes of champagne offered on silver trays. A quartet played soft live music and dozens of canopied tables had been spread across the lawn. The house was exceptionally decorated, but all Victoria really noticed were the acres and acres of flat yard and the adjacent trails. The estate was exactly what she wanted. When it came on the market three years ago, she immediately bid above the asking price, unwilling to lose the opportunity, and marking the first time she'd used any of the trust from her grandfather on something other than donations. Her father grumbled that it was more house than she needed, and he was right. But it wasn't the house she wanted, it was the yard. The perfect yard for animals. She'd reminded her father that there were fewer investments better than a fabulous piece of property. The back yard wasn't quite as pristine as when she moved in, seven dogs, not to mention the frequent foster, running, peeing, and digging could do that in no time, but it could be fixed. Yards were meant to be used, not just admired.

It really was perfect. Her mother—who'd mostly owned greyhounds, but also took in a long parade of rescues—would have wholeheartedly approved.

The serenity of the large landscaped yard, aided by the rippling murmur of a fountain, created a peaceful oasis where she could escape from the world. Being alone—with her dogs—was always what she needed to recharge her energy. The day's horrific crime scenes had dominated her every thought since she stepped into Todd Meiser's kitchen. Now, she wanted to clear her mind before she revisited the details, hoping to see each scene with a fresh perspective and perhaps think of something she might have missed.

She finished the last sip of her tea, set down her mug, and uncrossed her legs. Enough relaxing. She and Rivera had three murders to solve. At the beginning of a case, the questions always outweighed the answers. But that would change as they put together everything they learned combined with information from detectives, forensics, and the ME's office.

There's no way the numbers on the victims' heads were a coincidence, so what did they mean? Soon enough they would have the forensic report on the bullets and know for sure if the crimes were connected. In the meantime, what were they missing? What connected Meiser and the Cossmans? Why did the perp write the numbers? What purpose did they serve? A message to us? A need fulfilled for the perp?

Frank Cossman had come through with a list of names and numbers, his parents' closest friends and neighbors. With a tablet and stylus, she began digging for the truth.

After a few hours, and nothing helpful to show from it, she set aside her note pad. Taking a deep breath, she held it, and let it out slowly. The temperature had dropped from chilly to cold. A hazy sky blocked the stars. Wind rustled the branches and leaves.

She glanced at the time on her phone. It wasn't too late to call Helen to discuss the case. It'd be worth it, even if meant wading through a probe of her personal life or lack thereof. Helen Bernard

was one of the few people Victoria completely trusted.

She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. As her call connected, the dogs leapt up, staring alert toward the backyard.

“Stop. Leave the raccoons alone. Sit down.”

“Victoria?” Helen said.

“Hi. You’re still up?”

Eddie let out a long, low growl. Victoria placed her hand on top of his head.

“Of course. I’m about to pour myself a glass of wine. What’s going on there?”

Victoria’s dogs flew off the patio and raced across the yard. Only Leo and Bella remained on the steps, staring out after the others. Not all dogs were wired to chase. “Can you talk for a few minutes?”

Helen would know exactly what that meant. But that didn’t mean she’d let Victoria get right to it.

“Are you still all alone in that big house?” Helen had always been direct.

“I’m not alone. I have my dogs.” As she spoke, they were flying gleefully across her back yard.

“Take it from me, remember I was one of the bureau’s best profilers—”

“I know.” The dogs stopped, sniffed the ground, and turned around in a pack.

“It’s good to love what you do, but not to the exclusion of everything else.”

Victoria pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “Like I said, I’ve got—”

“What does having a dozen dogs tell you?”

“I don’t have a dozen dogs—”

“That you have a gaping hole in your heart that needs to be filled. Don’t pretend a dog—or however many you have—can fill it. On your death bed, you won’t say, ‘I wish I’d have logged another twenty hours on the MacDougal case and rescued five more dogs.’”

“Actually, I might. And it’s seven now.”

“Good Lord! Stop making my point. Seven can’t do what five couldn’t, because it’s not really about the dogs.”

Victoria laughed. “Maybe we can discuss my ‘gaping hole’ another time, since I’m really not convinced it exists.” The dogs returned, panting, looking pleased with their chase. Victoria petted each of them. “Actually, believe it or not, I said I would go to dinner with someone.”

“Is it the agent you’ve been working with? He’s easy on the eyes.”

“Rivera? No. I like working with him. But the dinner is with the guy who takes care of my dogs.”

“Ned? That’s his name, right?”

“Good memory.”

“I’m not that old. My memory is still exceptional. If you wanted a date, there’s no shortage of interested and eligible bachelors out there. You can venture beyond your own house.”

“I know but would they be interested in going out with me the FBI agent, or me the heiress?”

“Or you—the young beautiful blonde? You won’t really know until you give someone a chance, will you? Even if it doesn’t work out, the finding out process can be fun.”

“I’m happy. I like my life.”

“Can’t argue with that, I suppose. But please don’t cancel that dinner if you can help it.”

“I’ll try.”

“I mean it. I know how introverts work. No cancelling. Now, I’ve got my wine. Poured an extra big glass. Tell me, what’s going on there.”

Victoria’s smile disappeared. “So here’s why I called. I’ve got three murders and we know they’re somehow connected, but we don’t know how yet.”

“Start from the beginning. And then we’re coming back to the dog thing. The man thing, too.”

Going through the facts aloud forced Victoria to sort through what they knew and what they needed to know, in an objective and logical manner. Sharing it with Helen allowed for a mentor’s insights.

“It’s way too early to know how this ends. Don’t be impatient. Sometimes we never know. You have your facts laid out. With each additional piece of the puzzle you get now, you try to see what you need to complete the picture. You’ll see what fits.”

“That’s the problem.” Victoria sighed. “Nothing fits.”

“Then you either don’t have enough puzzle pieces, and you need to be patient, or you aren’t looking at it the right way. Maybe it’s not a cow puzzle, maybe it’s a puzzle of horses but in the very corner there’s one cow. See?”

“Gosh, that’s a big puzzle, then.”

“Which is why we can’t solve it tonight. Get some rest. Magnum PI reruns are calling me.”

“Why would you watch schlocky detective shows when—”

“Magnum was a detective? I just like the short shorts on Tom Selleck. Later.”

Victoria had to laugh. She wasn’t any closer to a motive that made sense for the Cossmans and included Todd Meiser, but the facts and the questions were more obvious. When she said goodnight to Helen, she was yawning and ready to go to sleep. Waking up with a clear head was the best thing she could do to get results.

“Time for bed.” She led Leo and Bella behind a small gate in an enclosure built to separate fosters or injured dogs from her pack. They had a room all to themselves and their own dog door leading to a separate outside area, but they could still see and hear her and the rest of the dogs. “You’re in here. Just until I know my dogs are okay with you, and you’re okay with them.” She rubbed each of them behind the ears and then sat and watched them sniff the new area. “At least you have each other.”

She yawned again as her dogs trailed behind her into the bathroom, watched her brush her teeth, and followed her back to the bedroom.

“Good night everyone. Sleep tight.” Victoria flipped off the light switch and sank into her bed. Below her pillow lay her personal gun. The thought of something happening to her, something that would leave her dogs without their owner, was enough to keep it nearby. If it could happen to her mother, it could happen to her. She wasn’t about to be anyone’s victim. Around her, the dogs grunted and sighed until the room fell silent.





BETH HURRIED OUT OF the hotel with her hands stuffed inside her pockets. She shouldn't be allowing herself this distraction. Not while she still had witnesses to eliminate. What if visiting Agent Heslin somehow prevented her from finishing the job that would keep her from going to prison? But she couldn't seem to alter her current plan, even though it defied common sense. It was as if Agents Heslin and Rivera were calling to her, as if they were in desperate need of her help and she couldn't ignore them.

"Where are you going?" Danny's growling voice carried across the lobby.

She whirled around. Crossing her arms, she answered, "Not really your business. Notice I'm not asking you where you've been."

"Uh. Can I help you?" the woman working the front desk asked, her face a mask of concern.

Beth glanced around. The hotel employee was still staring at her. Beth's eyes shot daggers back.

"I'm sorry." A forced-looking smile took shape on the woman's face. "I thought you were speaking to me."

"I wasn't. I was talking to my husband." Beth marched out to her car, half hoping Danny would go away so he didn't ruin everything for her. This thing she was about to do, it was her thing. But at the same time, she didn't really want to be alone.

"Why are you wearing your hair like that? You've never pulled it back like that before." Danny's tone communicated the scowl she would surely see on his face if she fixed her eyes on him.

Frowning, Beth ran her hand over her head and down the length of her ponytail. "Thanks for noticing."

He scoffed. "It makes your forehead look huge. You look like the Addams Family girl. You know, the hideous one."

Sometimes it was like he could read her thoughts. She did her best to ignore him, keeping her mind occupied with her own plan. They said little else on the long drive that took them from city lights and billboards to lengthy, dark stretches of trees and hedges. When the distance between each driveway was greatest, she slowed the car to a stop and idled in front of a giant iron gate. They had arrived at Victoria Heslin's residence. The agent's home wasn't visible from the road, but it was back there somewhere, at the end of a long, fancy-paved driveway. Small spotlights lining the road beyond the gate illuminated tufts of tall, unusual grass, bushes shaped with precision, and neatly-trimmed trees—the kind of stuff that requires regular landscaping. The darkness beyond was different than elsewhere. Not depressing, not hiding unknown horrors like back at the Sonesta Hotel, but alluring, almost a tease concealing whatever constituted the unlit surroundings.

"Wow," Danny said.

"Don't let it fool you. The wealthy, with their landscapers and cleaning crews, have plenty of their own problems. They're only better hidden."

"How would you know, Beth?" He sneered.

"Because I read and watch the news, idiot." She eased up on the brake and let the car coast past the entrance, about the length of a city block.

"What are we doing here?" Danny hissed. "This isn't part of the plan."

"It will only take a few minutes. There's something I have to do." She parked off to the side of the road on a wide patch of lush, green grass.

“You going to try to get in there?”

She nodded without looking at him. “I’m not just going to *try*. I’m going in.”

Danny laughed. “Terrible idea, Beth. This place represents insane money. Has to have high tech security and video monitors.”

Her pride got the better of her and she smiled, even though she hadn’t intended to share even a speck of information with him. “I’ve already scrambled the signals and shut off the alarms.” Truthfully, there hadn’t been any alarms activated. Surprising, for a property like that at night, and also puzzling. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she hoped she wasn’t mistaken.

Danny grunted. “Better be something worth stealing in there. You get caught, I never heard of you. Give me the keys.”

She ignored his comments, but she couldn’t help pondering his words. Was this worth the trouble of what could happen if she got caught?

“You think you’re anything like that agent? She’s a confident trust fund chick. She’d never do things just because someone told her she had to. She’s nothin’ like you, Beth.”

Bristling at his words, Beth scrambled out of the car and called back, “Shut up.” As usual, he just couldn’t stop trying to get under her skin. But this time, his intent backfired. He’d just given her more reason to go ahead with her plan. *Her* plan. Not his. She knew he wouldn’t follow. He wouldn’t get his hands dirty. He saved all of that for her. Always had.

“Get back here,” Danny screamed after her. “Don’t get your stupid ass caught over your girl crush. You aren’t done with what you have to do!”

Beth stopped, but not because of Danny. Hell, no. She just needed to think. And she had to pee thanks to the huge diet Coke she drank earlier. She dropped her jeans and squatted down on the side of the dark road. “Oh, damn.” Her underwear hadn’t been completely clear of her stream. Once her pants were back in place—now with an irritating wet spot against her lower back, a frustrating reminder that she hadn’t been able to handle the simplest of tasks—she studied the fence, walking alongside it. The bushes on the other side formed a thick barrier at least six feet tall.

Agents probably did stunts like this all the time, climbing over obstacles, pulling themselves up ropes. She could handle it. But as far as she could see in the dark, there really was no break or opening in the bushes. *This here’s as good a place as any.* She stretched her sweater sleeves down and around her hands to protect them from the tiny spears mounted on the top of every post. Huffing and puffing, with the spears digging through her sweater and into her skin, she hauled herself over the fence.

Amidst the snapping and cracking of branches, she dropped the rest of the way, plunging into the bushes. She landed hard on the other side, falling on her hip. Stinging flashes of pain shot from the scrapes on her arms and ankles, and her hip ached. A branch snagged her hair, tugging strands from her ponytail. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to push through the scrapes and claws of bushes until she was free.

With an aching, angry sigh, she paused to pick the leaves and twigs from her body. When she finished putting her ponytail back together, she was ready. Finally, the lights from the house were visible in the distance.

*Like going to the fricking Biltmore mansion.* She’d been to the estate in Asheville when she was younger and had never forgotten the place. Its size and the wealth it represented were awe inspiring, but there was also something ominous and creepy about such an obscenely gigantic home, its cold stone walls and floors, the claustrophobic bare-bones servant quarters in the attics and basements. They visited in the fall around Halloween, just like now, when the skies grew dark early. As they

made their way to the parking lot, she glanced over her shoulder. In the shadows between the trees, it was the ultimate haunted house.

*Pull yourself together. This isn't a haunted house. It's Agent Heslin's home. And if you want to speak with her, you need to get your butt up there.*

Cursing her damp underwear and her dirt-smeared knees and elbows to take her mind off her doubts, Beth took a trembling step toward the house. Soft earth squished under her weight as each footstep sank into the ground.

*Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty. . .*







IZZY LET OUT A DEEP woof. Victoria rolled over and opened one eye. Izzy was always the first to alert Victoria to anything out of the ordinary—like the occasional visitor. She flew off the bed and ran toward the doorway, her brown brindle coat blending seamlessly into the dark bedroom.

“Shhh. Be quiet. I need to sleep.”

Within seconds, all the dogs were on their feet and barking. What had woken them? With a touch of sleep still clouding her thoughts, Victoria imagined Ned had stayed the night in the guest wing and was just getting something in the kitchen. But just as quickly, she remembered he had gone home long ago. Had she set the alarms? No. She rarely set them during the day or night, afraid the dogs would set them off, and last night was no exception.

The barking escalated. Victoria wasn't hearing the excited yelps from earlier when the dogs chased something through the yard. These gruff barks were intended to send a firm message—this is our house. Which meant someone was there who didn't belong. She whipped her gun out from under her pillow and stood up, the hardwood floor cool beneath her bare feet. Her skin crawled with tiny goosebumps as she listened. In the sliver of light coming from the bathroom, the dogs' shadows stretched and twisted against the walls like hunched, contorting demons. Eddie slipped through the partly closed door and disappeared. From behind their enclosure, Leo and Bella watched, ears flattened, tails tucked underneath their bellies.

She wedged her cell phone under her arm, turned on the light, and crept out of her room toward the center of the house. The sheer size of her home intensified her concern—so many rooms and corridors where someone could lurk and hide. In a whoosh of movement, Izzy and Eddie ran past her and rushed outside. The dog door—large enough for a person to climb through—slapped shut behind them and clicked into place. That was good. If someone was on her property, they weren't inside. Yet.

“Exterior lights on.” Victoria's voice was steadier than her nerves.

Light flooded the patio and yard. Angled against the wall, Victoria scanned the area. Izzy and Eddie trotted back inside, huffing, and shaking their heads, their fur damp. “Good dogs, good dogs,” she whispered. She hoped they sensed her tension, she wanted to confirm their instincts—it wasn't okay for someone to be out there in the middle of the night. *If* that was the case. She hoped there was another explanation.

Facing the back door, Eddie growled.

*It's probably nothing. I'll just check the monitors and go back to bed.* A niggling sensation reminded her that just because it was most likely nothing didn't mean it was always nothing. It was definitely something when her mother was abducted in the middle of the night while the rest of the family and dogs were at their lake house.

Years ago, alone, in an equally big house, had her mother heard something, then tried to convince herself she was being silly, that perhaps whatever she'd heard wasn't anything more troubling than an animal invading the garden? Did she pass up the opportunity to call 911, thinking there was some innocuous explanation right up until the terror-filled instant she realized she was wrong? Had she thought it was probably nothing right up until the instant when strange men grabbed her, tied her up, and hauled her away from the home she would never see again? Victoria would never know the answers to those questions, but she knew she did not want to repeat mistakes from her family's past.

With a shudder, she cocked her gun, crept through the kitchen, and opened the door to the control room. Each screen inside the room would show a video feed from cameras spread around her house and property.

When she entered the room, in spite of all her training, an icy current ran up her spine.

Eerie gray static danced menacingly across the otherwise blank screens. Her heart pounded. Never had that happened before.

Closing and locking the control room door behind her, she called the security company.

Someone answered immediately. "Wentworth Security."

"This is Victoria Heslin. My code is GALGA081895SR2."

"Confirmed, Ms. Heslin. How can we help you?"

"I believe I have an intruder, maybe not in the house, but outside. I didn't have the security system activated before I went to bed, so no alarms went off, but my video feeds are down. Can you check on them?"

"Yes, Ms. Heslin. Do you think you or anyone else in the house is in danger? Do you want me to call 911? We can have one of our security personnel out there in . . . ten minutes, or do you want me to contact the Sheriff's office and have a patrol car come by?"

Victoria studied the gray screens, pushing away the thought that they were mocking her. Something was very wrong. But the dogs were no longer barking. She stared at her gun, curling her toes on the tiled floor. After years of living in a constant state of worry because of what happened to her mother, Victoria signed up for self-defense classes, and then studied martial arts. She hadn't wanted to live her entire life in fear. When she joined the FBI, even though her awareness of criminal behaviors multiplied, her paranoia disappeared as her training and experience progressed. By the time she graduated Quantico, her sense of empowerment was complete. She was now entrusted with protecting the lives of others, and more than capable of doing so. She could take care of herself.

"Ms. Heslin, are you still there? Should I call 911 for you?"

"No. No, thank you. No need to send anyone here. I'm the only one in the house and I'm armed. I just want to know what is going on with my surveillance cameras."

"Do you need a technician dispatched this evening, or would you like to make a service call for tomorrow?"

"Let me look around. I'll call back to place a service call."

"Okay. Thank you." She took a deep breath and ended the call.

She opened the door in a shooting stance, her gaze darting around, ready to pull the trigger if necessary. No need to announce her presence as a federal agent. This was her home.

The dogs lifted their heads from where they were sprawled across the floor on their sides. Izzy jumped up first and the rest of them scrambled to their feet and surrounded Victoria, each completely focused on their master. Whatever they heard earlier was no longer a perceived threat. Whatever, or whoever they heard was gone.

Ordering herself to calm down, Victoria sat at her desk with her weapon close by and checked her messages, aware of every slightest noise. Exhausted, but wound up like a tightly coiled spring, she eventually returned to bed and replaced the gun under her pillow. Tomorrow would require all her focus. She needed to sleep, especially because there might be some sleepless nights ahead as the investigations moved forward. But details and images from her long day kept flashing through her mind: brain matter, blood spatter, gaping bullet holes, numbers scrawled in black ink across ashen skin, a note left for her, and the bouncing gray static on her security video screens.

A clap of thunder echoed through the walls. Izzy jumped onto the bed, circled, then lay down, draping her head over Victoria's ankle. Victoria pulled the soft sheet and comforter up to her chin and concentrated on the dog's soft, rhythmic exhalations.

As a thunderstorm rocked the night, Victoria slept again while her darkest fears took shape in nightmares.

• • • •

SHAKING WITH FEAR, her heart pounding like crazy, Beth ran through the darkness. She landed wrong and her ankle twisted to one side. She yelped as a jolt of pain shot up her leg. Limping as fast as she could, she kept moving across the wide expanse of yard between her and the fence.

At any second, she expected to get slammed to the ground from behind, pulled backwards, and torn apart.

Just as suddenly as it started, the barking stopped. Nothing jumped on her back or tore at her skin. But would they come back? *I'll act crazy, stomp, and wave my arms around to freak them out. Or did that only work with bears?*

She shivered, thinking about what might have happened, what still might happen. A small winged creature darted past overhead, flapping too close for comfort. She shielded her face, bracing for an attack straight out of a horror movie. Since the moment she set foot on Agent Heslin's back porch, it was as if someone flipped a switch to let loose a deranged circus from hell. The sudden barking and growling—like a kennel full of crazed dogs lived inside the house. And not little yappy dogs like her sister's. Dogs with deep, guttural voices—a bunch of giant drooling beasts like German Shepherds, Rottweilers, and Doberman Pinschers, snarling and snapping their razor-sharp teeth, ready and willing to tear out someone's throat. That someone could have been her if she hadn't taken off running for her life. Maybe the dogs were the reason Agent Heslin hadn't activated her security alarms—no need for them.

Ankle throbbing, she continued with a wincing gallop movement toward the thick bushes. She ducked her head and covered it with her arms, forcing her way through the bushes to the fence. Tiny spears dug into her hands as she lugged herself over and collapsed on the other side in an exhausted heap. Her chest heaved with ragged gasps of breath. Not her finest moment.

The wet earth soaked through her jeans and top. She finally stood, brushing off debris and fixing her hair so Danny wouldn't know what she'd been through. Sweat trickled down her sides, further chilling her in the cold air.

Where was the damn moon when she needed it most? Unsure if she was heading in the right direction, she painfully hobbled toward the front gate, focusing on calming her heart and lungs so it wasn't like she was still running an obstacle course. As her fear dissipated, her anger grew. Things had not gone as she expected. Not even close. She'd had to flee like a scared and helpless animal, a terrified little rabbit, like prey rather than the predator.

She turned on her phone flashlight and aimed the small circle of light on the ground in front of her feet. When the large iron gate loomed ahead, she unfolded a note from her pocket and wrapped it around the fence where it was sure to be seen.

The note would have to do for now. Next time, she'd be better prepared.





A PERSISTENT WHINE broke through Victoria's slumber in the otherwise silent room. She rolled from her back to her side, jostling Izzy off her legs. The sad sound continued. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, the comforter falling in soft folds around her waist. The first specks of morning light entered the room. Her alarm hadn't gone off yet. The dogs rarely stirred until she got out of bed. Who was whining? And why was she so tired? As she woke fully, her memories returned—Leo and Bella, the disturbance after midnight, the malfunctioning security cameras.

"Listen up, Leo and Bella, I like my dogs to be quiet until the alarm goes off. So if you're still here tomorrow, gotta remember that. Please." She tossed the covers aside, stood up, and left the bedroom, followed by her dogs.

Walking through the main floor, her eyes darted to every corner. A quick check inside the control room proved the video monitor feeds and security system were working. The security company had left her an apology-laden message saying the technology had experienced a mysterious but temporary glitch and then restored itself. Victoria wasn't comfortable with the "mysterious glitch" explanation. Quite a coincidence for a night when she thought she might have had an intruder. She intended to find out exactly what happened. It might be time for a new security company. She returned to her bedroom to brush her teeth and pee. Her smooth skin always paled when she didn't get enough sleep, and dark circles had formed under her eyes, but it was nothing a little tinted moisturizer couldn't hide. She changed into running clothes and clipped her phone onto her jacket. As she passed the safe in the mudroom, headed outside, she debated grabbing her gun and holster, but decided against it.

Fog descended from a gray sky heavy with thick clouds, another soaking downpour almost a certainty. The scent of recently cut grass and damp earth had been intensified by yesterday's rain. The yard was littered with leaves and twigs blown from the foliage. Stepping off her back patio, she spotted footprints in the mud. Hairs raised on the back of her neck. A size seven shoe was her estimate. Gazing out through the mist at the tall bushes that framed her yard like a wall, she imagined someone hiding behind them, waiting. But her dogs, with their extraordinary hearing and scent detection, were calm and quiet, so no one was there. She crouched down and took pictures of the shoe prints with her phone.

She followed the footprints around the side of her house and toward the front of the property. Broken branches and trampled bushes indicated where the night time visitor had climbed the tall fence. Victoria straightened, rubbed her chin, and thought. She wasn't being paranoid if the threat was real. But how concerned should she be? She walked the perimeter of her home. No one had attempted to enter. Someone would be foolish to try and break into her home alone—yet she only saw one set of prints. The intruder might have been nothing more than a teenager on a dare. Egged on by her friends, hadn't she once been dared to scale the neighbor's brick wall and swim a lap in their pool when she was younger? Her soaked hair and clothes had provided the proof of her daredevil behavior. That might be all it was, except . . . there was the concerning issue of the security feeds.

Unwilling to climb through the bushes and jump the fence, Victoria jogged to the entrance to see if she could pick up the trail on the other side. Steps away from the gate, she spotted something small and white standing out against the black iron.

Careful not to ruin any fingerprints, she unfurled a wet slip of paper from around the bars and opened it like it was an ancient, fragile manuscript. Diluted purple splotches of ink smudged the

paper. She squinted to decipher all the letters.

*Without trust, you have nothing. Do you trust Rivera, and can he trust you?*





DRIVING TO THE OFFICE, Victoria pressed the phone to her ear as she pulled onto the interstate. She'd barely said hello before she yawned.

Rivera chuckled. "Late night?"

"Sorry. I sent you the summary notes I took after making calls and reviewing the research we got from local detectives."

"I looked everything over. Sent back my thoughts. Not much for us to go on."

"Nope. Not yet."

For a few miles, they brainstormed ideas about the murders, discussing the profile of whoever was responsible.

Victoria yawned again, although this time it might have been a nervous reaction rather than from her lack of sleep. She took a deep breath. "I had an unexpected visitor last night."

"A visitor?"

She told him what she'd found, including the note.

"Wait. You let me drone on and on about our case homework and then decided to drop that little bomb on me? What the hell?"

"Guess I was still processing the information." She turned down the heat because the warmth was making her sleepy.

"Any idea what the note means?"

"Nope. I was hoping you might."

He huffed. "Do you have it to give to the techs?"

"Yes. It was wet, not sure about prints, but they can at least compare the writing and the paper with the other one. I'll bring it to the lab as soon as I get there. You know, I think this focus on me could be the killer's weakness. It might be how we put an end to this."

Rivera grunted.

"Listen . . . don't tell Murphy. Let me tell him."

"Sure. But tell him right away." Rivera ended the call.

Victoria scanned her ID card and entered the FBI building just in time for Murphy's update meeting. Rivera was already seated at the table in the windowless conference room. His fingers tapped the table like he was playing the base notes of a piano piece. He studied Victoria as she took the adjacent seat, leaning toward him. "I dropped off the note. They'll analyze it to death for us—including the handwriting—but with the lighter staff on Sunday, results will be delayed."

Rivera nodded. He followed Victoria's gaze to the wall. Pictures from yesterday's crime scenes were displayed on a white board: a gruesome close-up of Todd Meiser's bloody face was taped above a wide view of the Cossmans lying across the hiking trail. Normally there might have been lines, some solid, some dotted, drawn between the images to illustrate the connections. There were none.

Murphy entered. "All right, I'm here." He slapped Rivera on the shoulder as he passed behind him. Before taking a seat, he dropped his notepad on the table and plunked his insulated thermos down beside it. "Let's get to it. Here's what I know. We now have two major crimes in the course of twenty-four hours and a media frenzy brewing. The media sure does love themselves a serial killer." He clutched his thermos. "Meiser's death might come with an explanation, one that ushers a boatload



of blowback for us—should have been under protection, blah, blah, blah—you all know I wanted them protected. The Cossmans’ deaths—well, until we have an explanation, their deaths came straight out of nowhere. More frightening for the public. More blowback for us. So let’s put their fears to rest . . . what do you have? Thoughts? Leads?”

Victoria and Rivera exchanged brief glances. She knew what he was reminding her to do, but she managed to ignore the frown on his face. “How was your son’s chorus concert?”

“Fine.” Murphy grunted.

“Good. Glad you were able to make it. Well, it’ll be easier to figure out the who, after we know the why. So we’re focusing on what connected the Cossmans to the Butler trial. We’re also looking for any reason someone might want them dead.”

Murphy took a swig from his thermos and wiped his hand over his chin. “Obviously.”

“So far, we’re not seeing that connection. No one Rivera or I spoke with could give us a reason someone might want the Cossmans dead, nor could we connect them to the Butlers, or Meiser. They don’t appear to have posed any threats or crossed anyone.”

Repetitive thoughts raced through Victoria’s head. *What did the victims have in common? What have we missed? And why the notes for me?*

Murphy stared at Rivera. “Anything to add to that bunch of nothing?”

Rivera coughed, giving Victoria a side long glance.

Murphy wasn’t looking at her. In a plea for Rivera to give her just a few more minutes, she held one finger up just above the table.

Rivera noticed and gave the slightest shake of his head before answering Murphy’s questions. “Sam gave us their credit card receipts from the past two days, since they arrived in town. Nothing we found puts Meiser and the Cossmans anywhere near each other.”

Victoria pointed to the white board. “So, if we’re staying open-minded here—the crimes show almost no passion, no excessive violence—the victims weren’t tortured, their deaths appear to have been instant. Yet the murders don’t appear well planned or connected in any way aside from the numbers on their heads.”

“If that information was leaked, someone else could have copied it,” Rivera said. “We asked to keep a lid on those details, but the neighbor who found Meiser saw it, so did the officers and the techs. At the Cossman crime scene we had police, the sheriff, the hiker, techs. . . any of them or all of them could have mentioned it to someone.”

“And the note left for you at the Cossman murder scene—” Murphy narrowed his eyes at Victoria. “That suggests some pre-planning. It also suggests the killer is messing with us or has some sort of fixation on you.”

“Well . . .” Victoria grasped her necklace. “There is something else. Someone left a note on my property last night. I think—”

Murphy plunked his forearms on the table and leaned toward her. “What do you mean, a note? What did it say?”

Victoria told him.

“Seriously, Heslin? That should have been the first thing you told me.” He scowled at Rivera. “Did you know about this?”

Victoria answered, not wanting Rivera to be in trouble for keeping quiet about it like she’d asked him to do. “We don’t know that it’s related to the other crime scenes.”

Murphy sighed heavily and sat up straight in his chair. “Let me know if forensics matches it to the others. If so—well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Victoria let out the breath she'd been holding and smiled inside, relieved she was still on the case. She wanted nothing more than to catch whoever killed Meiser and the Cossmans.

Murphy's phone lit up on the table. He ignored it and took another gulp from his thermos. "What about the Cossmans' hotel? Did you or the cops find anything there?"

"Nothing with the staff," Victoria said. "They all had alibis."

"The police have spoken to every person who stayed at the hotel in the past week. They made up an excuse about lost and found items, they didn't want to cause a panic, but wanted to make sure they were all alive and well. We have three guests we still haven't spoken with. Jim Johnson—might be a fake name. Paid with cash." Rivera glanced at his notes and smirked. "Jason Bourne also paid in cash. And one guest was using a stolen credit card."

Murphy plunked his elbows on the table, rested his chin on his hands. "The one using the stolen card. Tell me about him. Or her."

Rivera flipped a page in his notebook. "He was in room 332. When I called Thomas Wilson, the person whose credit card was used for the stay, I got an elderly man in San Francisco. Mr. Wilson hasn't left the Bay Area in years. Whoever was staying in room 332 had opened a new credit card in Thomas Wilson's name. He had the room reserved for three days, but one of the cleaning attendants reported that the bed hadn't been slept in after the first night, and his belongings were gone.

"So we don't know the criminal's real name or what happened to him?"

"Correct." Rivera tapped his fingers over his notepad.

"At least we haven't found his body yet. Prints?"

Rivera shook his head. "The woman who cleaned the room found empty beer cans, but she threw them out and they're long gone. We dusted the door handles, the remotes, and the phone. But it's a hotel room, there are too many. Didn't want to drag the lab down this alley when we don't have anything to connect him to the murders, and as far as we know, he left before Meiser was killed."

Murphy grunted. "See if the card was used anywhere after he left."

"We did." Rivera flipped his notepad closed. "It wasn't."

"Keep the account open and put a trace on it so we know if it gets used again." Murphy grabbed his belongings and stood up. "Well, get back to it. Let's hope we get some leads today, from somewhere."

Victoria left the meeting room and walked straight to her office. Cloudy morning light filtered in from a small window above her head. She opened her laptop and checked on her house. All the video feeds were working. On one screen, Izzy wandered through the kitchen, staring up at the countertops and sniffing here and there. One of her favorite things to do was to leap on top of them and search for errant crumbs. No doubt she'd try it soon enough. Ned might even find her there when he arrived in a few hours. The other cameras showed the rest of the dogs were fast asleep.

Victoria had to find out what happened to cause the temporary glitch in her video cameras, but for now, the murder cases came first, until a glance at her phone showed her father had left a message. If he needed something from her, she'd better find out what it was, or he'd be calling back soon. Her father was a wonderful man, but he had no practice with being ignored. She pressed the play button and raised her phone to her ear.

"Tori, darling. Hope you are well today. My attorney called. A sizable amount of money left your trust. Two hundred thousand dollars. You know I trust you, but Fenton just wants to make sure you aren't in any . . . trouble. Just call me. Love you."

Victoria deleted the message and set down her phone. Make sure she wasn't in trouble? What on earth did Fenton imagine she did with the money? She rolled her eyes. Fenton was supposed to be her

attorney as well. He should call her directly if he had concerns. Although, she didn't want to explain every dollar she spent, nor should she have to. She had good reason to keep her transactions secret and anonymous. She didn't want the publicity, and with her career, she couldn't have it. Federal agents were supposed to live quiet, private lives. The public didn't need to know she existed.

Rivera popped his head in the opening of her door. "You okay, Tori?"

She turned her chair to face him and offered a slight smile. "Absolutely."

He handed her a coffee.

She peered into the paper cup. "Do I want to drink this?"

"It's fresh. I just made it."

"Thanks." She took the cup and wrapped both hands around it, letting the warmth seep through her skin. "I know I must look a little rough around the edges. Not much sleep last night. But I'm fine."

"If you're worried about—"

"Good, you're both here." Murphy burst into Victoria's office, hitching up his pants. Victoria quickly scooted her chair out of reach to avoid a slap on her back or shoulder. Murphy didn't discriminate, every shoulder apparently beckoned to him. At least it was shoulders and not rear ends, or he'd be facing more charges of harassments than he could count.

Murphy directed his gaze at the top of her head. "Heslin, do you color your hair to make it blonde like that?"

"Uh, no. I've never colored my hair. This is the hair I was born with. Why?"

"I just called down to forensics. Their report isn't ready, but they gave me something. There were long blonde hairs on that silk scarf from Meiser's house. Techs thought they could be yours and wanted a sample."

"I don't see how—"

"Relax. They're not yours. And I told them you weren't that sloppy. The hairs they found were brown hair dyed blonde."

Victoria met Rivera's gaze. "We need to identify the prostitute Meiser was with and see what color hair she had."

"Or if Meiser had a lover who found out he was with a prostitute." Murphy wagged a finger. "He could have taken the girlfriend to a real nice dinner for the same amount of money he paid the hooker."

Rivera wrapped both hands around his mug. "You think the hypothetical girlfriend got that mad?"

"When it comes to a woman scorned, there are no limits." Murphy slapped Rivera on the shoulder before walking out.

Victoria called after him. "So, you're willing to consider that Meiser's death might not be related to the Butler trial?"

Murphy yelled back from the hallway. "Of course. I'm willing to consider his Grandma did it, but it's not likely."

Victoria swiveled her chair back to face the center of her desk. "Between the small footprints and the long blonde hairs, there's a woman involved. But there's no good reason for a scorned girlfriend to then become a serial killer."

The agents' phones beeped at the same time. Victoria read the message. "Okay. Ballistics just confirmed the bullets matched. The same gun killed Meiser and the Cossmans. So that's good. Finally a connection besides the numbers. At least we know for sure they're connected."

"Same hit man, different client?"

Victoria shrugged. “I really don’t see any evidence that either was a professional hit. Even though I know it’s the best and only motive we’ve got so far with Meiser.” She took a sip of her coffee and flinched. It was a far cry from a spiced pumpkin latte, but she took another sip because she didn’t want to make Rivera feel bad. She swallowed the second bitter gulp and stared at her notes.

A day later, and the same two questions remained. How were the crimes connected? Why would anyone want to kill the Cossmans?





AFTER TAPPING AROUND on the top of the bedside table, Beth sat up and found her phone. She jammed her finger on the button to stop her alarm. Running her hand through her matted hair, she stared blankly at the wall. Her eyes drooped closed. She clutched a pillow, plopped back against the mattress, and rolled onto her stomach. She should get up, but she didn't want to. *Need more sleep.* Her body ached. The bed was comfortable, the pillows decent. *Just a few more minutes . . .*

"Get out of bed, lazy ass," grunted Danny. "You've got to get the Smiths before they're out of here."

Danny was right. Jason and Kelly got lucky yesterday when the cop showed up. But today would be their last day flitting around town being all sweet to each other like it was their honeymoon. It had to be. *Because I'm not going to jail. Please, God, don't let them have called the police already.* She rarely prayed, only when she was in dire danger of being caught for something. Now was as good a time as any.

She pushed herself out of bed and trudged into the bathroom. She rubbed her eyes and frowned at her puffy face, her flattened hair, and the dirt caked under her fingernails. She stripped and turned on the shower. The water helped soothe her soreness. Jumping through the bushes and over Agent Heslin's fence had not been one of her better ideas.

Alone in the room while getting dressed—*just like Danny to go down to breakfast without me*—she turned on the television. In no time at all, she'd found a news update about what she did. Her face lit up as she turned up the volume. The brawny guy, he must be the boss of the other agents, gave a statement about Todd Meiser's death and what it meant for the Butler case. The Butlers again! Those freeloaders sure were getting a lot of attention for what Beth had done.

During the commercial, she rifled through the clothes in her suitcase and pulled out wrinkled black pants and a white blouse, the most business-looking outfit she owned. She purchased them just in case she needed to pretend to be someone sort of professional for one of Danny's business schemes. The pants were a bit tight around her thighs and the shirt poked her underarms, but it made her feel official. Confident. Powerful. Like someone deserving of respect. When packing, she'd envisioned completing the outfit with her black, floral scarf—no longer an option thanks to Meiser—and going somewhere kind of nice. She and Danny were on vacation, after all.

Just over a week ago, he had plopped down on their couch, opened a beer and said, "Next week is our three-year anniversary."

"It is?" She knew their anniversary date, but she had a hard time believing *he* had remembered.

"We should celebrate. Let's get away for a few days."

"Really? Okay. Sure," she'd agreed. "Where should we go?"

"I already picked a place out. It's in Virginia. I used to go there when I was a kid. There's a waterfall with a mind-blowing view."

"Waterfall?" Beth had asked, still surprised he'd suggested a vacation. "Remember I showed you that article about that woman who slipped from the edge of a waterfall and fell to her death? Was that the same place?"

Danny took a gulp of beer. "Nah, that was somewhere in North Carolina. You remember that, huh?"

“Yes.” The story was too morbid to forget. Beth wasn’t a fan of heights, and she shuddered at the thought of tumbling to her death and smashing to bits on the rocks below. But it wasn’t often that Danny suggested they do anything together, aside from watching television. She wasn’t about to put down his idea even if it involved traipsing along the edge of a waterfall.

“Anyway, we’re going to hike up to the falls when we get there. It’s going to feel like we’re on top of the world. And . . . I’ve got a surprise for you.” He grinned.

“You do? What is it?”

“Can’t tell ya. But you’ll just have to trust me.”

Beth smiled. Everything about his out-of-the-blue suggestion was unusual. Danny hadn’t been romantic since they got married. He hadn’t paid much attention to her at all lately, other than to show his irritation over one thing or another. She might have been a little more suspicious if she hadn’t been so hopeful. “What about the new business you’ve been working on?” *Our million dollar sure-thing.* “Can you leave it for a few days?”

Over the past few months, Danny had been leaving town for a few days at a time. His new business venture was supposed to make them a lot of money. One million dollars was the figure he used. She’d asked, but he hadn’t shared any details. Beth had yet to see anything come of his travels. Just a bunch of hotel and meal expenses, but he seemed passionate about whatever it was, she had to give him that.

“Oh, yeah. It can wait a few days for me.” He downed the rest of his beer. “I’m closer than I’ve ever been. It’s just a short matter of time before it happens. Then it will be like hitting the jackpot. Guaranteed.” Grinning, he tossed the can toward the trash and missed.

Now, here they were, in Virginia on their supposed vacation. A nice dinner was likely to happen. That’s what people did on anniversary trips, although they probably used credit cards with their actual names on them. Lately, Danny never wanted to go out anywhere with her. Which was strange because when he came back from his recent business trips, she’d found receipts for some upscale restaurants. Not like super fancy, can’t-get-a-reservation types of places, but still a big step up from Bubba’s Take-out Barbecue. Well, tonight would be different. She’d go without him. She’d find a nice sit-down restaurant with waitstaff and cloth napkins and candles on tablecloths, the type of place where Agent Rivera might take Agent Heslin. She’d enjoy a good meal by herself.

After she killed the Smiths.

Studying her reflection in the mirror, she removed the studs and rings from her ears, setting them at the back of the sink until only one earring remained in each earlobe. She was ready.

She drove back to the Sonesta Hotel, her ground-zero, stakeout spot. She didn’t see the Smith’s Jeep. She parked facing the hotel entrance to catch them coming in, or to catch someone else from her list coming out. An hour went by. Boredom always made her crave a salty or sugary snack, but she had no food. She rotated her index finger from side to side, chewing on her cuticles. To pass the time, she called Danny to give him an update. He was probably laying around the room watching television and sleeping. What she really wanted was for him to bring her something to eat, which was impossible because she had their car. The truth—she was lonely and wouldn’t mind just hearing his voice. The call went to his voicemail.

“This mailbox is full and cannot accept additional messages.” She’d always been annoyed by the bossy, robotic woman who came with the phone service.

Beth sighed and returned to watching through the windshield. Where were the Smiths? According to the hotel’s computer—pathetic—almost anyone could hack into that system—they were still

checked in. But what if they had left without checking out? What if they'd taken off without stopping at the Sonesta's front desk like she and Danny had done?

Clasping her hands repeatedly, she watched the digital clock, counting the seconds until the minute changed. *Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen . . .*

Out came—what was his name—room 125—he was on her list. Horrigan? Yes—Steve Horrigan. He had no social media presence that she could find. She knew almost nothing about him. For all she knew, he was one of those guys who was living in a different decade technology wise.

She couldn't just wait around for the Smiths any longer. Cursing them for eluding her too many times, but mostly because of their stupid happy faces and marital bliss—which she doubted was even real—she followed Horrigan's black Ford pick-up out of the parking lot. The Smiths should stop acting so sappy, stop the irritating public displays of affection, and take a clue from couples like Agent Rivera and Heslin. Their love was evident in subtle glances, but they didn't go out of their way to throw it in anyone's face.

Tailing Horrigan to the edge of the city, annoying hunger pains pinged across her stomach like mini lightning bolts. When she passed a Bojangles, she considered forgetting about Horrigan and stopping for food. She managed to steel her resolve by thinking about the gross food they must serve in prison. She had a job to do if she didn't want to find out more about prison slop first hand. From a street lined by woods, Horrigan pulled his truck onto a dirt road. So did Beth. Her car bounced in and out of ruts and mud puddles but she barely slowed down. He would see her following. She didn't care. Her stomach growled. She needed to get it done.

At the end of the road, he parked in a cleared area large enough to hold a few cars. He got out and grabbed a tackle box and fishing pole from the back. He smiled and waved as he passed her window. Beth looked down at her legs, pretending not to see him. Better to let him march deeper into the woods.

She waited until he disappeared on a narrow path. When she got out of her car, the wind cut through her thin, silky blouse. She wrapped her arms around her body to ward off the chill. Wishing for a coat and something warm to eat—a hot chicken biscuit would be perfect—she hurried after him. The path ended in an open area near a river. She heard a cough, looked left, and saw Horrigan.

He set his tackle box down. "Can I help you?" He sounded amused, without a hint of fear.

A strong wind blew against her. She tucked her chin. "Why would I need your help?"

"You followed me here. And it don't look like you came ready to fish." One side of his mouth lifted into a smirk.

Okay, so she wasn't the best follower, not like when she was stalking people online. Then she was great. She stepped closer, one hand inside her purse turning her gun around so she could pick it up and be ready to shoot. The gun refused to move. The damn muzzle was stuck on something. Had to be the hole in the inner lining, the one that occasionally ate her lipsticks and spare change, the reason she and Danny couldn't find one of the car keys for months. Scowling, she kept her eyes on Horrigan but had to put both hands inside her purse to get the gun loose. "I think you know why I'm here, Steve. You saw me! You know and I know that it's just a matter of time before you decide to tell someone."

Horrigan leered. "What are you doing?"

The gun finally jerked free inside her bag. She kept it hidden.

"Okay. Whatever, lady. I think you've been drinking. But I'd like to know what you think I saw." With his hands on his hips, he took a few steps in her direction. "Why don't you go ahead and tell me what's going on and why you're here."



A strong gust of wind howled past, fueling her anger. Her pulse thumped like a drum in her ears and throat. How dare he mock her and act like he had the upper hand! The old Beth might have let him intimidate her, hunched her shoulders and hurried away, but the old Beth was gone, replaced by a stronger version who didn't have to take his or anyone's crap.

"This is what's going on, Steve." She yanked the gun out of her purse and curled her fingers around the grip.

His eyes bulged. He held up a hand and backed away. "Whoa, hold on there. Just lower that thing. No need for—"

"You going to try and outrun my bullets, or just stand there and tell me you really don't know what I did?"

"I don't know—honest to God—you have me mixed up with—"

"Like hell I do." She pulled the trigger three times. He jerked as each bullet met his body. Beth's arms shook with each shot, but she held tight to the gun.

With a vacant, shocked stare, Horrigan swayed in slow motion at the edge of the woods. Blood soaked his hands, squirting through his fingers as he clawed at his chest. His legs collapsed, and he slumped to the ground on his back, gurgling and groaning.

Beth dropped the gun. Steering clear of his streaming blood, she grabbed his feet. After a few dragging steps, his dirty boots slid off in her hands, and she toppled backward onto her bottom. "Damn it." She scrambled up and wiped her hands on her pant legs, threw the boots into the woods and resumed pulling on smelly, damp, threadbare socks. *Gross*. She managed to drag his body a few yards into the trees and bushes, stopping twice to catch her breath. He was no longer groaning when she took his keys and rifled through pockets for his wallet. She grabbed his tackle box and fishing pole and threw them into the woods after him.

Her arms were limp, wiped out from shooting and dragging Horrigan's heavy body. She straightened her clothes, damp with sweat, and scowled at the dark, dirt smears on her shirt and pants and the muddy area covering her butt.

Grabbing her gun off the ground, she hurried back to the cars, *hope no one heard the gunshots*, and threw everything from her car and glove compartment into Horrigan's truck. It was time for a switch. With the rag and a bottled water from his floor, she wiped down every surface inside her own car, focusing on the steering wheel, the door handles, and the gear shift. She didn't have a record, they wouldn't find her fingerprints in the system, but Danny . . . he'd been convicted of several petty crimes. If they found his prints, he'd lead the authorities right to her. As she hurried through the work, her new mantra played in circles in her head: "I'm not going to jail, I'm not going to jail, I'm not going to jail . . ."

She backed the truck out, yanking the wheel left to face forward. Another pick-up rounded the corner, spewing dust in its wake. *Really? Now? You've got to be kidding me*. Her heart rate spiked as the vehicle drove straight toward her, filling up the one lane road. Her new mantra evolved into a frantic counting spell. With one hand, she put the vehicle in reverse, gripping the gun with the other, certain the approaching driver was there because he heard the gunshot.

The truck pulled up beside her, the driver's side only a few feet away. Her fingers tightened around the gun in her lap. *Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve . . .* A middle-aged guy wearing a blue plaid flannel shirt and a ball cap lowered his window and stared at her.

She rolled her window down too, lifting the gun a few inches. Her heart thumped harder.

He leaned forward with a big smile on his face. "Fishin'?"

“Yep. I was.” She did her best to act natural, but her smile felt tight and forced, like it might crack. She closed her lips, so she wasn’t baring her teeth like a rabid animal.

The guy shut his engine off.

*Crap!* He was staying. She had to get out of there. But at least he wasn’t there for her.

“Any luck?” he asked.

This time her smile was the real thing, full of pride and satisfaction. “I caught exactly what I wanted to catch today.”

“Good for you. Hoping for the same.”

“Ha!” She revved the engine and sped away. It wasn’t luck, eliminating him.

That’s when it hit her. *No! Oh, no! No! No!*

Her breath caught, and her heart skipped a beat. Everything felt wrong from the pit forming in her stomach to the dizziness spiraling around her head. In her haste, she’d forgotten to write the number five on Horrigan’s forehead. Numbers were important, even the odd ones. Numbers brought order. Numbers were necessary. And, to make it worse, she hadn’t left messages for anyone.





CHRIS ROBERTS SLOWLY reeled in his line, pulling slightly left, up, and left again, to get it unhooked from the twig it had snagged on. “Come on, Betsy. Come on, girl. There we go,” he whispered to himself. Once the line was free, he eased his way downstream, whistling, and cast from his new spot. He’d been standing next to the river for an hour, without getting a nibble.

The thirty-something blonde lady must have taken her luck with her when she left. She was a funny one. She had an edge about her, a nervous look, not what he expected to see on the face of anyone who had just spent time hanging out by the river. Strange that she was out there. She wasn’t dressed for the outdoors. He could only see her head, shoulders, and a bit of her torso. Her silky white top hadn’t fared well while she was fishing. Kind of looked like she’d had an unhappy spill in the sand, or a roll around in the bushes. Another poor office worker trying to snatch a break from a dismal cubicle and get some fresh air, like he used to do. He grinned. Or maybe she drove all the way here only to discover that nature is actually dirty, before scurrying back to the safety of her office’s four gray walls. He shook his head. Nah. Just before she left, her nervous look had been replaced with one of triumph. She’d be back for more.

He rolled his neck from side to side and reeled in his empty line again. Across the calm water, a small dark spot scurried about. A beaver. It climbed out of the water on the other side of the bank. Roberts smiled, content. There was no place he’d rather be, except maybe doing the same thing in Colorado, or Montana. It was the quiet hum of nature that appealed to him. The lull of the clear water streaming gently past, the whitecaps that arced over the boulders and rocks, the lack of artificial noise.

He set down his fishing gear and opened his thermos of herbal green tea. It was better hot, and in this weather, it would be tepid in no time. Winter was extending its icy grip into the fall season.

Back in the clearing, he had parked near another car. He would have heard it leave if the engine had started, so it was still there. Where was its owner? Might be nice to have someone to talk to for a bit.

He finished his tea and, with his hands inside his fleece lined pockets, stared across the river, taking a deep breath of the fresh, chilly air. He stepped back toward the cover of the woods to relieve himself. He gazed in through the trees, admiring the colorful fall foliage, until something caught his attention. The handle of a fishing pole stuck up through the brush. He chuckled. Odd—but not entirely unusual; wouldn’t be the first time a day with no fish got under a sportsman’s skin and—like an irritated golfer who missed a three-foot putt—he threw his equipment into the woods. The pole was a sturdy one. Was it salvageable? He ambled into the woods, toward the discarded piece of equipment. When he was close enough to grasp the pole, he caught a glimpse of something else.

Red liquid glistened across the bushes, dotting the leaves as if they were diseased. And then . . . he had to blink to make sure what he saw was real. He dropped the pole, and backed away in quick, stumbling steps. His hands flew to his chest. “Oh no. Holy mother....” A thin sweat broke out over his skin.

The dead man’s eyes had stared up at the gray sky, his expression frozen in horror. Roberts could barely think or breathe. Had the man moved? He didn’t think so but—*Oh, God!*—he wasn’t sure. *You have to check!* Roberts crept forward again, gripping the sides of his head. The man’s shirt was soaked in blood, a pool of it covered the ground beside him. *Oh, he’s dead! He’s definitely dead!*

Roberts' eyes darted around. His pulse thumped, rushing blood past his ears, louder than the river. He yanked his phone out of his shirt pocket. It slid out of his sweaty, shaky hands, flipped through the air, and landed in the blood.

"No!" He squeezed his eyes shut. Bile rose in his throat. He had to lean forward, resting his hands on his knees, and wait for the nausea to subside. The dead man's face was etched in his brain, the gruesome expression and lifeless eyes staring at him from inside his mind.

He wanted to race back to the car and lock the doors. But he had to call for help. Tears sprang from his eyes as he grabbed his iPhone from the puddle of blood seeping from the dead man. Holding the phone away from himself, he ran back to his bag, where he had a rag. He cringed and gagged as he wiped the deep red liquid off his screen. A sudden noise came from the woods. He jerked around, heart racing. A squirrel scurried up a nearby tree trunk. Damn. If he hadn't just peed, he surely would have wet himself. Muscles tight and tense, he scanned the area again. The quiet isolation of the river bank had become a source of terror.

Praying for God's help, he pounded 911 into his phone. His fingers slipped on the numbers. He had to hit the back button and start over again. *Come on, come on, come on!*

"911. What is your emergency?"

"I just found a dead man. He's near the river. Near the clearing when you turn off . . . off . . . I can't even remember . . . *where am I?* . . . Fordham Street!"

"Your name, please."

"I'm Chris Roberts." His lips trembled. "I was fishing. That's when I saw him. Jeez. He's been shot. At least I think he's been shot." Roberts gathered his gear in one arm, dropped his empty thermos and almost tripped hurrying to pick it up. He flung his bag over his shoulder. With his new pole dragging across the ground behind him, he hurried toward the clearing where he'd left his car.

"Mr. Roberts, I'm sending someone to your location. You should hear the sirens in a few minutes. Is there anyone else in the vicinity?"

Roberts peered over his shoulder, scanning the river bank and the woods. He'd reached the clearing. "I don't think so, but . . . there's another car here."





BETH WIPE GREASE OFF her hands with a napkin as she swallowed the last bit of her hot dog. Slumping down in the gas station parking lot, she pulled out her cell phone and called Danny. One less witness to worry about, and only three left. She wanted to share that news. Her call went to his voicemail. Again.

*Asshole better clear out his messages one of these days.* She made a mental note to tell him when she saw him later. She'd been harboring so much anger towards Danny lately. She had a vague, almost surreal but ever-present feeling that they'd had a huge fight recently, but she couldn't even remember what it was about. His business venture? Or . . . she just didn't know.

She put the truck in drive and headed back to the Sonesta Hotel. She liked being high up above the ground, it made her feel in control, like the boss of the road. Too bad the interior smelled like cigarette smoke. But here's what else smelled like cigarette smoke—prison. So it was a good reminder of what she was determined to avoid.

As she was pulling in to the hotel lot, a middle-aged man with dark skin and a paunchy stomach walked toward his car. Arnold Gomez. Thanks to the “special reunion” pictures he posted on his Instagram page yesterday, she knew where he was going. He was running late, thank goodness. He should have left a while ago if he was going to meet his nephew when he said he would.

She rummaged in her purse for a scrap of paper and a pen. Wrinkles formed across her forehead as she leaned forward and scribbled her next message. This time she would be prepared. With a smile, she tucked the paper in her pocket, drove across the parking lot, and fell in behind Gomez's Hyundai. Turn after turn, she followed him closely, but not too closely.

Beth glanced at her speedometer. He was doing at least 48 in a 35-mph zone. She frowned. Wouldn't that be just her luck if a cop pulled her over and searched the vehicle. She had no idea what Horrigan had stashed under the seats. He could be a drug runner for all she knew, although he seemed too boring of a guy for that. Still, to play it safe, she let up on the accelerator even though it meant increasing the distance between her and Gomez.

None of the people passing in cars paid her any attention. They weren't staring out their windows or switching lanes to avoid her. She was just a random person in a Ford F-150. They didn't have an inkling of what she had done or what she was about to do. No one expected something bad to happen during the day. Even Danny seemed nicer when the sun was out, before his first drink woke up his mean streak and each additional drink intensified it.

Gomez left the main road and drove onto a side street. Small homes gave way to apartment complexes. At a sign offering two months free rent, free cable and Wi-Fi, Gomez slowed down and entered the Hampshire Apartment Complex. Beth gripped the wheel tighter, her arms growing rigid. Her heart raced. *Just a few more minutes.*

Ignoring the “Drive Slow – Children” signs, Gomez wove through the apartments to the back and parked in front of building D. Beth parked nearby. She tucked Danny's gun in her purse and stepped down from the truck. Gomez was still in his car. Looking around, she saw no one else. Too good to be true? Nah. Even if someone came out, who would try to stop her? They might call the police, but she would be long gone by then. And if they were lucky enough to catch her license plate, it would lead to Steve Horrigan. They'd be looking everywhere for him, thinking he was the killer, at least until he started to smell and someone eventually discovered him.

A terrible sensation descended over her. Something she couldn't pinpoint but knew was bad, like a nightmarish déjà vu. She closed her eyes and leaned against the side of the truck, hoping it would pass.

A car door softly clicked shut. The car beeped as it locked.

*No time. Pull it together.* She opened her eyes. Gomez was walking away. *Do something.*

"Freeze!" Slightly dizzy, she managed to stand with her legs apart, both hands on the gun, her voice level but loud, pretending she knew exactly what she was doing from experience. And she really did have some by now. But the strange, unsettling feeling made it hard for her to focus.

Gomez spun around and placed his hand on his chest. "Me?"

"Yeah, you." Her voice cracked. *What is wrong with you, Beth?*

"Uhh, why?"

"You know who I am." She stepped forward, a little unsteady.

"No." He shook his head. "I don't know you."

"Don't lie to me. It's too late for that."

"I think you've made a mistake, lady." Gomez glanced toward the apartment building and took a step backwards.

"I haven't made a mistake. I'm Agent Heslin. FBI."

He cocked his head to the side and shrugged. "What do you want?"

"I want you to do what I say, so no one gets hurt." Her knees beginning to quake like they had in the hotel room yesterday. If she was going to shoot him and not miss, she had to get a lot closer. "Just get on your knees." She echoed her words in her mind, wanting to sound confident and in charge. Impressive. Powerful. "There's something important happening here. FBI business."

"Why do I have to get on my knees?"

"Don't ask me questions. Just do it." Her hands were trembling. She gripped the gun tighter, like it might fly out of her hands any second. She moved close enough to see his dark eyes darting about. A muscle in his neck quivered and tensed as he lowered himself to one knee.

Beth held her chin up, moving closer step by step, eyes fixed on the scar running across the man's cheek. Just like Danny's scar. And somewhere in those few seconds after he kneeled, Beth no longer saw Gomez's dark skin and shaved head. She saw Danny. And for once, he was doing what she asked him to do.

He sprang up and ran toward her. Beth blinked, not believing her eyes. Her mind flashed to the time she accidentally knocked over Danny's full, opened bottle of whisky and he came after her with a hockey stick.

A rush of panic flooded through Beth's veins. As quick as she could, she pulled the trigger. Once. Twice. The kick from the shot rattled her teeth and jerked her back. Danny staggered to the side then stumbled backwards, a shocked expression overwhelming his features. A knife fell from his hand and clattered to the pavement beside him. He crumbled over with a groan.

Beth ground her teeth. The heat of her anger spread across her face. *How dare he? Where was the respect for a federal agent?* He'd tried to trick her, acting all cooperative while planning to stab her as soon as he had the chance. Just like Danny. Pretend to be all nice so Beth wasn't expecting the blow that might send her tumbling down the stairs, backwards over the chair, or wherever she happened to be when his rage blew up. But this time, she had shown him. She stepped right up to Gomez and pulled the trigger a final time. The gun only emitted an empty click.

*Damn!* She glared at the gun. *Now I have to figure out how to reload it.*



Her breaths came short and fast. Her whole body shook as she hid the gun inside her purse, but the unsettling feeling from earlier had disappeared. At her feet, Gomez stopped convulsing and lay still.

She rummaged in her purse for the Sharpie. *Where is it! Gotta clean out this bag!* Finding it, she scrawled the number six on the center of his forehead. Below it, she wrote, *You'll be sorry.* "I'm more than a punching bag and sex toy." She tucked the scrap paper with her note into his mouth. With a smug, satisfied smile, she hurried back toward her car.

"Uncle Arnold!"

The voice broke Beth's reverie. She stopped, rooted to the spot. *He saw me!* Now, the nephew needed to go, too. But her gun was empty.

The young man ran toward his uncle's body. He stopped suddenly, picked up the knife from the ground, and scanned the area with his chin lifted and his eyes blazing.

Beth backed away, still watching. The nephew walked forward again, sank to the ground, his hands covering his mouth, one knee in the spreading puddle of blood. With a sudden jerk of his head, he rose to his feet, looking left, right, and over his shoulder, the knife still in his hand.

Beth froze as the nephew's eyes met her own.

Danny's words echoed through her mind. *Who do you think you are, Beth? You can't do anything.* Her posture changed. No longer channeling the confident demeanor of Agent Heslin, she slumped her shoulders and waved her hands around in frantic, panicked motions. *No one would ever suspect me.*

"He's been shot!" she screamed. "I didn't see who did it. I'm—uh—I'm going to get my phone and call 911!" She ran the rest of the way to Horrigan's truck as if she was hurrying to call for help. Instead, she drove off, tires screeching around the corner.





KELLY WALKED THROUGH her living room, wheeling her suitcase behind her. She sniffed, turning her nose up. The whole place smelled a little musty. There was no food in the fridge, of course, and the dehumidifier would need to be emptied before that green stuff started growing inside it. She had to run a dark load of clothes right away so her favorite yoga pants would be clean for tomorrow. But it was good to be back.

She lowered the volume on the TV. Jason had already disappeared into the bedroom. For him, it just wasn't home without all the televisions going at once. Picking up a pen, she started making a list.

Eggs, butter, bananas . . .

Behind her, the TV mentioned a shooting. She glanced at the screen. Her pen dropped. Her stomach flipped. "Jason!"

Jason rushed into the living room. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Kelly fumbled with the remote, pausing the news and then rewinding it. "Look!" She pointed at the paused screen, her eyes wide.

Jason followed her gaze. "What?"

Kelly pressed play, waving her hands in front of her, her eyes fixed on the television. "That dead guy was in the room next to us!" Kelly's hands flew to her face and the remote hit her in the nose. She lowered her hands, wringing them in front of her chest. "In our hotel."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! I remember his face, and that outfit. It doesn't really match. He was wearing it at breakfast yesterday. He sat one table over from us. He said hello to me because I saw him when he first checked in, when you went to park the car and I went up to the room by myself. He was in the hallway then. Same pants, different shirt. He was in the room right next to us."

On the television, the news anchor stepped to the side, revealing a man lying on his back on the ground. "Law enforcement needs your help identifying this man. He was found by the Rocky Bend River off Fordham Street this afternoon, with no identification."

A digital black bar covered parts of the man's torso and his entire face, hiding something Kelly could only imagine was terrible. He wore a dark green sweatshirt, flung wide open, a blue shirt patterned with pink fish and gray fishing poles, and camouflage cargo pants.

The camera went to a close shot of the newscaster with the crime scene image behind him. "The unidentified man has heavily tattooed arms."

"If you recognize him, please call the number below. Anyone in the area who heard gunshots between the hours of eight and ten in the morning are asked to notify authorities."

A tip line number scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

"Whoa. I don't remember him." Jason frowned at the screen and twisted his hands together. "And now he's dead?"

"Not just dead. Murdered!"

"Can't believe they showed a dead guy on the news. I didn't think they were supposed to do that."

"They said he was shot. Well, they said something about hearing gunshots. They don't know who he is. What should we do?"

Jason rubbed his hand over his chin. "We call that number. Tell them what you said, so they can figure out who he is."

Kelly paused the television again, flapped her hands against her sides and paced in a circle. “You do it. Hurry. I’m too nervous right now. I’ll tell you what to say.”

Jason called the number, taking deep breaths. “Hi. This is Jason Smith. I’m calling because I have some information about a murder we just saw on television.” He put his hand over the phone and spoke to his wife. “They’re transferring me.”

A few seconds later he spoke again. “The man who got killed, he was in the room next to us at the Sonesta Hotel in Virginia.”

Kelly held onto his elbow, bouncing on her toes, shaking his arm. “Do you remember our room number?”

“Okay. I can hold.”

Kelly jostled his arm again. “I can’t remember our room number. Do you know it? We have to tell them what room we were in. He was to the right. But if you were facing our door, he was to the left.”

“Facing it from the hallway or from inside the room?”

“From the hallway. From the hallway.”

“Okay. Calm down.” He put his arm around her. “I’m on hold. They’re going to connect me to someone. I can’t remember the number either right now. I mean, I knew it, but . . . somewhere in the middle of the second floor. They can always look it up.”

Kelly grabbed a throw pillow from the couch and paced around the room.

“I’m still on hold. Wait, they’re transferring me to a detective.”

“Put it on speaker so I can hear what they say.” She hugged the pillow to her chest.

Jason gave his contact information and told the police what they knew.

“Thanks for calling in on the hotline. Let us know if you or your wife think of anything else.”

“Oh. Okay. We will.”

Kelly bounced on her toes some more, shaking Jason’s elbow again.

“Uh, can you hold on for a second?” Jason asked the detective.

“We should tell them about that lady following us.” Kelly nodded, her whole body bobbing up and down.

Jason moved his mouth away from the phone and whispered to his wife. “That’s not relevant, Kel. And we don’t really know that she was following us.”

“They said they wanted to know about anything suspicious,” Kelly whispered back, her eyes as wide as possible. “She was suspicious. Weird and suspicious. Maybe she followed that guy too. And now he’s dead. She had a gray car—”

“A Honda—”

“A gray Honda with a big dent in the front and the headlight wasn’t working. Tell her, Jason. Please.”

“No.” Jason covered the bottom of his phone with his hand. “That lady has nothing to do with this. And we’ve done enough.”

“Then let me tell them.”

“So *now* you’re not too nervous?” He shook his head.

She held out her hand, her big brown eyes pleading.

Jason sighed and handed his cell to his wife.





RIVERA WAS TURNED BACKWARDS, backing a black SUV out of the FBI garage when his phone lit up with a call.

Victoria lifted the vibrating device from the center console. “It’s Detective Sullivan. I’ll put him on speaker. If it’s not about the case, take it off real quick before I hear something I might not want to hear.”

Rivera laughed and cranked the steering wheel to his left. “Sully won’t say anything you can’t handle.”

“You’re forgetting the time he called me a snob.”

“He didn’t call you a snob. He asked if you were one. Valid question, considering.”

“After we saw him at Meiser’s house, I meant to ask you how he’s doing now, you know, with the drinking . . .” She let her words trail off to accept the call, pressed the speaker phone button, and handed the phone to Rivera.

“Sully. What’s up? Agent Victoria Heslin is with me and you’re on speaker. We’re on our way to forensics.”

The detective spoke in a hushed voice. “Another victim of the Numbers Killer. At the Hampshire Apartments complex.”

“The Numbers Killer?” Rivera asked.

“That’s what the media are calling him.”

Rivera blew out a big puff of air. “So much for keeping the info about the numbers internal. When did it happen?”

“Few hours ago. We’ve already done our jobs here. I noticed no one from the FBI showed up. Not sure why no one has called you yet—sorry.”

“Shouldn’t he have called us?” Victoria whispered to Rivera, frowning.

Rivera whispered back, “he’s calling us now,” then spoke to the detective. “Sure thing. Appreciate this. Wait—was there another message written on the victim?”

“Hold on. Someone asking me a question here.” Sully must have covered his phone because muffled conversation continued on his end of the line.

“I’m looking up the address.” Victoria typed into her phone.

Sully returned. “You there?”

“We’re here. Are they sure it’s our same guy?” Rivera asked as Victoria said— “You need to make a U-turn here.”

“Sure as can be without forensics and ballistics. He had the number six written on his head, same as the others. Looks like number five got skipped, or we haven’t found the body yet.”

“Was there another message on him?” Rivera cranked the steering wheel around a median to head in the other direction.

“Yeah. On his head. ‘You’ll be sorry.’ And they found another note. Another note with your name on it, Victoria.”

Victoria gripped her thighs, bracing herself for the information. “I’m just really popular this week, aren’t I? Well, what did it say?”

“It said, ‘Agent Heslin, watch your back.’”

Rivera’s nostrils flared.

A cold chill traveled down Victoria's spine. Her thoughts flew to her late night, uninvited visitor, the footprints in her yard and patio. She didn't want to let the killer unsettle her like this, but goosebumps formed on her skin just the same. She crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders. "Well, I—I guess the killer doesn't know me very well. I always watch my back. Thanks for calling us, Detective. We're on our way."

"Later." Sully disconnected the call.

Rivera gripped the wheel. "That note is a direct threat," he said through gritted teeth. "I don't think you should go anywhere alone until we've caught this guy."

Victoria tapped the gun in her holster. "I've got this thing here with me at all times. And another around my ankle. But, you know what, just in case, I should ask Sam to see if anyone from one of my past cases was recently released from prison."

"No need." Rivera slowed the car to a stop for a red light.

"Why not?"

"Because I've already checked."

"Oh." She was quiet for a moment. "When did you do that?"

"After we found the first note."

"And?"

"We didn't come up with anyone."

"Hmm." Victoria rubbed her hands together then placed them under her legs.

"Murphy's probably going to take you off the case now."

She had been thinking the same. She stared out the window, away from Rivera. "Well, until then, I'm still here. So let's hurry up and get to the Hampshire Apartments. Now that the killer is sending me personal threats, I want to catch him more than ever."

• • • •

RIVERA GAZED PAST THE police tape to study the apartment complex—rows of identical buildings, mustard-orange on the bottom, whiteish with mildew stains on top. A few porches overflowed with trash—mattresses, boxes, rusty bikes. Others were much nicer—a colorful bistro table and chairs, one with large potted and hanging plants, some Halloween decorations. "Any surveillance cameras around?" He stared over Sully's shoulder, still scanning the buildings.

"There are cameras, but they don't work."

"Great."

Blood stained the pavement in the parking lot. Crime scene techs had left evidence markers and tape behind, but the corpse was en route to the medical examiner's office.

"The guy's nephew is over there. Name is Hernan Gomez." Sully gestured to the young man sitting on the curb. "He had a gun on him, no permit, but it hadn't been fired. We took it. Also had a knife."

"Okay. We'll talk to him. Might as well."

Rivera and Victoria walked over to Hernan Gomez. Wearing a ball cap, the young man's face blazed with anger. He didn't look any older than twenty and might have still been a teenager.

"I know you'll have answered some of these questions already, but please bear with me," Rivera said. "He was your uncle?"

"Yeah." Hernan kicked at the ground with his shoe, scuffing it back and forth.

"Did you see anyone else around when you found him?"

The young man wiped at something under his eye. "Like I already told the cops, no one except some lady. She left to call 911. She told me she didn't see who did it."

Rivera made a note on his notepad. "Did she come back?"

"Nope." Hernan pulled on the rim of his cap and avoided Rivera's eyes.

"What did she look like?"

Hernan shrugged. "I dunno." He pointed to Victoria. "Sorta like her."

"Good, that helps. Was she taller, shorter, heavier?"

"Heavier, maybe. And she wasn't as pretty."

"Okay. What about hair? This color, same as Agent Heslin?"

"Yeah."

Rivera and Victoria exchanged a quick glance.

Hernan shrugged. "I don't really remember much. I was, you know, blown away about my uncle."

"That's okay," Rivera said. "That's a good description right there. We're going to have you work with a sketch artist on a computer, see if you can remember more."

Hernan nodded. "Because you think the woman mighta killed him?"

"We need to talk to her. Hear what she might have seen. She might be scared, too. Did you see her leave?"

"Yeah. She drove off in a black pick-up. Back part was open. Like no cover on it."

"That's great. Glad you noticed that." Rivera wrote on his pad. "So, you live here with your uncle?"

"He was here visiting me. We were going to lunch."

"Were you with him when he was shot?"

"No, I was upstairs in my apartment waiting for him to get here."

"Can you show us your place?" Victoria asked. The police hadn't gone inside. She wanted to get in there before any evidence could be hidden or destroyed.

"Yeah. Over here." Hernan mumbled as he trudged toward his home.

Rivera stayed where he was. "I better call the boss."

"Find us when you're done." Victoria caught up to Hernan and walked alongside him. "What sort of man was your uncle?"

Hernan shrugged again. "I don't know what he was into. Not getting shot type of sh—stuff. Nice, real nice, but—you know—boring. Worked in a warehouse somewhere. Moving boxes and stuff. He was the manager."

"Do you know where he worked?" Victoria asked.

"Nah. Sorry. He told me, but I forget the name of the place."

"That's okay, we'll find out." She stopped outside Hernan's door and looked around.

Hernan unlocked his apartment door and held it open. "Why'd he have that writing on his head?" Hernan frowned deeply. "That was freaky."

"We're not sure yet." Victoria stepped inside. Apparently, Hernan didn't watch the news. "Just wait over there, please." She gestured toward the corner where she could keep an eye on him as she explored the small space. The entire apartment could fit into her kitchen. Xbox games and controllers were scattered around the main room and on the table top. In the kitchen, a trash can needed to be emptied, a stack of dishes filled the sink, and a cereal box sat open on the counter. In the bedroom, clothes were strewn across a single twin bed.

"If your uncle was staying here, where did he sleep?"

"He wasn't staying here. We were just hanging out during the day. Getting to know each other. He's my dad's brother and I don't know my Dad. So he just found out I existed. I just met him for the first time a few days ago."



That explained how little he knew about the man. Victoria opened the closet and peered inside. "So he was staying somewhere else?"

"I don't know where he was staying. I think he said he knew a guy who lives around here."

"But he didn't say who?"

Hernan shrugged and sank down into his ratty couch. He dropped his head into his hands. "I didn't ask him. Oh, man. This is unbelievable. My uncle was a good guy. I know he was. Not like my—You got to catch this—"

"We'll find whoever did this. You can count on that. This is my card. Call me, please, if you think of anything that might be helpful, or if you remember who he was staying with."

Hernan took the card and nodded.

"Is there someone you can call to come hang out with, so you won't be alone?"

Hernan shrugged.

"You're holding up really well, and we appreciate the help. Can I call someone to be with you? Your mom, a friend?"

"I'm fine. I'll deal with it."

"Okay. Maybe you can visit a friend then."

"Yeah. Okay. Okay. I'll do that."

Sensing the annoyance in Hernan's voice, Victoria said goodbye. She left as Rivera was striding up the path to Hernan's apartment. Rivera stopped suddenly and stared off in the distance toward the woods lining the back of the complex.

"Hear that?" Rivera took a few quick steps toward the trees, then took off running.

Following Rivera's lead, Victoria pulled her gun from her holster and dashed into the woods after him. When she caught up, he was putting his gun away.

"It was just a deer." He shook his head, breathing hard. "Sorry."

"No, problem. A sprint works better than caffeine." She tucked her weapon back where it belonged.

"I just thought, if she's leaving you messages- it's likely she's sticking around to see your reaction to them."

"I know." Victoria walked next to Rivera, taking deep breaths, her heart still pounding.

"Learn anything from the nephew?"

"Not much. He barely knows his uncle. Gomez was divorced. No kids. And he wasn't staying here. Hernan isn't even sure where he was staying or where he lives, so we'll have to find out. I'm sure the detectives already have. You?"

"I left a message for Murphy. He was supposed to make a public announcement on the case at five. Then called Sam, asked him to search for connections between all the victims. If we're lucky, Gomez is the missing link connecting all of them."

"Hope so."

Rivera took a last look back at the woods. "And . . . I just got off the phone with the 911 shift manager. There were three calls to 911 about this shooting. All from males. None from a woman."

"You were busy. I think it's safe to say our killer is a woman with blonde hair. And Hernan didn't find her at all suspicious. But did she want him to see her, or did she get caught?"

Rivera ran his hand over his hair. "Either way, it's a short matter of time before we catch her."

"Let's try for catching her before another body comes in."



• • • •

WITH A TENNIS TOURNAMENT playing on his television in the background, Jason Smith tore open an envelope and threw its contents into the growing pile of junk mail. Kelly sat in a recliner nearby, reading. Jason's phone rang. She looked up from her novel. "Who is it?"

Jason lifted the device. "Unknown. I'm not answering." He set it back down.

Kelly leapt from her chair and grabbed his phone off his desk. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"This is Federal Agent Victoria Heslin. It's urgent that I speak with Jason and Kelly Smith."

• • • •

AT THE LOCAL POLICE station, the Smiths sat in a small room with a table and four hard chairs, across from a tattooed woman with two nose piercings and jet-black hair. A big, burly officer in civilian clothing, with a close-cut beard and side burns, sat with them.

"Why are we here, again?" Jason asked.

The officer cleared his throat. "The information you provided led us to identify Steve Horrigan, the man you saw on TV earlier. The car you described with the dent in the right front, the one your wife thought was following you, it might match the one found at the crime scene this morning. The plates were stolen, the car isn't registered. And, we have three victims who were checked into the Sonesta, your hotel, when they died."

Kelly turned to Jason. "See that, baby, good thing we told them about that lady. Glad we didn't stay another day in that hotel."

The tattooed woman tapped a pencil on the table. "Tell us what you remember about the woman driving the car, and I'll do my best to create her image."

Jason clasped his hands in front of him. "She was probably around thirty years old, maybe a little older. She had blonde hair. Not thick like Kelly's, but not stringy either, just average hair. She wore it down, parted in the middle."

Kelly toyed with the ends of her hair. "And it was pulled back in a ponytail when I saw her. She was parked in a car next to me. Before she drove off, she stared at me—really stared, like she hated me or something. It freaked me out. I knew something was seriously wrong with that woman."

"We'll make a version with each hair style." The artist showed them different features on her laptop, asked questions, and used short quick strokes of a stylus to shape the woman's head, her hair, her cheeks, and her eyes.

The Smiths studied the image.

Jason frowned. "Can you make her eyes a little more . . . lidded? And maybe a little more . . . dull?"

"Okay." A hint of a grin crossed the artist's face.

Jason studied his wife—her glossy, smooth hair and glowing complexion, her lush pink lips—and offered her a smile meant to reflect his appreciation. He turned back to the sketch artist. "She had sort of an overall disheveled look to her."

The artist nodded, adding lines and shading. When she was finished, she'd created a portrait of a sad woman with a distrustful look in her eyes, like she'd had a tough life. She didn't look like a killer, but more like a victim. "What do you think?"

"That's pretty good." Jason nodded. "Seems about right best I can remember."

Kelly agreed.

The artist tilted her head, studying the picture. “Any other distinctive features, birthmarks, scars?”

Jason shrugged and shook his head.

“Okay.” The officer stood up. “Just sit tight awhile longer. Some FBI agents need to speak with you. They’re on their way.”

“We spoke to them earlier.” Kelly crossed her arms in front of her chest and rubbed her shoulders.

“Right.” The officer walked toward the door.

Jason took off his jacket and wrapped it around his wife. “Cold?”

Kelly nodded.

“Can I get you anything while you wait?” the officer asked from the doorway.

The Smiths asked for water bottles and settled in, holding hands, exchanging anxious glances and nervous smiles until the officer returned. He waved them toward the door. “Okay. They’re ready for you.”

The agents were waiting for the Smiths in a room with more comfortable seating and a window. The change in rooms felt like an upgrade. “Hi. I’m Agent Victoria Heslin, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” The female agent shook hands with Kelly, then Jason. “We’re grateful you called the tip hotline today. Your sketch was very helpful. We just compared it to another image from someone else at a recent crime scene. The sketches are similar. You’ve been a big help to our investigation so far. Especially since you noticed the car she drove.”

“It was my wife who wanted to mention the woman following us.” Jason’s eyes beamed as he glanced at his wife. He had teased her that this wasn’t how he wanted to spend the evening—at the police station—but she had done good. At the prompting of the agents, he repeated the information they had shared with Agent Heslin earlier in the day.

“This is important. Did you ever see that woman inside the Sonesta Hotel?”

“No. We didn’t,” Jason said.

“I’m positive I didn’t,” Kelly added.

“What made you notice her following you?” Victoria asked Jason.

“So, first she was behind us when I dropped Kelly off at the mall near our hotel, to get her nails done. Her headlight was out so I told her.”

Victoria’s face lit up. Rivera was already out of his chair and tapping his phone, most likely calling the police impound lot, asking someone to turn on the Honda’s headlights and check the left one.

Jason shifted his gaze from Rivera back to Heslin. “Then she was behind us again when we were going to the movies last night. We left the hotel and stopped at a store to get snacks. She followed us right from one parking lot to the next.”

“Did you find that strange?” Heslin asked.

“Oh yeah. But then a cop pulled up and I let it go. He must have said something to her about her headlight, I saw him pointing to it. And when I came out of the store, she was gone.”

“She left as soon as the cop talked to her,” Kelly said. “So creepy. Why was she following us? What did she want?”

Victoria shook her head. In light of what happened to three other hotel guests, she could make an educated guess about what might have happened if a cop hadn’t come along, but she had no proof yet.

Kelly picked at her nails. “I really don’t think I’m going to sleep well again until you find her.”

“We will,” Victoria shifted in her seat and crossed her legs.

Kelly clasped her hands tightly together. “That hotel was awful. I can’t believe we ended up there. It looked nothing like it did online.”

“We’d like to show you some pictures. Please tell us if you came across any of these other people while you were at your hotel or at any other time.” Victoria set out a picture of Todd Meiser, from before he died.

Kelly and Jason both said no.

“What about this married couple?” She set down a picture of the Cossmans.

“Oh no.” Kelly clamped her hand over her mouth. “I did see them! They had cute dogs with them. Is that...oh my God! That’s the couple who were murdered when they were on that hiking trail!”

“Where did you see them?” Victoria slid the stylus from the side of her tablet.

Kelly perched on the edge of her seat, knees bouncing. “I saw the husband taking the dogs out one night. Our first night, because it was when I went to fill the ice bucket. And I saw them both at breakfast one morning.”

“Did you speak with them?”

“No.”

“Did you see them interacting with anyone else?”

“No.”

Rivera showed them a picture of Arnold Gomez, just in case he had made an appearance at the hotel for some reason. Neither had seen him.

“Why is this happening to people that stayed at the Sonesta with us? Why are they dead?” Kelly twisted her fingers together in front of her chest.

With a grim expression, Jason reached for his wife’s hand and squeezed it.

Victoria swallowed hard. “We aren’t sure yet.”





THE AGENTS DROVE BACK to their office checking leads, requesting data, and sharing information. Since it was Sunday, traffic was light. The drive was taking a lot less time than usual.

Rivera lowered his phone from his ear. “Okay. Listen to this.” His voice might have sounded calm and controlled to anyone else, but from the hitch in his breath, Victoria knew he was excited about something. “The Honda they found near Horrigan’s body matches the Honda the Smiths said followed them from the hotel. Broken left headlight. That puts this blonde woman at the Sonesta Hotel, at least in the parking lot, and at two of our crime scenes. And her hairs put her at Todd Meiser’s crime scene and in the Honda, not conclusively, the DNA tests will take a while, but at least the hairs are a visible match under the microscopes.”

Victoria clapped her hands. “So who owns the Honda?”

“The vehicle and the plates were stolen, and its been wiped clean of prints.”

“Of course. Otherwise it would have been too easy.”

“That’s not all.” Rivera tapped the steering wheel. “Remember little Gomez said the blonde woman left the parking lot in a black pick-up? Well, guess who owned a black pick-up?”

“I’m betting on Steve Horrigan.”

“Exactly. We’ve got an alert out on the truck. The description will be on every electronic billboard within a few hundred miles of here. Every patrol officer in the mid-Atlantic will be looking for it.”

“So we know what our killer looks like, sort of. But who is she? Why is she doing this? And why did she choose these people who don’t seem to have anything in common?”

Rivera’s expression turned grim. “And why is she sending messages to you?”

“I have no idea.” Victoria looked out the window, lifting her eyes toward the sky. Having seen little of the sun in the past few days, it was hard to tell if it was dusk, or if the clouds were thickening and darkening in preparation for another rainfall. Or maybe both. It had been another long day. Ned would have fed the dogs their dinner hours ago.

“I’ve got to send Ned a message and let him know I’m coming home.” She had to do a better job of keeping him updated on her schedule, or it really wasn’t fair to him. He had his own life. But what if she didn’t text ahead to let him know he could leave? What if she showed up and maybe he stayed and maybe they just hung out together for a while? Wouldn’t that be just what she needed to clear her mind, relax, forget about her work for a few hours so she could see everything again with an objective, clear mind in the morning?

“What are you thinking?” Rivera asked.

“Nothing. Just . . . looking forward to going home tonight.”

Who was she kidding? A few hours with a nice guy talking about something other than murder probably was exactly what she needed, what she *should* do. It was how normal people spent their after-work time—right? But was it fair to Ned? It would be impossible not to think about the cases and the crime scenes, not to text Rivera when a new idea or question occurred to her. That wasn’t fair to Ned. She wouldn’t be very good company at all.

She typed a text—*I should be home in an hour. Thanks for everything*—and pressed send.



VICTORIA PULLED INTO her garage. Ned's SUV was still there. That was unusual.

She entered the house through the garage. The dogs jumped up and went crazy greeting her, even Leo and Bella. She put her bureau-issued gun and holster in the safe. An incredible aroma emanated from the kitchen.

She walked into the kitchen. Ned was standing over the sink. "You're still here." *Oops-that sounded rude.* She smiled warmly to cover up her faux pas. She really was happy to find him still there. "Something smells amazing."

"That's dinner and there's a plate waiting for you if you're hungry. I waited for you to get home because I just have to show you something." He smiled ear to ear.

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise." He walked into one of the family rooms. The dogs had all lain down, a sure sign Ned had given them plenty of exercise during the day.

"Izzy, come," Ned called.

Izzy leapt from her bed and trotted to Ned, her body wagging side to side.

"Okay, ready for this?" Ned's enthusiasm could not have been more obvious. He was bursting to show her the new trick he'd taught Izzy. His smile was contagious. Just what she needed to push the murders out of her mind, if only for a short time.

• • • •

NED LEFT A FEW HOURS after Victoria arrived home. They'd hung around, laughed, and emptied several bags of organic dog treats teaching the dogs new tricks together. The evening had been light-hearted and fun.

Just a few minutes after he pulled out of her garage, she had a phone call from him.

"Hey. I'm still here, at the end of your driveway. There's someone waiting in a black sedan outside the front gate. Says he's an FBI agent."

"Oh, sorry. I should have mentioned that. He's a colleague. He's keeping an eye on me."

"Why do you need someone to keep an eye on you?"

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "It's just work stuff. Go home and get some sleep. I'll call you tomorrow about some ideas I have for the trip."

"You sure? Because—"

She smiled. "I'm sure."

He sighed. "Okay."

"Hey. Thanks for tonight. It was fun. Just what I needed."

"Yeah? Well we can do it again sometime. My boss lets me have a pretty flexible evening schedule."

Victoria laughed. "Great to know. We might just have to do that. Have a good night."







VICTORIA TOOK HER SEAT at the conference table with Rivera, three other agents, local detectives, including Sullivan, and government officials. Most were absorbed with their own phones. The Chief of Police made small talk with the mayor, waiting for the meeting to begin. Victoria poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table.

Pictures of Arnold Gomez and Steve Horrigan had been added to the montage of images lining the white board. Listed in chronological order were the messages left on the victims and the notes addressed to Victoria.

Todd Meiser - #2 - *Liar*

Robert Cossman - #3 - *Cheater*- Sonesta Hotel.

Anne Cossman - #4 - No message found - Sonesta Hotel.

Note to Agent V. Heslin with Cossmans: *Does your partner treat you well?*

Note on Agent V. Heslin's property: *Without trust, you have nothing. Do you trust Rivera?*

Steve Horrigan - no message, no number. Suspect's car left behind. Sonesta Hotel.

Arnold Gomez - #6 - *You'll be sorry.*

Note for Agent V. Heslin with Gomez - *Watch your back, Agent Heslin.*

The names Jim Johnson, Thomas Wilson, and Jason Bourne, the only guests at the Sonesta Hotel who had not been located, interviewed, and alibied, were circled with question marks around them.

Murphy entered the conference room, unsmiling. With a curt nod he acknowledged a few of the people seated around the table, slapping the Chief of Police on the shoulder as he passed. He set his Bulldogs thermos down. "Let's get started." He fixed his eyes on Victoria. "Agent Heslin, go ahead."

Victoria pushed her chair back, stood up, and turned on her tablet. Full of neat bullet-point lists, underlined phrases, starred and capitalized items. Rather than reading from the notes, she kept her gaze focused on the faces around her. "We haven't identified our perp yet, although we have a description. Here's what we know. We have five murders—four males and one female—that we know were caused by the same gun. We think the numbers represent the order in which the victims were killed, and the ME's findings support that."

The mayor raised her hand as she spoke. "I thought the man they found by the river didn't have a number on him."

"Correct." Victoria folded her arms. "But ballistics match, and the Honda left behind at his crime scene matches one witnesses saw the suspect driving."

"I see." The mayor settled back in her seat, looking uncomfortable.

Victoria gestured toward the white board. "The victims don't seem to have been targeted by race, age, or gender, unless Anne Cossman was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, which is possible. But most likely, these aren't hate crimes in the typical sense." She made eye contact with the Chief of Police. "We've spent the morning combing through your team's interviews with the victims' employers and family members. We compared your reports to our own, as I'm sure the detectives are doing as well." She nodded at Sully. "We've found no commonalities. The victims don't appear to share friends, family, activities, attorneys . . . nothing."

"So why them?" the mayor asked.

"The connection must exist from the killer's point of view." Victoria clasped her hands in front of her body. "These people have done something to her."

“Her?” The mayor’s mouth hung open.

“Yes, ma’am. We believe the killer is female,” Victoria said. “The victims have done something to wrong the killer, at least from her perspective. It could be anything. All of them are from out of town, except Todd Meiser. All but Meiser and Gomez stayed at the Sonesta hotel.”

“Where was Gomez staying?” the mayor asked.

“We’re not sure yet.” Sully shifted in his seat and cleared his throat, staring at the white board as he answered.

“So have we looked into everyone else staying at the hotel?” the mayor asked.

Sully answered. “We have three guests still unaccounted for. Two left after one-night stays. Might not have even stayed overnight. Both paid cash. We’re thinking they met a woman or . . . a paid date. It happens in that hotel. The third is Jim Johnson. The minute that Mr. Johnson comes back for his stuff, we’ll know about it. We’re trying to track down all three of them.” The detective swirled his coffee absentmindedly with a stirrer. “You know, maybe the victims all drove too slow or cut our killer off changing lanes.”

Sully’s suggestion was an attempt to diffuse the tension in the room, but anything was possible. Victoria pointed to the whiteboard. “The killings took place in daylight, three of them in open, public areas. They’re sloppy, not well planned, with prints, hairs, fibers and other evidence left behind.”

A colleague of Sully’s interlocked his fingers, resting his hands on the table. “The killer also left behind a scarf.”

Heslin nodded. “However, there’s no match for any of the fingerprints in our systems. We believe the perp just recently became unhinged somehow.”

The Chief of Police made a fist and tapped it on the table. “Unhinged. Sloppy. New at killing. You’ve got the hotel connection. And yet, you—I mean, we—still haven’t caught the person.”

Rivera cocked his head. “It’s only been three days.”

“Only three days?” The chief’s voice rose. “Have you been reading the papers? Or watching TV? It’s wall-to-wall coverage. We need this case closed yesterday.”

Victoria took a sip of water from her glass, giving herself another second to think. “Based on the footprints, the hairs left behind, and our descriptions of a suspect seen at two of the crime scenes, we’re looking for a woman in her early to late thirties, with straight brown hair dyed blonde, about five foot four. She’s been seen wearing her hair down and also in a ponytail. She may not have a job, since the crimes have occurred at different times throughout the day.”

“Did anyone see her at that hotel?” the mayor asked.

Murphy set his thermos down with a thump. “No.”

“So we’ve got a female serial killer in our city?” The mayor fiddled with the top button of her blouse as she spoke.

“Yes.” Victoria nodded. “A spree killer, actually. More than one murder in a short period of time, different locations, no cooling-off period between them. It’s possible she’s not acting alone, but she’s our only suspect at this time.”

“Isn’t that unusual? Doesn’t that make it easier to find her?” The mayor let go of her button.

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “It cuts our potential suspects in half, so we only have 150 million possibilities—in the USA.”

Victoria addressed the mayor. “Men are more likely to be serial or spree killers because they’re more socialized to express their aggression outward, more likely to hunt down victims. And it’s rarer for women to kill using guns. But none of that makes our jobs easier. We really don’t have statistically

significant samples of female spree and serial killers to study. And on average, female killers manage to evade arrest for much longer than men.”

Sully twirled the stirring stick between his fingers like a tiny baton. “What type of spree killer do *you* think we’re looking at?”

“The short timeframe for these kills argues for a mission-oriented killer, someone with a purpose for elimination, like revenge. But, as I said, the murders are highly disorganized, So, it’s possible we have a visionary killer.”

“Can you elaborate?” the mayor asked, again clasping her top button.

“Visionary killers select their victims in a way that tends to appear random to investigators. They’re usually suffering from psychosis, having delusions or hallucinations that compel them to kill. The victims they choose are directly related to their psychosis.”

“Like David Berkowitz,” Rivera said. “The ‘Son of Sam.’ He claimed Satan, or a demon told him to commit murders.”

“I thought it was his dog.” Sully laughed.

“Yeah. And like our killer, he also left letters for the police.” Rivera crossed his arms, placing his hands on his biceps. “Some visionary killers believe or come to believe they are someone else entirely.”

Victoria made eye contact with her colleagues around the conference table. “Female spree killers still attack for the same reasons as men, though—anger, revenge, the need for control, mental illness. Based on the messages she’s left, it’s likely she’s been wronged by a man, a boyfriend or husband. She appears to be leaving messages related to that experience.”

“Are we even considering that the Butlers had anything to do with all these killings anymore?” an agent asked.

“We’re still considering everything.” Murphy set his arms on the table. “Until we can rule it out with absolute certainty.”

“Well, then . . .” The Chief of Police shifted his gaze to the notes on the wall, then settled it on Victoria. “As far as I can tell, in addition to the hotel, what connects these victims—and their murders—is you, Heslin.”

“Excuse me?” The pitch of Victoria’s voice rose. Beside her, Rivera sat up straighter.

“It was you who convinced Todd Meiser to testify,” the Chief said. “Then we’ve got the couple killed hiking with their dogs, and I understand that hiking with your dogs is one of your big hobbies. And all the notes were left for you. Someone is obsessed with you.”

Victoria crossed her arms and shifted her weight. “The first note was left when the Cossmans were murdered. It’s possible the killer saw Rivera and me being interviewed on television after Todd Meiser was murdered. Channel 14 was on the scene when we left.”

The chief rolled his eyes “Where I come from, when we hear hoofbeats, we think horses, not zebras. You are in this up to your eyeballs. Let’s not overlook the obvious just because it’s uncomfortable for you.”

She turned red. “I’ve never met... I’ve never met the Cossmans, Steve Horrigan, or Arnold Gomez. And it’s not me that our suspect seems to have taken an interest in.”

The Chief maintained his hard stare. “Could have fooled me.”

“She appears to be focused on . . . an imagined relationship between Rivera and me. Perhaps she . . . has some displaced anger towards us.” Victoria inhaled deeply, took her time exhaling. “At this point, I’m certain we need to focus on what connects these victims in the killer’s mind.”

The Chief leaned forward. “Still, is there anything you want to share with us? Anything that might shed light on the messages written on the victims? Liar. Cheater. You’ll be Sorry. Is it possible those messages were intended for you?”

Victoria opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. She clasped her hands behind her back to keep from curling her hands into fists. Sully coughed and averted his eyes.

The Chief’s gaze roamed from Victoria to Rivera. “Is there something going on with you two? Because if there’s something we don’t know, and it allows this perp to keep killing, accumulating victims . . .”

Another detective jumped in. “If the FBI is going to be taking the lead on these cases, don’t be making things worse for us. We’re the ones who have to take the heat for these deaths.”

Rivera glowered at the detective. “Don’t forget—we live here. This is happening in our backyard, too.”

Murphy cut in. “Enough. We’re not going down this territorial battle path. The FBI was called from the beginning because of Meiser’s connection to the Butler case. Now that we have a serial killer on our hands, we would have been called in anyway. This is our case, no doubt about it, but I like to think that we’re all working together in the best interest of the public, to catch this killer.”

Rivera set his hands on the table. They were still and steady, as usual, steady as a rock, but the muscles around his eyes tightened. His voice sounded carefully controlled. “To address concerns anyone may have, there is nothing unprofessional going on between Heslin and me. There never has been. Everything points to those messages being intended to represent the killer’s thoughts on the victims.”

“Sorry to say this, Rivera—” Sully looked away from his friend, grimacing. He gestured toward the white board. “But the notes and the one-word messages are directly tied, and the notes are directed at Agent Heslin.”

“The killer is unstable.” Victoria dropped her hands to her sides, the heat of anger rising to her cheeks. She couldn’t believe the turn the meeting had taken. She focused on Detective Sullivan, taking in the hint of red capillaries around his irises and again wondering if he was just overworked or if he’d been drinking. She placed her hands on her hips. “There may be no rational explanation for what The Numbers Killer leaves behind. Insane or not, people do some horrible things without any reason at all.”

The Chief of Police narrowed his eyes, offering a slight nod.

“So what can we do?” the mayor asked. “How can you put out extra people to protect the public if we don’t know who is at risk?”

Her question met silence.

Victoria cleared her throat and everyone looked at her. Hands on her hips, she lifted her chin, and squared her shoulders. “Finding victim number one might be the key to all this.”





AFTER THE MEETING, it was a relief to be alone. Sitting at her desk, Victoria shook off the feeling that she'd been accused of something. Resentment wouldn't help and would only distract her from the case. There was work to be done. Detectives were still at the Sonesta Hotel trying to figure out how the staff or guests might figure into the murders. Sam and other intelligence analysts were still searching into connections between the victims. The police were handling the calls coming in through the tip lines, and Victoria and Rivera were following up with the few that seemed legit and warranted further investigation. There hadn't been anything else useful since they talked to Jason and Kelly Smith. Victoria also had a pile of paperwork waiting, forms she had to complete from her last case. And she was expected to testify in court during the Butler trial, although she was still waiting on the exact date and time.

Before she'd accomplished much, Rivera stopped outside her door. "Come with me to the ME's office?" He twirled a set of keys in his hand.

"Because you don't want to be alone with Rebecca?" Victoria laughed. "Please don't tell me you haven't noticed she has a thing for you."

Rivera grunted. "I've noticed."

"She reminds me of a young Oprah. She's been divorced at least two years now. Not sure why you don't ask her out."

"So, are you coming or not?"

"Sure. Just giving you a hard time. I was thinking the same anyway." Victoria closed her laptop and stood up. "Let's see what Rebecca has to say about the last two victims. I'll meet you in the parking garage. What car number?"

"Number three. But I'll wait for you."

She stopped. "Rivera, you know I can take care of myself. I don't need a personal escort."

"Maybe I don't want to walk out there alone. You think of that?"

She laughed. "Fine. Give me a minute."



AN ACCIDENT ON THE highway had traffic at a standstill. Victoria pulled a protein bar from a pocket in her backpack. "In case of emergency." She held it up. "Want half?"

"No, thanks. But I've got to eat something. You mind stopping somewhere?"

"No. I'm hungry, too." She dropped the bar back into her bag. "When you get to the next exit, there's a little Mexican place on South Boulevard. I know the owners. We used to do spin classes together."

"Sounds great." His stomach growled. "Told you."

"You shouldn't skip breakfast." Victoria laughed. "We're almost there."

Inside The Cantina, the Monday lunch crowd was sparse and they had their pick of the red vinyl booths. Both agents ordered tacos and Rivera ordered a Coke. The waiter delivered waters and a basket of chips with salsa. Rivera dug in to them without hesitating while Victoria turned on her tablet and opened her notes. She had to lean toward Rivera to be heard over the music. "What do we still need to follow up on in our search for a connection?"

Rivera dipped two chips into the bowl of salsa and spoke between bites. “Our background checks covered their previous locations, work histories, insurance agents, gym memberships. There’s nothing. It’s like you said—she’s getting revenge for something they did to her.”

“Wish we had a crystal ball right now. Okay. We need to dig deeper on this. And let’s go back to the Sonesta Hotel after the ME’s office.”

“You think the detectives are holding back on us?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just, we need to go back.”

Rivera grabbed another handful of chips. “What would make *you* angry enough to go after people like that?”

“Hmm. Well, if I was crazy and disturbed enough to have a hit list, anyone who tortures animals would be at the top of it.”

“Ahh. That was too easy. I should have guessed it.”

“How about you?”

He drained most of his water and set it down. “Pedophiles? Yeah, that’s it. Perverts that victimize children.”

“So if you saw someone assaulting a child, you would go after them?”

“Absolutely.”

“So what did our killer see them do?”

Rivera shook his head. “Or maybe we’re looking at it in reverse. Maybe the question is—what did they see *her* do?”

Victoria shook her head and dropped it into her hands. “I don’t have any idea.”

Rivera stood up. “Be right back. Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m fine.” She tapped the top of her almost full glass of water. “Thanks.”

Rivera returned at the same time the food arrived. He stood next to the booth while the waiter placed their platters on the table. He took his seat once the waiter left. “No work-talk while we eat. Let’s see if we can do it.”

Victoria smiled and powered off her tablet. “So, are you and Renee still good friends?”

“We’re friends. We don’t talk much. She’s seeing someone.”

Victoria lifted her taco for a first bite. “Is it serious?”

Rivera shrugged and dug into his own food.

Victoria took his limited response as a lack of interest in the topic. She dabbed at her lip with her napkin. “I like this song.”

Pretending his fork was a microphone, Rivera closed his eyes. He began to sing a Dave Matthews ballad.

Victoria’s mouth dropped. “Wow! You’re really good.”

He opened his eyes and stopped singing. “Damn straight I am.”

She laughed. “Keep going. I like it.”

“If you insist.” He finished out the refrain in a smooth, low voice, adding a twang. “How about you sing a few verses?”

“You do not want to hear me sing. I promise.” She laughed.

“Come on. Can’t be that bad.” He took a gulp of his soda.

“Nope.” She smiled from ear to ear. “But . . . how about this . . . I’ll save my singing for when you’re really down and need cheering up, because I promise you will laugh your ass off.”

Rivera extended his hand across the table and Victoria shook it. “It’s a deal.” He grinned and finished the last of his drink. “I know you don’t go out much when you’re not working, but maybe we



should do this for real sometime. Go out to eat, but not under the auspices of work and catching a crazed killer.”

Victoria smiled. “That might be fun.”

Rivera cleared his throat and touched his ear. “Hey, uh, there’s something I should tell you.”

“Yeah?” Whatever was coming, she had a feeling it was going to be interesting. “What’s that look for?”

“What look?” Rivera cocked his head.

“Like you just . . . I don’t know. Like maybe for once you’re not entirely sure of what you’re going to say.”

Rivera smiled. His gaze never wavered.

“Have I got something on my chin?” She raised her napkin, hovering it near her mouth.

Rivera chuckled. “Your chin is fine.”

“What is it then?” Unsure if she should be frowning or laughing, Victoria settled for an uneasy half-smile.

“I just . . .” He crossed his forearms on the table and leaned in. “The reason we’ve been working together a lot is because . . .”

“Because?”

“I might have been requesting it.”

A smile slowly built on her lips. Her stomach fluttered, although she didn’t know what would follow his confession. “You have?” She uncrossed her legs and shifted her weight, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Well . . . that’s interesting. I can’t wait for you to tell me why. Or do I want to know?” She placed her hand against her cheek. “I mean, I know I’m a lot more pleasant than Agent Poloski . . . and I never have to leave to pick up my kids or watch their recitals like—Oh, dear—Oh, crap.” She shook her head.

“What?”

“Talking about picking up kids—you know, my dogs are sort of like my kids and I forgot to call Ned again. Hold on. This will only take a second.” She took out her phone and tapped her contacts. She held up one finger, waiting for the call to connect.

“Victoria?”

“Ned, hey.”

“Ah!” Ned exclaimed. His laughter was joined by a young woman’s voice.

“Oh, dear! Oops!” The woman laughed again in the background.

Victoria’s muscles tensed. She twisted her napkin. “Did I catch you at a bad time?” The pitch of her voice had risen.

“I was pouring wine when you called. Apparently, I can’t multi-task as well as I thought. Just spilled it.” He chuckled, and so did whoever was with him, a light flirty sound.

“But, it’s only . . . it’s just afternoon.” With a flash of anger, Victoria stared intensely at her empty plate.

“Yep. So, what do you need, boss?”

She shoved a stray section of hair away from her face. “Oh, um, I just wanted to make sure you could come back to feed them dinner and hang out there for a while.”

“Sure. Are you going out of town? Did you want me to stay over?”

“No. Actually, you don’t need to go back. Don’t worry about it, I didn’t realize you had plans . . . I mean . . . the dogs will be fine. They’ve got their dog door. They’ll be fine.” She frowned and pressed the red button to end the call.

Rivera lowered his head to meet Victoria's eyes. "He can't babysit the dogs tonight?"

"What? No, uh. I guess he's on a date. In the middle of the day. I mean, he didn't say it was a date, but it sounded like one." She rotated her palm toward the ceiling. "I don't know why I'm so surprised. But . . ." She looked away, grabbed a few chips, and chewed them absentmindedly. "It's no big deal. The dogs will be fine."

"Can't argue with that. If I'm not mistaken, dogs all over the world manage on their own for hours at a time."

"I know, it's just—never mind. Anyway." She sighed and looked past Rivera, over his shoulder. "What were we talking about before I made that call?"

Rivera settled back against the booth. "You know. Work stuff."

"Right."

"Ready to get out of here?" He looked around the restaurant.

"Yeah. Okay."

Rivera spotted their server and signaled to get his attention.

• • • •

INSIDE THE MEDICAL examiner's office, gospel music played through the speakers. Dr. Rebecca Boswell, a licensed pathologist, was pushing a gurney with a zipped body bag. A large presence, Rebecca wore hot pink scrubs and black sneakers. Her sleek hair was pulled back in tiny braids.

"Hello," Rivera called.

Rebecca stopped, stared at Rivera, and smiled. "Agents, welcome." She crossed the room and turned down the music. "I was wondering when I was going to see you."

"Hi, Rebecca. We were on our way here yesterday when we got the call about Gomez." Victoria set her hands on the side of a steel gurney as she spoke.

"Someone has been keeping us all busier than usual, haven't they?" Rebecca shook her head.

"What can you tell us?" Rivera asked.

"Nothing you don't already know." She nudged the bridge of her glasses using the heel of her hand. "Same COD for the victims, shot from up close with a small-caliber weapon. The last one, Gomez, took three rounds to the torso. Nothing unusual about how they died, considering." She shrugged. "I've got Gomez's wallet in the back room still, if you want to examine it. It wasn't on him. It was in his car and somehow it ended up here."

"Not exactly protocol, but as long as it's not lost," Victoria said. "We'll go take a look."

"Follow me." Rebecca led them into an office and grabbed a key from a drawer. "Gloves in a box on the wall over there. Plastic sheeting next to it." She unlocked a safe and stood back.

Rivera set a sheet of plastic on a table. Wearing gloves, Victoria scooped up the evidence bag and removed the wallet from inside it. She unfolded the nicked leather sides. She gasped, and her mouth dropped open. Tucked into one of the credit card slots was a blue key card for the Sonesta Hotel. "You've got to be kidding me," she whispered. "I cannot believe we're just finding this out now."

"Wow." Rivera slid the wallet and card back into the evidence bag.

Victoria glared at the wallet. Her mind raced with frustration, mostly targeted at Detective Sullivan. "I told you—How could—"

"There might be an explanation," Rivera said.

"Whatever it is, better late than never." Rebecca peered over their shoulders. "Significant?"

"Definitely," Rivera said. "I think we've identified missing Sonesta customer Jim Johnson. And now we know why Johnson hasn't returned to the hotel. Gomez must have used a fake name."

With a sigh, Victoria pulled off her gloves and tossed them in the trash. “So far, we’ve got Todd Meiser on the one hand, and on the other—Sonesta Hotel customers being eliminated. That hotel connects all the victims, except for Meiser.”

“We need to get back there now.” Rivera tucked the evidence bag with the wallet into his coat pocket.

Victoria nodded. “I’ll call Sam on the way. I want to see everything he’s got on the hotel staff.”

“We’ve already seen it.” Rivera started walking toward the door.

“Did we?” Victoria followed him, walking next to Rebecca. “We, as in the FBI? Because I can’t believe this happened.”

“Local PD interviewed them all and did background checks, but our agents did, too. I saw the report. Useless. Let’s talk to the staff again.” Rivera stopped in the doorway. “Thanks, Rebecca. You’ve been a huge help.”

“Anytime. Come back and stay longer next time.” She smiled at both agents, but her gaze lingered on Rivera.

“I’m calling Sam.” Victoria called as they left the ME’s building. “Sam, it’s Victoria and Rivera. You’re on speaker phone.”

“Excellent timing, my favorite agents.”

“We know you say that to everyone, Sam,” Rivera said.

“I was about to call you.”

“What’s going on?” Rivera asked, pulling the car keys from his pocket.

“I found the companion Meiser met with. That’s what she calls herself. Her name is Olivia Papaleia. She didn’t know he was dead, by the way. Finally called me back when she heard. She seems young, cooperative, and afraid. I didn’t question her, but she started talking anyway. Said she was in classes all day when he was killed, and she has plenty of witnesses. Said she’s never been to his house. She met him at a hotel, where—”

Every muscle in Victoria’s body tensed with excitement. “Which hotel, Sam?”

“The Vista View Hotel.”

Victoria’s shoulders slumped. “It’s like we were so close to winning the lottery and then the last ball popped up with the wrong number.”

“Sorry. And she has no priors. Doesn’t even have so much as a parking ticket to her name. And that’s her real name, I checked it out.”

“Good to know, but from what these crimes tell us, whoever is doing this, it’s like she recently snapped,” Victoria said. “Five kills in a matter of days. She’s either getting revenge or she just recently went nuts. The fact that she has no prior record may not matter.”

“Give us her address. We’ll try to speak with her right now,” Rivera said, opening his car door.

“She has alibis you can check, so you’ll know soon enough if you like her for any of these murders. Here’s her address.”

• • • •

WITH THE ESCORT’S ADDRESS programmed in their GPS, Rivera took the next exit to get them headed in the right direction. “It’s only a thirty-minute drive, and sort of on the way to the Sonesta Hotel. It will just be a detour.”

“What could have happened to get these people killed?” Victoria said. “Why don’t we know?”

“Maybe Olivia can tell us.” Rivera opened his container of gum with one hand and shook a few into his mouth. “Do you want to call for backup?”

Victoria read the signs and billboards lining the road: Jesus Saves, Fresh Farm Produce Exit 28, Savvy Furniture Mart, Open 365 Days a Year. She shook her head. “There’s two of us. Sounds like she couldn’t have done it. Let’s just call in to Murphy, let him know where we’re going. We’ll be fine.”

Rivera grunted his agreement. “We’ll put our Kevlar on before we go in.”





WEARING FBI VESTS, the agents stood outside the door of the address Sam provided. Their hands hovered by their hips, just above their weapons as they vigilantly watched the doors and paths around them.

“Ready?” Rivera asked.

Victoria nodded and pressed the doorbell. A woman opened the door. The agents quickly scanned her body. She wore a long, fitted sweater, leggings, and dark-rimmed glasses. There was nowhere to hide an easily accessible weapon on her body that would not be detected.

“Olivia Papaleia?” Victoria asked.

“Yes. That’s me.”

Olivia was of Middle-Eastern descent with olive skin and shining black hair that formed a single French braid between her shoulders. No trace of blonde. She was nothing like Victoria expected.

The agents identified themselves. With a tight-lipped smile, Olivia made a sweeping gesture to welcome them inside. “Please come in.” She closed the door and padded away, leading them to a neatly decorated room. On a glass coffee table sat a laptop, a spiral notebook, and a text book—*Modern Political Theories*. The flickering light of a candle cast a small dancing shadow on the back wall. Victoria caught the light aroma of oranges and cloves, reminding her of Christmas.

“Have a seat.” Olivia indicated two chairs, part of a comfortable arrangement of furniture, and plopped down on a couch with plush pillows and a faux fur throw. She folded her legs to her side.

How had this confident woman made Sam think she was afraid? The fact that she’d fooled him gave Victoria reason to be wary.

Rivera scooted forward on the edge of his chair. “We’re here because you might have been the last person to see Todd Meiser alive. You were with him beginning on Thursday night at the Vista View Hotel, correct?”

“Yes. He wanted company, and that’s what I provide.” She batted her eyes at Rivera. “Just company. It’s all quite legal. He needed a calming presence. I know he was killed in his home. I was never there.”

Rivera’s expression remained placid, even Victoria couldn’t read his thoughts. “When did you part ways?”

“I was with him for less than two hours. I came back here after. My roommate can vouch for that. She’s at work right now, but I’ll give you her number.”

Rivera jotted down the contact information for Olivia’s roommate on his pad. “Did you know Todd well?”

“No. Not really.”

“Had you ever met him before?”

Olivia looked down at her bare feet, trailed a pink fingernail across her ankle and under a delicate gold anklet.

“We’re trying to find a killer,” Victoria said. “We’re not here to bust anyone for . . . anything else.”

She lifted her chin, dipping her head back. “I’m just concerned, worried really, that I might know something I shouldn’t know.” She sighed. “But I don’t think so. So—yes, I’ve met him before. A few times. Same place.”

“The Vista View Hotel.”

Olivia set her elbow on the arm of the couch and rested her chin in her hand. “Yes. The one next to the rail road tracks.”

Victoria’s and Rivera’s eyes met. Victoria’s body stiffened. “Isn’t the Vista View near the shopping mall? I don’t think there are any railroad tracks around it.” Her voice took on a new, quiet intensity. “Olivia, is there a chance that you met Todd Meiser at the Sonesta Hotel, not the Vista View?”

“Oh. Yes.” Olivia grimaced and tugged on the silver earring dangling from her ear. “Sorry. I do mean the Sonesta. The one with the big blue sign. It’s not very nice.”

For Victoria, the energy in the room completely changed. She wanted to jump up and pump her fist in the air. It was a challenge to maintain her composure. “Did Todd tell you the name he used to check in?”

Olivia allowed herself a slight smile that didn’t last long. “He used the name Jason Bourne.”

Victoria nodded, but inside she was beaming. One more unknown hotel guest was now accounted for. “At the Sonesta Hotel, did you see anyone speaking to him, or watching him? Anything that seemed unusual or made you uncomfortable?”

“Well, yes, actually, there was something. Todd arrived before me. He planned to meet me at the back entrance and let me in. I was almost at the back door when a woman ran out. She looked angry, although she might have been afraid, it seemed more like anger. And I think she was crying. A man followed right after her. He yelled, ‘Come back here. You don’t understand.’ Something to that effect. Todd saw them too. Before the door closed, and even after, we could hear them fighting behind the hotel.”

“Do you know what they were fighting about? Could you hear them?”

“I could hear that they were upset, but I couldn’t tell you what it was about.”

“And you didn’t call the police?”

Olivia shrugged. “No. It didn’t seem necessary. People argue. Their argument just made its way into the parking lot. Besides, I had business to attend to. I had an exam to study for after. At first, I thought about going to see if she needed help. But she was yelling just as loud as he was. It was awful, but it seemed like a domestic affair. Not anyone else’s business. And it didn’t last long.”

“How long?”

“Oh . . . I remember. A train went by. The train runs so close to that hotel, it literally shakes the walls and blasts its horn the whole time. I don’t know how anyone sleeps there at night. The sound of the train and its horn drowned out the fight. After the train passed, I don’t remember hearing anyone.”

“And you didn’t see the couple again?”

“I did not.”

“Can you describe them?”

“Oh . . . gosh.” Olivia rolled her eyes up to the ceiling then back down, settling her gaze on Rivera. “He was an average guy, a little scruffy, not someone who takes great care of himself. He had dark hair, I think. And she was sort of pale, washed out.”

“What color hair did she have?” Victoria asked.

“Hmm . . . blonde?”

Victoria pushed Olivia’s candle toward the opposite end of the table and set out copies of their sketches. “Does this woman look familiar?”

Olivia set her feet on the ground and scooted forward. “In this picture with her hair down, that could be the same woman I saw. She might have looked like that. But I’m not sure. She rushed by

me.”

“Anything else you can think of?”

She shook her head. “Sorry.”

Victoria set out photos of the victims. “Did you see any of these other people?”

Olivia took her time studying the photos. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen them before.”

“Okay. Do you know if Todd had a girlfriend, particularly one with medium-length or long blonde hair?”

She smiled. “That’s not something I would ask him.”

Victoria and Rivera exchanged glances in a subtle, practiced way to see if either had more questions to ask. Rivera stood up and Victoria followed.

“So, I’m all good. You’re going to call my roommate?”

“Yes. Thank you for your time.” Victoria handed Olivia her business card.

Olivia placed the card on the coffee table and stood up with them. “Todd was nice to me. I hope you find out who killed him. I hope you catch the person who killed all these people.”

*So do we*, thought Victoria, walking toward the front door.

“Rivera,” Olivia called, her voice soft.

Both agents stopped and turned around.

Olivia dropped her head in a coquettish pose so only her eyes looked up at him from under her long, dark lashes. “That train isn’t the only thing that can shake the walls.”

He smiled. “I bet it isn’t.” Then he turned and walked out the door.

Once outside, Victoria laughed. “Guess she isn’t concerned that you’re with the FBI.”

“Guess not.” A red tint crept over his face.

“Looks like she’s putting herself through college. Whatever she’s doing must pay more than working retail.”

“That’s what they tell themselves, isn’t it?”

Victoria nudged Rivera’s arm. “It appears to be her choice. I like her. And I like that she appreciates you. And if her alibis all check out, it doesn’t look like she is involved in any of our cases.”

Rivera rubbed the back of his neck. “Now we know that all the victims were staying at the same hotel. The Sonesta is the key to all of this. We got off track because Meiser happened to be a witness in the Butler trial. From the very beginning of all this, you’ve been saying his death didn’t look like a hit.”

“Thank you for pointing that out, I’ll take the credit.” She smiled. “Let’s go back there now, to the hotel. I’m surprised Sam didn’t find issues with any of the staff. No criminal records and each of them has an alibi for at least some of the murders.”

“Maybe they’re all in on it together.”

“Hmm. No grievances against the hotel owners. No pending lawsuits. But there has to be something.”

On the way to their car, Victoria opened her bag and felt her keys in an inner pocket. “We’re not far from the office. If you don’t mind stopping there, I’ll get my own car. The hotel is sort of on the way to my place. Then you can just take this car home after. I mean, if we have a chance to go home tonight.”

Rivera nodded as he opened his door. “I don’t think you should go home alone.”

“I know. Agent Lampros was at my house last night. I feel terrible that he had to stay up because of me. I brought him muffins and coffee when I left the house. I hope someone else gets stuck with the



job tonight.” Victoria sat and fastened her seat belt. “Oh. I almost forgot. Again. I need to make a quick call.” For the first time, she was anxious about calling Ned. Since she’d interrupted his date, she was worried about what she might hear. She pressed a few buttons on her phone and waited. “Hi. I need you to come by tonight and stay a few hours.”

“Sure thing. Oh. Are we still on for dinner tomorrow?”

The dinner was only to discuss their trip. That’s all it ever was. So why did it seem like everything had changed? “I’m sorry. Can we reschedule the dinner?”

“You have to eat something tomorrow night. I can meet you wherever.”

Victoria sighed. “There’s just a lot going on. I doubt I’m going to be able to go, or that I’m going to be very good company if I can make it.”

“The news says it’s five murders now.”

“Yes. The whole city is working on catching the perpetrator, it’s not just me.” Victoria set her free hand on the door frame, gripping the edge. “Although, my team is supposed to be leading the efforts. I’ll keep you posted. I mean, you’ll know when I’m free because I won’t be begging you to come to my house.”

“It’s what you pay me for.”

“Right. But thank you. How are the new little ones doing?”

“They’re doing fine. One of them is a little wary of the big boys, but they’re holding their own. No worries. Is someone coming to get them soon?”

“I haven’t heard anything yet. To be honest, I forgot. We’ll give them a few days and then I guess I’ll follow up with the family to see what their plan is. Thanks, Ned. I’m very grateful. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Good luck and . . . be careful.”

“I will.”

Rivera wove through the rush hour traffic. “You had a dinner date with your dog walker?”

Victoria slid against the door as Rivera hung a right without slowing the car. “Hey, slow down. Nothings on fire.” She laughed. “I’m not really sure it was a date. And *had* is the operative word.”

“You have stuff in common with this guy? Besides dogs?”

Victoria shrugged. “I guess that’s what I might have found out. It wasn’t a real date or anything. We had business to discuss. But it probably wasn’t a good idea.”

“Really. Huh.” Rivera turned on the radio and zipped in front of a slower moving car. He grabbed for his gum, dumped a few pieces into his hand, then slapped them into his mouth. “So, taking care of your dogs—is that Ned’s only job?”

“It is now. It’s a lot of work. Especially when I’m out of town. You’ve heard of concierge doctors? Well, he’s like that, except I’m his only client. And it’s not me he’s taking care of.”

“What did he do before you hired him? Do you know?”

Victoria opened her eyes wide and stared at Rivera for several seconds, then laughed. “Of course I know. You think I would let a stranger into my house to take care of the dogs without vetting him every which way and a few more? Jeez. You know me better than to ask that. I did a comprehensive background check.”

“So what did he do?”

“Ned is a veterinarian. He was just a year out of vet school when he moved here. He started his own practice but didn’t have enough clients to make ends meet. He has some hefty school loans. That’s how I managed to get him. Okay, dad?” She sighed. “I’ve got enough people questioning my personal decisions already.”

“Hey, you have a serial killer suddenly very interested in you. Strange notes left on corpses and strange footprints on your property. Your security cameras weren’t working the other night. Time to rethink everyone and everything.”

Victoria lowered her eyes and her voice. “Yeah. Okay. I get it. You’re right.”

Rivera moved his hand toward the center of the car. She thought he was about to reach for her own, but then he dropped it back on the wheel. “I want you to be safe more than I want to be right.”





TWO LOOSE ENDS REMAINED: Jason and Kelly Smith.

They were gone.

*I wasn't fast enough.*

Beth had their home address. They had seen her close up, not once, but twice. Just like Todd Meiser had seen her inside the hotel. His name hadn't been listed with the other hotel occupants, but she recognized him immediately when she traced his Range Rover's license plate to a registration, then to a photo of him.

First things first. She had to get rid of Horrigan's truck in case they found his body. She turned into the shopping center where she'd first tried to kill the happy-go-lucky singing Smiths. The Walmart parking lot was bustling with cars. She parked the pick-up and hopped on a nearby bus to the airport where she rented a car with the last of her "borrowed" credit cards and fake IDs. She was grateful she had them, but worried about having run out of alternate identities and sources of payment.

She returned to the Vista Hotel. She didn't want to stay there too much longer on Sylvia Malone's newly opened credit card. There was more than one way to end up in prison. But she couldn't go home either. Not with Danny still hounding her.

Inside her hotel room, she pulled a blanket off the closet shelf and wrapped it around her shoulders. The news reports would be starting in a matter of seconds. Plopping onto the pull-out couch, she clicked on the television and found one of the major networks. She bit her lip through a car dealership commercial. A drug commercial for a disease she'd never heard of came next. She chewed on her nails through the long, ridiculous list of side-effects. When the music signaling the news started, she lowered her hand, staring intently at the female newscaster sitting behind the studio desk.

"Breaking news. Another murder committed by someone the police are now calling the Numbers Killer. What are authorities doing to prevent someone else from falling victim? Stay with Channel 14 for the latest."

The other reporter went through his list of what was to come, but Beth tuned him out.

"What? How could they know about my counting? Danny must have told them!"

She jumped up, pacing the length of the room and back. *Two, four, six, eight . . . two, four six, eight . . .* She grabbed a water bottle off the dresser and gulped from it. The newscaster had sensationalized the murders, like Beth was some crazed killer going after people with no rhyme or reason, and no one was safe. She laughed, quick and sharp. Her amusement didn't last long. Danny had betrayed her. To hell with him. She didn't need him. Had she ever? No!

She needed to turn her new-found notoriety and skills into money. Maybe she should contact Raymond Butler and collect a little reward for her efforts? After all, as she now understood, she had inadvertently done him quite a favor. He owed her. But what did she have to hold over him? The deed was done, it wasn't like she could threaten to bring Meiser back to life if the Butlers didn't pay. Perhaps Butler could offer her a job, before he was carted off to jail. Not everyone could hack into an FBI agents' video camera feeds and shut them down. Not everyone could hack into hotel registries and the DMV, matching hotel guests to their rooms and cars. It might have been relatively simple, if some of them hadn't used fake names. She was pretty amazing and deserved a job with a guaranteed paycheck every week. That would be nice for a change.

The news report returned, jolting Beth back to attention. The tall brunette woman she'd seen earlier on TV spoke from an outside location.

"The violent killing spree that began yesterday morning with Todd Meiser now includes Robert and Anne Cossman, and Arnold Gomez. Channel 14 news just learned that all the victims had numbers written on their foreheads."

*Oh. Of course! That's why they're calling me the Numbers Killer.* She laughed with relief. Danny hadn't told anyone about her counting compulsion after all.

The camera view drew back, revealing the parking lot where Beth had left Gomez to die.

"Then, just yesterday afternoon, Arnold Gomez, also visiting the area, was murdered here at the Hampshire Apartments, where he was visiting his nephew. Police say the killer wrote the number six on Gomez' forehead, after he was shot. None of the other victims appear to have any connection to Raymond Butler and the trial that starts in just a few days. But the numbers appear to correspond with the order in which the victims were killed."

Hmm. No mention of Horrigan and his ugly fish shirt because she'd forgotten to write something on his head. But wait . . . That was a good thing! They couldn't know it was her that killed him. Grinning, she focused on the news.

"Channel 14 will stay on top of the investigation as authorities track down the killer. If the numbers really do represent the order in which the victims were killed—" The reporter frowned, like she was the one who had to solve these crimes, not Agent Heslin and Agent Rivera, "—where are victims number one and five?"

*Victim number one?* Beth's knees shook, and the room spun. *What's happening to me?* She reached for the wall to brace herself. Fear spiked her adrenaline and she desperately wished she wasn't alone. Being alone made her situation so much more frightening. Where was Danny when she needed him? She fought the wave of nausea rising from her stomach, dropping her head into her hands. She managed to lower herself to the floor before she fell unconscious.

The news was still playing when she woke up. Lifting her head off the carpet, she rubbed her forehead. The nausea had passed, but her ears throbbed with the onset of a headache. She dragged her purse off the desk and onto the floor. Removing the gun first, she rummaged through the mess of useless junk in search of aspirin. *Where the hell is it?* The bottle wasn't there, but her fingers closed around two lint covered pills at the bottom of her bag. Those would have to do. She trudged off to the bathroom to wash them down with water, then returned to the television.

"Channel 14 News has just learned that the Numbers Killer left a threatening note for an FBI agent at the murder scene of Arnold Gomez."

"What?" Beth sat up, gasping. "A threatening note? No. No. No. I would never do that." Her hands flew up to cover her mouth. "I didn't threaten her! How could they think that? I was trying to protect her. I told her to be careful. I told her to watch her back!" She slumped against the wall, tearing at her hair. This was awful! How could she have been so misunderstood?

She had to see Agent Heslin and clear up the terrible misunderstanding. It couldn't wait another second. But how? How could she get to her with those crazy dogs guarding her mansion?

Squatting on the floor next to the coffee table, she woke up her laptop. Waiting on the hotel's internet service was like watching grass grow, but within fifteen minutes she had intercepted the feed going from Agent Heslin's home to the security firm who monitored her videos. This time, instead of shutting them down, she watched.

The house was huge, so on her screen, each live feed was smaller than the size of a postage stamp. Clicking on an image enlarged it. She needed to find where Heslin kept the dogs. She clicked

on all the outside views. Finding no fenced kennels or pens, she switched to the interior views. Many of the rooms were almost empty of furniture, but covered with large stuffed squares, giant circles, and bean bag chairs. Some sort of contemporary decorating trend? A room with a sectional couch and a large television had the same squares and circles, but there, almost every stuffed shape had a dog on it. How many beds did those dogs need? Some of the creatures were laying around with their ridiculously long legs sticking straight out like poles, their mouths lolling open. A few were laying half-on and half-off the giant square beds. Some were curled up inside bean bag-looking chairs, their legs tucked beneath them. What a life they had!

Beth enlarged the view of the kitchen and her jaw dropped. What the—? A bolt of anger shot her to full attention. There was a tall man in Heslin's kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers, acting like he was right at home. He had light brown hair and looked like he was in his late twenties, or early thirties. His muscles rippled under his jeans and form-fitting quarter-zip top, one of those silky athletic shirts. From all the pictures Beth had studied of the Heslin family, she would have recognized Victoria's brother, who had blonde hair just like his sister. This was not the brother. "Who the hell is that?" If Rivera was Mr. Sexy, then this guy was Mr. Sexier. But what was he doing in Heslin's house? He didn't belong there. And did Rivera know about him?

Beth quickly searched through the other feeds, clicking like mad to see if Heslin was somewhere else in the house. She didn't find her or anyone else. Unless the agent was in one of the bathrooms, this guy was alone in her house.

She returned to the feed from the kitchen. Mr. Sexier stood against the large, white-marble topped island in the center of the room. He was busy doing something, but Beth couldn't see what because his back shielded her view. She leaned closer to her laptop. Mr. Sexier moved to the side. Syringes lay spread across the counter. *What was going on there?* One by one, he filled them from a glass bottle. Beth squinted. The front of the bottle had a prescription label, it wasn't something from a store. Whatever he was doing, it was extremely suspicious.

He opened the refrigerator and removed a square, plastic container. Then he called to the dogs. *The video has sound!* They flew from their beds and surrounded him. He opened the container. Without a trace of hesitation, they gobbled down the food he handed them. The man grabbed the collar of a big dog, striped brown and tan like a tiger, telling the animal he was a good boy. Behind the man's back, his other hand held a syringe. Slowly, he moved his hand toward the dog's thigh. Once there, in one swift movement, he jabbed the dog with the syringe and depressed the plunger.

Beth gasped.

*What the hell is he doing? Is he trying to kill Agent Heslin's dogs?*





RIVERA PICKED THE SHORT straw on updating Murphy, so Victoria arrived at the Sonesta Hotel before him. She parked her SUV in the back corner of the parking lot, away from the main entrance, to survey the area without being on display herself. From the cooler in her backseat, she grabbed a yogurt and spoon. The yogurt wasn't exactly cold, but it wasn't quite warm yet either, so she went ahead and opened it. She only had a few minutes to finish eating and pull up her video camera feeds to check on her dogs. Before too much time passed, she wanted to be sure there wasn't another "glitch" with the system.

Four of her dogs were in the family room, three of them on dog beds, and one on the couch. All slept soundly. Leo and Bella slept side by side next to the picture window. Victoria tapped the screen to change rooms and found Eddie by himself in the kitchen. With his butt up and his tail wagging, he swatted his toy and then hopped after it. Izzy trotted into the room, her tail wagging like mad, attempting to join in his game.

Victoria smiled, eating her yogurt and watching her happy dogs. A year ago, Izzy was found malnourished and dehydrated, tied to the back of a house in Seville in the blazing sun. Victoria had pictures from when Izzy was first brought to the shelter. The vet had pulled more than fifty bulging ticks off the pup's ears, treated her for mange, worms, and burns from God only knew what. The playful dog with shiny fur romping around her kitchen looked nothing like the despondent animal who had been rescued from a hellish life of neglect and abuse.

Eddie and Izzy froze in unison, ears up, and muscles tensed. After a few seconds of standing frozen like statues, they raced out of the room.

Ned's voice sang out. "Who wants to go for a walk next?"

An unfamiliar pang resonated inside her. She had become used to the concept of Ned being around whenever she needed him. The threat of him being with somebody else bothered her more than she would have thought.

Ned stepped into the entryway carrying leashes and wearing a Vanderbilt zip top and jeans.

The passenger side door opened with a sudden click and the interior lights came on. "I've got the folder with—"

Victoria gasped. The spoon dropped and clattered against the cup holder. Her hand flew to her sidearm.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't know I would startle you." Rivera sat down next to her and pulled the door closed.

She laughed, placing her hand over her chest. "Good thing you're not the perp."

Rivera frowned, watching the image on her phone. "That's Ned?"

"Yes. Jeez, I'm still trembling, here."

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know. I just turned the video on. He was supposed to give the dogs their shots today. Not sure if he remembered."

Rivera reached for her phone. "Can I see him?"

"Sure. You can even hear him." After handing him her phone, she collected her spoon from the floor, wiped it off with a paper towel, and dropped it back into the cooler with the empty yogurt



container. She leaned in to see what Rivera was seeing. A smiling Ned attached leashes and spoke to the dogs while they jumped up and down, weaving around him like it was the best day of their lives.

Rivera's expression concealed any emotion.

"Let's get out there before it storms again," Ned said to the dogs. He began singing *Thunder* by Imagine Dragons, substituting in a few of his own lyrics.

"Here, give me that," Victoria held out her hand. "I feel bad that we're spying on him."

Rivera returned her phone.

"Did I tell you he agreed to go to Spain with me next month?" Victoria shifted in her seat. Her lips were pressed together, she didn't have the heart to smile.

"For another one of those dog group visit things?"

"Yes." She frowned and mimicked his deep raspy voice. "For one of those dog group visits."

"Don't you ever vacation at a resort, like normal rich people? And why Spain? Aren't there plenty of dogs here in the US that you can rescue?"

"Yes. Absolutely. And I do help . . . financially . . . It's just that some breeds really touch your heart. My mother had a thing for greyhounds, and the dogs at these shelters are all suffering, or they were, I mean. At the end of the hunting season, hundreds and hundreds of them are discarded by hunters like they're pieces of garbage. And few will find forever homes if they aren't sent to other countries for adoption." Victoria took one last glance at Ned leashing up her dogs before shutting off her device and pocketing it. "So, what's the plan?"

"Interview the staff again." Rivera placed his hand on the door handle.

"Good idea." Victoria turned away from Rivera. They both opened their doors and got out. "And first, let's take another look around inside."

"In case there are bodies stuffed in the cleaning supply closets . . ."

"At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised." The doors clicked shut and Victoria pressed the key to lock her car. "And I want to know why we didn't know about Gomez staying here until we found the key in his wallet."

They went straight to the front desk to introduce themselves and took down the names of the employees currently working the desk and on the floors. There had to be at least a dozen other detectives and agents working the Numbers Killer case from every angle, but Victoria and Rivera were the only ones at the hotel.

Victoria's phone rang. She glanced at the screen, frowned, and held up a finger. "Sorry. It's Ned. Just give me one minute."

A frown appeared on Rivera's face.

Victoria wandered a few feet away from him to answer her phone. "Hey, Ned. Everything okay?"

"No. Sorry to bother you on the job, but Sasha is acting really strange."

"Sasha?"

"Yeah. Sasha is pacing and panting. I think she's sick and uh, you should take her somewhere. Can you come home now?"

Victoria froze. An icy chill skittered down her back. "Sasha?" Sasha passed away a few months ago from osteosarcoma. Ned administered her chemo for months and eventually put her down while Victoria held her and sobbed. Was he just getting her dogs' names confused? Impossible. He wouldn't forget her name. He knew all her dogs and everything about them. And if one of them was ill or injured—something beyond what he could handle—he was to rush them to the emergency vet hospital. Victoria didn't take any chances with their health.

“Um, okay. I’ll be there soon.” Her voice wavered as the phone went dead on the other end. What was he trying to tell her? Was this code that another one of her dogs had broken a leg due to osteo, and he just didn’t want to deliver the terrible news over the phone? A dull, heaviness crept into her chest. Did he have to put one of the dogs to sleep immediately, and wanted her to come back to say goodbye?

Rivera’s dark eyes met her own. “Everything okay?”

She clamped one hand around her waist. “Um, I don’t know. Look—I’m sorry. I hate to do this, but I have to leave. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Okay?”

He narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest, and studied her. “What’s going on?”

“I’m really not sure.” Would Ned pull some sort of stunt to get her home because she had cancelled their date? Was this his way of showing her she could make the time? If that was his plan, she would be furious. Beyond furious. But it didn’t seem like something Ned would ever do. No, something terrible had happened to one of her dogs. Already, her heart ached. Her limbs felt numb. She couldn’t bear to consider which one was hurt.

Rivera’s phone buzzed from inside his coat pocket. He slid it out and looked at the screen. “Murphy. I better take it.”

Victoria waved over her shoulder and hurried off. In search of clues, she tapped the icon to view her security cameras and clicked the page with the video feeds.

They were all blank again.

A tendril of terror traveled down her neck and into her toes as her mouth went dry. She picked up her pace and called Ned back. His phone rang until it went to voicemail. She ran the rest of the way to her SUV, got in, and peeled out of her spot.

When she drove past the entrance, Rivera held his hand up and mouthed something. She didn’t stop. She could call him later, once she knew what she was dealing with. At this point, all she could tell him was that something strange was going on at her house. Something that required her immediate attention.

The timing could not have been worse. They were closing in on the killer, had to be. The secret to everything was somewhere locked inside the Sonesta Hotel. She’d come back as soon as she could. She swallowed the lump in her throat and sped down the street, driving 70 in a 50 mile per hour zone.





RIVERA RAN HIS HAND over his head as he watched Victoria's taillights disappear into the night. What had Ned told her that made her spooked? Whatever it was, she hadn't wanted to share it with him.

Rivera did not consider Ned as a competitor—until he saw him on screen. In the past, every time Ned's name came up, he'd pictured a goofy-looking, skinny guy in a big baggy T-shirt and loose pants. Like Shaggy from the Scooby-Doo cartoons, or the hiker who found the Cossmans. The live video proved he'd been way off. The dude was good looking and had the run of her house. Maybe there was something more than their employer and employee relationship. Guess he and Victoria weren't as close as he thought. But when he pushed Ned and his emotions aside, he was even more uncomfortable with Victoria's sudden departure. She had never left work at a critical moment before. So, whatever Ned told her had to be a big deal. Putting that together with the notes she'd received from a killer, and alarm signals went off in his brain.

*I should go after her.*

Murphy's ranting broke through his thoughts. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, boss." Rivera forced himself to unclench his jaw and focus.

"Cops just found Horrigan's truck. Abandoned in a Walmart parking lot. Another dead end."

"Hmm," was all Rivera could think of in response. "I'm at the hotel. I'm going to find out what happened here if it kills me."

"Agent Poloski figured out why Gomez paid cash for his hotel room and checked in under a false name. His stuff is still in his room, by the way. I thought it might be our biggest clue yet, that Gomez knew someone was after him. But Poloski discovered that Gomez owes money to his ex and this follows a trend of not wanting her to know he had money for a pseudo-vacation and a hotel."

"Jeez. Okay. Let me know if he finds out there's more to it." Rivera ended the call and started walking back to the hotel with the folder of photos and sketches under his arm, cracking his knuckles. He stopped, turned toward his car in the parking lot, took a few steps, then turned again. With a loud, heavy sigh, he walked inside to the center of the three-story lobby and looked up at the upper floors. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, taking in the faint smell of must, the muted sounds of shuffling feet, and a few murmurs coming from behind the reception desk. He opened his eyes. Behind the registration desk stood an overweight young lady in her early twenties wearing glasses. Her name tag said Betty. Next to her stood a bearded man who looked slightly older, also wearing a black blazer with black pants. The man kept his focus on something behind the counter. Betty tucked a stray hair behind her ear and smiled at him. "Hi. You checking in?"

Rivera held up his badge. "FBI."

"Oh. Again." She blinked and squared her shoulders. The male worker beside her straightened up and leaned forward against the desk. "I'm the manager on duty. Can I help you?"

"Aren't you supposed to wear a name tag?"

"Can't find it today. My name is Alex."

"Where can we speak privately, Alex?"

Alex lifted his hand toward the door behind the desk. "Come this way." He raised a movable piece in the side of the counter, so Rivera could walk through.

“I need you to come, too,” Rivera told Betty. “I know you’ve already spoken to detectives, so I apologize for putting you through this *again*, as you say, but it’s important.”

Alex nodded. “Sure.”

Rivera glanced out through the office window toward the front desk. “Have you seen anyone suspicious here? Any unusual behaviors that stick out these past few days?”

Betty pushed on the arm of her glasses. “We already told the detectives, and the agents, but there was one guy who left a few days ago.”

“The one who wanted a specific room number, right?” Alex grinned. “Said he knew it was ridiculous but just to ‘work with him.’ It was just . . . strange.”

“Yes. That was him.” Betty’s eyes had lit up with excitement. Or maybe she was just nervous about the investigation being focused on her place of employment. “He was wearing a baseball cap, can’t remember what it said now, but I’m pretty sure he was wearing a cap. He’s gone now, but he never checked out. Left a few days earlier than he had the room reserved for. I heard that the credit card he used wasn’t his. It was some sort of identity theft thing. But you know what? I’m just remembering this—I’m pretty sure he asked for two key cards.”

Two? The guy posing as Thomas Wilson and whoever he was with—were they the couple Olivia saw running out the back door? Was his companion the mystery killer? Or did they have absolutely nothing to do with the murders? Rivera opened his folder and showed Alex and Betty the pictures of their killer compiled by the police artists. “Have you seen this woman?”

Betty picked up the photo and drew it closer to face. “No, I don’t think so.”

Rivera pressed his lips together and silently sighed. Just because the staff hadn’t seen her, didn’t mean she hadn’t been there. He trusted Olivia and what she claimed to have seen. Her “that might be her” response to the Smith’s sketches was the most hopeful testimony they had so far.

He scanned the memos hung on a bulletin board next to his head. “Any kind of get together or meeting being held here?”

Betty shrugged. Alex shook his head.

The agent picked up the pictures and put them back in his folder. “A sales opportunity? A reunion of any kind? A hiking or fishing club?” None of the things he mentioned would be a fit for all the victims, but there had to be some commonality that hadn’t occurred to them yet.

“Not that I know of. And I’ve worked every day this week.” Alex’s eyes flashed toward the door, then back to Rivera. “We’re more likely to have guests who pay with cash and don’t want anyone to know they’re here than we are to have business meetings, if you get my drift. This place isn’t . . . you know what I mean, don’t you?”

“I understand. I’ve got some pictures for you.” Rivera opened his folder and set down the same photos he’d shown to Olivia earlier. “Did you see any of these people together? Talking? Coming or going together?”

Betty stared, covering her mouth with her hand. “I recognize some of them as the people who were killed.”

Rivera saw the fear in her eyes. The hotel’s guests were more at risk than the witnesses for the Butler case. The police should be guarding them instead. But none of the victims had been killed at the hotel. Should the hotel close until the killer was apprehended? The media didn’t know about the connection yet, but surely once the word spread about the victims’ sole connection, everyone would flee and cancel reservations as quickly as they could. Once word got out, the hotel wouldn’t be able to give rooms away. “Can you get me the names of everyone staying here for the past four days, with their room numbers?”

“Yes. We’ve already done that for the FBI and the police, like five . . .”

“I’d like to see it again.”

“It will just take a few minutes.” Alex shook the mouse on a nearby computer and woke it up.

Rivera left the office and walked to the far corner of the lobby where he had a view of the entire space. He called Victoria. There was no answer.

Alex returned and presented Rivera with several printed pages. The agent set them down on a coffee table. He jotted down the names and room numbers of the victims in order of their deaths. He also wrote down the Smiths’ names, since it was possible, even likely, they had twice been targeted and followed.

Meiser, aka Jason Bourne: room 267.

Cossmans: room 383.

Gomez, aka Jim Johnson: room 145.

Horrigan: room 125.

Smiths: room 123.

And the still missing Thomas Wilson: room 332.

The hotel employees hovered nearby, ready for another request. Rivera stared at the information and rubbed his chin. The victims’ rooms weren’t in consecutive order, nor were they even on the same floor. He handed Betty his list. “I’ll need access to these six rooms.”

“Sure. Just . . . I’ll be right back.” She pivoted around and returned to the office.

Five minutes later, carrying room keys in six different labeled sleeves, Rivera headed to the room occupied by the Smiths. It had already been cleaned and made ready for the next occupants. He didn’t expect to find anything there, but he slipped on gloves and searched every corner, shelf, and drawer for possible answers. His eyes traveled the room one last time searching for anything that didn’t belong. He moved the drapes aside and peered out the window into the dark woods. Beyond a large berm, twisted branches bent and straightened in the wind.

A glance at the bedside table clock told him Victoria should have made it to her house by now.

He walked down the hall, poked through Horrigan’s belongings, and found nothing of interest. He took the stairs to the second floor and the room Meiser and Olivia had used. The room had already been cleaned, occupied, and cleaned again. But in room 225, Gomez’s belongings were still inside. Again, nothing in the room struck Rivera as significant.

On the third floor, in room 383, the Cossmans’ stuff had been cleared away since his last visit with Victoria. By request of the authorities, the hotel had been told not to give the room to any new customers yet. Rivera took another quick look. He didn’t expect to spot anything new, and he was right.

Thomas Wilson’s room, 332, had also been cleaned before the hotel had been instructed to leave it as is.

Except for room 332, each of the other rooms shared the same layout and the same view on one side of the building. The only other common thread between all was being in close proximity to each other between three floors of the Sonesta Hotel last Friday night. The same night Olivia saw the mystery couple fighting.

*What are we missing?*

Rivera parted the curtains and stared outside toward the woods again. Nice enough as a backdrop, if you didn’t look too closely. Not a forest exactly, but enough trees for teens to hide in and guzzle beers. A place to toss trash into for those too lazy to make the trek to the dumpster. Big enough for small creatures, the ones who occasionally ventured out onto the highway for an unplanned game

of Russian roulette. From his current angle, he spotted the start of a narrow trail, snaking haphazardly through overhanging limbs.

Removing his gloves, he checked his phone again for a message from Victoria. Doing something was better than doing nothing.

He walked down to the first floor and left the hotel through the backdoor. Outside, a dampness hung heavy in the cold air, descending with the gloom as if it meant to creep into every corner, every crevice. He crossed the parking lot and stopped somewhere between the building and the edge of the woods. Looking back at the hotel, he scanned the roof and the exterior walls. He located the rooms he'd just explored by their dark, unlit windows. Had all the victims seen something behind the hotel that put them in danger? After a few seconds of staring, he pivoted to face the woods. He'd have a quick check, and if Victoria still hadn't called him back, he was heading to her house.

Intermittent gusts of wind cut through his sports coat. A faint, unpleasant smell wafted from somewhere close by. A dead squirrel maybe—the little creatures didn't only die on the highway. He rubbed his neck. Something about the woods bothered him.

He scanned the edge, where the woods met the patchy grass, found the trail opening, and headed in. Tall, wet weeds slid against his pants. With each step deeper into the canopy of tangled trees and fallen branches, the smell grew stronger and more repulsive. Surprising that the hotel staff hadn't received a request to do something about it yet. Or maybe they had.

The swishing of sodden, fallen leaves accompanied his steps. It took stumbling over a bumpy root for him to get with it and turn on his phone's flashlight. Broken foliage indicated someone or something else much larger than a raccoon or possum had been through recently. His heart beat faster as he stepped slowly, alert for anything unusual.

The electric whoosh and the clickety-clack of an approaching train cut through the silence. The horn blasted, the noise steadily building to a roaring crescendo. Olivia's claim that the train blocked out all other noise rang true. He took another step forward. A metal can crunched under his foot. A few more yards ahead, a piece of white fabric floated above the ground, glowing like a ghostly apparition in the small circle of light emanating from his phone. Rivera peered toward the fabric. The smell was strong. A few steps closer and the outline of a torso became visible under the white fabric. A man with pale bloated skin and dark hair was lying face up. A single word covered his forehead. Not written in black ink, but in deep pink strokes of color. Lipstick.

Rivera edged closer, struggling to decipher the letters. B. E. T. R. He couldn't make out the rest. He looked away, cleared his head of assumptions, and tried again.

*Betrayer.*

He'd found victim number one.







THE TIME FOR MEDICAL attention had long passed. The man had been dead for several days. If the smell wasn't enough of a giveaway, the damage from scavengers—tiny missing chunks of flesh—made it certain. Rivera pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket and crouched down, disturbing as little as possible around him. The man had been shot at least twice. Black stains circled his collar bone, stomach area, and the grass and leaves around him. He had died right there in the woods. Rivera put the gloves on and searched the dead man's pockets for identification. He found a wallet with a license inside. The name on it meant nothing to him.

The train had passed, but the wind was starting to howl. He called the medical examiner's office and Rebecca answered.

"It's Rivera. I found another gunshot victim."

"Hello, Rivera. Where did you find him?"

"Sonesta Hotel. Can you come out?" He put Rebecca on speaker and moved his flashlight beam slowly over the ground, looking for shell casings or other evidence.

"It just so happens that I can, for you. I can be there almost immediately." The sound of movement and metal clinking came through the phone, like Rebecca was putting away her tools.

"You know where it is?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. Drive around the back. Look for the dumpster. I'll meet you there." He glanced at the time and at his messages. Still no word from Victoria.

"Hold tight. I just have to clean up here and grab my bag. Then I'll be on my way."

"Not sure what you'll find. He's been there awhile and with the rain . . . It's starting again now. Sounds like a storm coming."

"Whatever there is to see, I'll do my best with it. I'm also good at my job." She chuckled. "I'll call Forensics on my way."

"Thanks, Rebecca."

The rain was just a cold drizzle, but the wind was cold and biting when Rivera called Murphy to give him an update.

Murphy huffed into the phone. "Why the hell didn't anyone find that body before?"

"Don't know, boss."

"I can't come out there. I'm up to my neck in this other thing. I'll call the Chief of Police, so he doesn't feel left out. Glad Rebecca and forensics will get there first."

On the verge of shivering, Rivera called Victoria next. Still no answer. She'd always answered his calls before, no matter what she was doing, even when she was out walking her dogs. Once she'd even picked up in the middle of taking a shower. He left a message asking her to call him immediately and told her he had found another body. Victim number one. He bit into his lower lip, his concern for Victoria escalating; his bad feeling about her situation growing worse. He had to wait for Rebecca to arrive. But then he was getting in his car and driving straight to Victoria's house.

His call to Sam went to voicemail. He left a message with the victim's name. "I'm going to text you an image of his license. Tell me anything you can about him." He ended the call and sent Sully a text, then read case updates in his email until the ME's familiar white van appeared. The drizzle

changed into a light but steady shower as a young man stepped down from the driver's side and Rebecca emerged on the passenger side.

"Over here." Rivera waved from the edge of the woods. He was pleased Rebecca brought someone with her. He didn't intend to wait until she was finished, but also wouldn't have felt right about leaving her alone.

"What have we got?" Rebecca carried a bag of data collection tools. Her assistant walked behind her carrying an umbrella and lighting equipment.

Rivera wiped water from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Hey, Rebecca. Hi—"

"Eric. I'm an assistant. Just started last week."

"Hi, Eric. You got here fast." Rivera walked toward the path. "The vic is back here. He's been dead a few days."

"We hustled to get here before the rest of the cavalry arrives and tramples the scene. You think this one is also a victim of the Numbers Killer?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm sure." Rivera lifted a branch to avoid getting hit in the face.

"I hope he's the key to stopping the killer." Rebecca ducked under the branch.

"So do I." Rivera led the way to the body, staying off the path and walking right through the brush to preserve evidence. "There he is."

Rebecca followed Rivera's gaze to the corpse. "I smell him already. He's dead. You got that part right."

Eric set up the lights while Rebecca removed items from her bag. "You need a hat to keep the rain out of your eyes," Rebecca said, talking to Rivera but studying the scene before her. "I've got an extra one in the van you can have."

"I can't stay." Rivera glanced over his shoulder toward the parking lot. "Unless you need me for something specific."

Rebecca chuckled. "Nothing I need you for here." She glanced at him sideways. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." Rivera rocked back on his heels. "I've got to go check on . . . a situation. I'll call and either meet you back here or at your office."

"Okay. No problem. Forensics is on their way. I'll give you a personal update as soon as I'm done. And good luck with your situation."

Rivera raced through the rain to his car, threw open the door, and sped out of the hotel parking lot with the rain battering his roof.





FOR THE LAST FEW MILES to Agent Heslin's house, Beth drove her rental behind a small red car. Large magnets advertising *Farm Fresh Meals* decorated the back and sides. The car's brake lights came on as it approached the large iron gates. It stopped in Heslin's driveway. Beth pulled up alongside it, hopped out of her sedan, and walked up to the driver's window. "Hi. You're delivering?"

"Yes." The woman smiled sheepishly. "A little late. I got behind."

"I'll take that for you. I'm a friend of Agent—a friend of Victoria's. I'm going up to the house."

"Oh, okay. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." Beth forced a smile.

"All right. That will help. I'll get the bag." She removed it from the trunk. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Beth maintained her fake smile. *Now drive away.*

She returned to her rental and waved the other woman away. Once the red car had disappeared down the road, she drove past the entrance and parked around a bend on the side of the road, where the car wouldn't be seen by anyone entering at the front gate. She dropped her gun in the delivery bag, hustled back to the gate, and pressed the buttons to announce her presence. "Hi. I have the—" Oh crap. What is it called? She glanced down at the bag. "The Farm Fresh Meals delivery for Victoria Heslin."

"Kristen?" said a deep, masculine voice. *Figured Mr. Sexier would sound like that.*

"No. Kristen is sick today. This is Beth. Are you going to open the gate? Food is getting cold." *Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve . . .*

"The food is supposed to be cold."

"Oh. Fine. No one told me what's inside." *Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . .* "I have other deliveries to make." She swallowed hard, her mouth dry.

The gate inched open, swinging in a slow arc across the fancy pavers. *Yes! I'm in!* Beth hurried forward carrying the bag. She didn't know where the delivery people usually took the bag of food and she didn't care. Somehow, she would get past the guard dogs. Perhaps Mr. Sexier really had killed them today and she had nothing to worry about. Although what would that make him? Someone to watch out for, at the least. She walked around to the shadowy area at the back of the house. She'd just set foot on the edge of the stone patio when the dogs came rushing out, barking.

"Damn! No! Stay back! Bad dogs!" With her heart pounding and fear threatening to paralyze her muscles, she grabbed her gun from the bag. She violently shook the bag upside down, dumping its contents to the ground. Kicking at one of the boxes, she sent it flying up into the air, scattering roasted vegetables around the patio.

The dogs immediately forgot about her. They scarfed up the food like live vacuum cleaners. All except for the two smaller mutts who didn't really fit in with the others. Something about them was familiar. They stood together, away from the rest of the pack, barking, and snarling at Beth like they had their own set of rules.

Sweating and breathing hard, Beth yanked the tops off two other boxes of food and tossed their contents away from the house. The dogs scrambled after it.

With her gun cocked in front of her chest, and not taking her eyes off the animals, she hurried away. Grabbing the back door—*please be unlocked!*—she swung it silently open, jumped inside, and

pulled it shut behind her. She slumped her back against the tall windows. On the other side of the glass, the dogs were eating and sniffing their noses over the ground. She sighed with relief. They were out and she was in.

She took a few quiet steps across the floor. Nothing creaked or groaned. Of course it didn't. Everything in the fancy house looked perfect, but not that it mattered, the dogs had already made enough of a racket. She stopped in the kitchen to admire the room, her mouth hanging open. The space was big and open but warm and inviting at the same time. Beautiful wood floors gleamed, and stately marble covered the counters. The high-tech stainless appliances—*a computer in the fridge?*—looked like something from a future decade. The tiny video feed images hadn't done it justice. Did it get any better than this? Actually—yeah- same set up but without the faint, lingering smell of dogs. Still - just wow! And if what Beth suspected was true, Heslin didn't deserve to live there.

A framed picture hung on the wall—the same family Beth saw online. Except in this photo, they were relaxed and laughing instead of formal and posed. She was reaching to touch it when an angry voice blasted through the silence from behind her.

“Who are you?”

She jerked around to see Mr. Sexier, a towering presence with his arms crossed.

She lifted her gun, aiming it at his chest. His eyes grew wide. He took several steps back.

Beth swallowed and cleared her throat with a sharp cough. “Listen, Mr. Sexier, I've killed people, and I won't hesitate to do it again. Do what I say, and don't you dare try to trick me.”

“Ahh, yes ma'am. What is it you want?”

“Ma'am? What the—? I'm not an old lady!” She forced her anger out through her stare.

“I know.” He opened his palms toward the ceiling. “I was just being polite.”

Beth shook the gun. “First, I want to know who you are and what you're doing here.”

“You want to know what *I'm* doing here? Shouldn't—”

Beth gritted her teeth and screamed. “Answer my question!”

“I'm Ned McCallister. I take care of the owner's dogs.” He looked past her, out the glass door. “And since you dumped dinner on the ground, looks like I'm going to be her chef tonight as well.”

Beth sneered. “Glad you can find humor in this situation. But let me tell you something, there's nothing funny about it. And it didn't look like you were taking care of them today. Looked like you were trying to kill them.”

“Kill them? Why would you think—and how would you know anyway? Were you watching me?”

“Since I'm the one holding the gun, you don't really get to ask questions.” She scanned the kitchen and gestured toward the leather bar chairs. “Go sit down on that chair thing over there.”

The dogs swarmed back into the house, a caravan of twisting and turning, sniffing and snorting, hyper creatures.

Beth jumped back. “What the hell?”

“Dog door.” Ned tilted his head toward a giant rectangular hole in the wall.

“Get them out of here right now. Get them out!” She kept the gun pointed on him. “Or I'll finish off what you started today.”

“What I started?” He walked toward one of the doors leading out of the kitchen. “Come on, dogs. This way. Come on.”

Beth followed close behind, keeping his body in the range of what she could hit without missing. “Don't try anything.”

The dogs followed him. He shut the door and turned around to face her. “What's going on?”

“That’s exactly what I’m here to find out. But not without Agent Heslin. Call her and tell her to come here.”

“Tell her to walk into a potential ambush? I’m not doing that.”

*Now what?* Without taking her eyes off him, she paced the floor. “Listen, Ned. You might be so stupid and brave that you’re willing to sacrifice your life so your girlfriend doesn’t get hurt, but are you willing to sacrifice one of her dogs? Seems to me she really cares about them. What would she think if all her dogs died because you wouldn’t cooperate? Guess she wouldn’t need you anymore if that happened. In fact, maybe that’s a great idea. Maybe that’s what’s best for everyone. If I kill them all now, you can go before you’ve ruined Heslin’s whole relationship with Rivera.”

“Wait. Calm down. There’s no reason to hurt the dogs. And I really have no idea what you’re talking about.” Ned shook his head.

“Don’t look at me like I’m stupid. Make the call!”

Frowning, Ned reached for his phone on the counter.

“Wait! Let those dogs back in.”

“Now you want them back in?”

“Just let them in! Some of them.”

Ned opened the door and called to the dogs. They all rushed in. Beth took a step back, cringing at their exuberance. “Not all of them!”

“Oops,” he said, not sounding one bit sorry that he hadn’t done exactly what she told him to do.

Beth shifted the gun’s aim to the pack of dogs bouncing and leaping around Ned. “Now call Agent Heslin and tell her to come home because one of the dogs is hurt and you need her help. Do not say anything else. Do not tell her I’m here. Do not mention anything about a gun. One wrong word and I will start shooting these dogs. I will. I really, really will. Is that understood?”

Ned’s face hardened. He moved his gaze over the dogs. They were all looking up at him like he was royalty, although they occasionally eyed Beth in a way that bothered her immensely. The two smaller ones resumed snarling at her.

Ned glared at Beth as he picked up his phone.

• • • •

AFTER THIRTY MINUTES, Beth’s arms ached with exhaustion, tired from holding the gun raised for so long. “Where is she?”

“She said she was coming.” Ned sighed. A big white dog rested its head on Ned’s lap. Ned stroked its neck. “You know she’s a federal agent, right?”

“Of course I know that. Where was she when you talked to her?”

“I already told you. I have no idea.”

Through the floor to ceiling windows, a bolt of lightning illuminated the sky in shades of deep purple. With a backdrop of ghostly black branches, shadows moved around the patio. Beth wasn’t sure if there was really something out there, or if it was just an illusion. In the corner of the kitchen, the two little dogs hadn’t stopped barking and snarling since she arrived. “Shut up, shut up, shut up,” she hissed at them. Their yapping only grew louder. “What the hell is their problem? Why are they doing that to me?”

Ned shrugged. “They’ve been nothing but friendly and submissive, until you came along.”

With no warning, all the big dogs jumped up and ran toward the back door.

“Why did they do that?” Beth kept her finger on the trigger, lest Ned forget who was in charge.

The backdoor opened with a soft, almost undiscernible crick. The dogs' panting and huffing escalated. A repeated slapping noise echoed into the room. Someone was moving slowly toward the kitchen.

"Ned?" came a female voice from the entry way. Agent Heslin.

"Finally," Beth whispered. She gestured to Ned with her gun. "Stand up slowly and turn around." She twirled her hand to get him going, keeping enough distance so that he couldn't grab the gun, but close enough that she could still shoot him without missing. When he was facing the entry, she stood behind him, pressing the gun into the back of his neck. "Tell her you're in here."

"Don't come in here," Ned shouted.

"That's not—damn it!" Beth whipped the back of his knee with the gun.

Ned groaned. His knees buckled from the blow.

"Get up." Beth grabbed his T-shirt, peering around him, suddenly nervous about catching her first real-life glimpse of the FBI agent. "You're going to be sorry if you don't do what I tell you." She cocked her weapon. "And don't you worry about Heslin. She can take care of herself. Let's just hope she'll tell me the truth. I need to hear what she has to say."

Heslin crept around the corner, her gun stretched out in front of her, surrounded by all the dogs except the two littlest, meanest ones. Kudos to the agent for being so calm and well prepared. But what had Beth expected? Victoria Heslin was a real agent. She'd had actual training.

"What did you tell her, Ned?" Beth poked his shoulder with the muzzle. "How did she know I was here?"

"Because she's good at her job. And you better listen to her." He shifted his weight to one leg, favoring the one Beth hit.

Beth huffed. "Aren't you a brave man for someone who could have their brains blown out at any second. How many warnings do you need?"

"I'm a Federal Agent. Drop your gun. Let him go and we can talk." It was the same voice from the news interviews. And the agent was even prettier and more polished in person.

Beth gripped her gun tighter. "Oh, I know exactly who you are. But do you know who I am?"

"I'm not sure that I do, but I'd like to know. Put your gun down so we can talk." Heslin took a few steps forward.

"I'm the one who tried to warn you. I told you to watch your back. I was protecting you." Beth angled her body sideways, making herself as small as possible behind Ned's body, keeping the muzzle of her gun on his back. "You never know who you can trust, and who wants you dead. But little did I know that it was you who couldn't be trusted."

"I can be trusted." Heslin came closer. "Put the gun down."

She looked so calm and yet so serious. How did she do it? Beth squared her shoulders and leaned into Ned's body. She was completely shielded. "I want the truth from you, Agent Heslin. Only the truth."

"You've got it, as soon as you put the gun down. Whatever it is you need to know, I'll tell you. Only the truth. What's your name?"

Beth had to admire the agent's intense focus. No freaking out. She acted like they were having a normal conversation. Well, if that's how it was done, Beth could do the same. "I'm not going to let go of my gun because I don't know who deserves to live yet. Maybe Ned does, maybe he doesn't. You see, I thought we could be friends, Heslin. Now, well, I just hope you aren't about to disappoint everyone. It's not fair to Agent Rivera. And I won't let him suffer."

"Rivera isn't suffering. Rivera and I are colleagues. Nothing more."

“Oh, really? Is that what you want me to believe now? Don’t patronize me. Do you think I’m that stupid? Do you?” *I’m shouting. I need to calm down, not lose my cool.* She took a deep breath. “I need to know who this man is, and what’s he doing here at your house. But first, make those dogs shut up.”

Heslin didn’t respond. She moved slowly forward, her progress so slight, Beth wouldn’t have noticed if she wasn’t so astute. *One step, two steps, three steps, four . . .* “Stop right there. Don’t come any closer or I will kill this man. I swear to it, I will blow his brains out just like I did with Meiser and the Cossmans and the rest of them. Where is your partner?”

Heslin’s eyes flickered away from Beth’s for a nanosecond to look at Ned.

“He’s out trying to catch the Numbers Killer, right? He is, isn’t he?” Beth snorted. “How about that. Well, he’s in the wrong place.”

The agent’s phone rang from inside her coat pocket. She ignored it.

Beth let go of the gun with one hand to wipe her sweaty palm on her pants. “So—who is he?”

“His name is Ned. He’s a vet. He takes care of my dogs.”

“Ha! A vet? At least your stories line up, but I’m not sure if I believe them. So, let’s say your GQ model boy-toy really is your dog walker and a vet . . .” She trailed the butt of her gun up Ned’s back between his shoulders until it was pressing against the back of his neck.

“He is.” The agent’s gaze didn’t waver.

“Does Rivera even know about him? I wonder how he feels about you hiring someone so handsome? I don’t think he likes it much. Now he always has to wonder. Why would you do that to him?”

Victoria didn’t respond.

“I’ve never even met Rivera,” Ned said, sounding exasperated instead of terrified, which made Beth very angry. “I think I’d have met him here if they were a couple. Don’t you?”

“Shut your mouth.” Beth snarled. “You’re the cause of all this. You don’t belong here, and I know what you’re planning. Don’t think I’m going to believe anything you have to say about Rivera.”

Heslin took a step closer.

*Why isn’t she putting down her gun? Doesn’t she care that Ned could get killed right in front of her? What do I have to do to make her cooperate?* She lowered her gaze. All the dogs were lined up in front of Heslin, staring at Beth. Their skinny, half-starved muscular bodies crept her out. And the little ones were still doing all they could to drive her off the edge. Sharp intermittent yaps, coming at her in odd numbers, like screeching fingernails on a blackboard. She tried to find a pattern, a way to add the barks together in a rhythm that ended up even. They were fraying her nerves with their yapping, yapping, yapping.

From somewhere beyond the kitchen, she heard the voice she did not need to hear. *Not now. Oh, God. Not now!*

“You’re losing it, Beth.” Danny laughed. “You’re counting, aren’t you? I know you are. Better drop the gun. You’re no match for her.”

Beth cringed. She didn’t know how he’d gotten there, but it was just like Danny to show up right when she was starting to really stress out. She gritted her teeth. He was trying to mess with her confidence, like always. *Wouldn’t he just love to see me fail.*

“Agent Heslin is not going to put her gun down, Beth. FBI agents don’t do that. You’re the one who needs to do what she says.” Danny’s tone was mocking, like he was enjoying her anguish.

“Get out of here,” hissed Beth through clenched teeth. “I mean it. I do not need you here right now.”



“You want us to leave?” Heslin still sounded calm, like everything happening in the kitchen was normal. Like Beth was no big threat.

“I’m not talking to you.” Beth shot daggers through her eyes at Heslin.

“She’s going to beat you, Beth. You’re going to jail,” Danny said.

From behind Ned, Beth cocked her head toward Danny’s voice. “Get out! I don’t need you. I never have. You’ve ruined everything, and I know what you were planning! You thought I’d get caught, didn’t you? That’s why you wanted me to kill them.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Heslin said. “But drop the gun and we’ll talk about it. You can explain everything. I’m a very good listener.”

“Listen to the lovely, calm agent and drop your gun, Beth,” Danny said. “I’m damn sure she has more experience than you, in spite of your little killing spree this weekend.”

Beth grimaced, her face contorting with rising anger. “Shut up, Danny! Just get out of here! I’ll never trust you again. Never!”

Victoria and Ned exchanged glances. “With whom are you speaking?” Victoria asked.

The agent’s snooty arrangement of words sparked a flame of anger inside Beth. *What the hell?*

“Do you think I’m someone named Danny?” Ned’s voice had the bite of being placating. There was an edge of condescension, not just fear. *He thinks he’s better than me.*

“He’s asking who you’re talking to, Beth. Are you gonna tell him?” Danny’s voice rose. “He feels bad for you. He thinks you’re crazy. Can’t you hear it in his tone? He thinks you’re a nut case who hears voices.”

“Go back outside!” Beth shouted.

Victoria moved her eyes slightly to the right, just over Beth’s shoulder.

“Is there someone with you?” Victoria’s tone was even calmer now. She spoke as if she was consoling a child.

*Why were they acting so strangely now that Danny was here? Was he hiding behind something so they couldn’t see him?* She didn’t dare risk turning around to look. She was not going to take her eyes off the agent for a second. Were they trying to trick her? Of course they were. Everyone was out to trick her. It was Beth against the world. Always had been. Well, she wasn’t going to fall for it. Not for a second.

The little dogs kept barking. Barking and barking at the top of their stupid, puny lungs. Beth pressed her lips together so tight her teeth dug into her lips. “I’m going to kill those dogs if they don’t shut up.”

Victoria’s lips quivered, but her voice remained steady. The gun didn’t waver. “If you hurt one of those dogs, I will shoot you. So that’s your decision to make. I hope you do the right thing and choose wisely.”

Beth laughed, a high-pitched frightening sound that surprised her. “But you don’t mind if I shoot your boy-toy?”

A muffled sneeze startled Beth. She stepped backward, pulling Ned with her. “Who’s there?”

No one answered.

“Danny? Is that you? For once in your life, help me out for a change. Go outside and tell me what’s going on.”

Rivera entered, his gun also drawn in front of him.

Beth laughed again. She sounded unhinged, even to her own ears. “Oh, now it’s really going to get interesting.”

“Ma’am, please set the gun down and let’s talk.” Rivera spoke calmly, politely. He kept his eyes locked on hers. “You’re outnumbered. If you shoot at any of us, you will die. We don’t want you to die. We want to hear about what you did and why you did it.”

“I’m here for you, Agent Rivera. You!” pleaded Beth. “I know how much you love her! I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I’m here to warn you that you can’t trust her.”

“I appreciate that, Elizabeth.” Rivera took a step closer. “And I want to hear your advice, but it’s hard to talk when we’re aiming weapons—”

“How did you know my name?” Beth shouted.

“You’re famous now. Really.” Rivera’s nose twitched, his face contorted, and he sneezed but went on as if it never happened. “I want to hear what you did, and why you did it. Everyone does.”

“You know what I did, then. I killed all of them who saw me. Almost all of them. Jason and Kelly Smith got away. But not for long. And that Butler guy had nothing to do with any of it.”

“We know. We know it was all you,” Rivera said, as if she had done something wonderful. But did he really appreciate what she’d done, that she’d had the strength to do it all by herself, identifying them and tracking them down, or was he placating her so he could put her in jail?

“You killed Todd Meiser, the Cossmans, Steve Horrigan, and Arnold Gomez?” Agent Heslin asked.

“Yes. All of them. By myself.”

“No wonder their dogs despise you,” Ned muttered.

“What was it they saw you do?” Heslin was still watching Beth closely.

Beth lowered her gaze for a second, but the gun against Ned’s back didn’t waver. “I—I had to do it. Danny said they saw me.”

“Who is Danny?” Heslin asked.

“Tell her who I am,” Danny shouted. “Tell her what you did.”

Beth’s hands were cramping around the gun. She’d been holding it in a death grip since Heslin came in. “You said they saw me!”

Danny laughed and slapped his leg. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it. And you really are the stupidest woman on this earth. No one saw you! You killed them because I told you to. No other reason. You didn’t want to go to jail. Guess you really wanted to do it, didn’t you? You wanted to know what it was like to have the power.”

“That’s not true! The first one, Todd Meiser—before I killed him, he begged me—said he wouldn’t tell what he saw if I let him live.”

“He was about to testify against the mob, Beth. Surely, with all your insane counting, you can put two and two together. Or can’t you?”

“Who is Danny?” Victoria asked again.

“You want to know who he is? You want to know who Danny is?” Beth screamed. Her face contorted in anguish. “He’s my worthless cheating husband. But why don’t you ask him who he is for yourself.” She laughed, a high-pitched crazy sound. “I’d love to hear what he has to say.”

“We can’t ask him.” Rivera edged toward her. “I found your husband, Elizabeth. I found him in the woods behind the Sonesta Hotel.”

Something snapped inside Beth. Again. And this time, she felt it happen. A giant dam broke inside her mind, spewing forth a torrent of filthy memories. An ache spread through her chest, her lungs, her throat. The truth left her shocked and gasping, with nowhere to hide from it, no way to avoid the drenching in pure heart-breaking nastiness.





LAST FRIDAY NIGHT. That's when it all happened. Just four days ago, but it seemed like ages. Beth had been innocent and stupid. Well, maybe not innocent, but certainly unaware.

She and Danny hadn't talked much during the long drive to Virginia. Danny said he was tired. He slept most of the way while Beth drove. They checked into the Sonesta Hotel long after sundown. He went to the front desk to check them in, since they were using Thomas somebody or other's credit card. Once they had their keys, they drove the car around to one of the side doors and went in with their stuff. There was nothing special about the hotel, but their room was clean, with windows offering a view of the woods. Beth gazed out. In the varied degrees of blackness and shadow, it was nice enough, but barely.

Danny yanked the curtains closed. He stepped on the back of his shoes to pull them off and tossed them into the center of the room. He plopped himself back on the bed like he wasn't going anywhere for a while. "Damn!" He lifted his head off the pillow, his voice taking on the edge of irritation she knew so well. "I forgot somethin'."

"What is it?" Beth picked up his shoes and lined them up side by side in the closet. "Maybe it's something we can buy here."

"No. Nothin' from home. I left my gun in the car. I can't leave it there, in case someone breaks in." He didn't make a move to get up. Beth knew what was coming. "Go get it, will ya? Bring it inside."

She had been about to open his suitcase and put away his clothes but stopped. For the vacation to be any fun, she had to make sure Danny stayed happy and didn't run out of beer, but also didn't drink too many at once. She picked up the car keys he'd tossed onto the desk. "Sure. I'll be right back."

"Wait. Throw me a beer before you go."

She opened the cooler they brought from home, got the beer, and handed it to him. "Here you go, hon. And I'll be right back." She smiled suggestively, but Danny hadn't taken his eyes from the television, except to open the beer. Leaning down, she kissed him gently on the edge of his mouth, just a fleeting kiss where the scar on his cheek met his lips, her hand resting on his chest.

Dutifully, she left the room carrying her purse, so she had a place to conceal his gun. She didn't know why he had the gun, or what it was used for, but he'd always had one. She went through the empty lobby and out across the dim parking lot. Opening the driver's side door, she glanced around. Seeing no one close by, no one paying attention to her, she scooped the gun out from under the front seat.

A couple holding hands walked toward the front entrance and a man stood just inside the automatic doors. She was wary of carrying the gun. Danny didn't have a permit for it and neither did she. She didn't want to get in trouble for something so insignificant, didn't want to take any additional risks that might ruin their vacation and the surprise he had lined up. Despite all the illegal activities she'd participated in, above all, she was terrified of going to jail.

Making a split-second decision, she walked around the side of the hotel toward the woods, shivering in the cold. She used her key card to open the back door, where no one would see her. The entryway was dark and smelled slightly of ammonia. On the other side of the stairwell, someone she couldn't see was having a one-sided conversation. She stopped to make sure her purse was zipped shut.

There was something familiar about the voice coming from around the corner. The deep gravelly sound reminded her of Danny, but the tone was off. Too accommodating, too charming, and there was soft laughter.

“I miss you too, kitten.”

Beth’s skin turned clammy. A feverish chill raked through her body and settled in her bones. The voice was too much like her husband’s to belong to anyone else. But who was he talking to? Who was he calling ‘kitten’? She stood still, holding her breath.

“She went out, but I’m in the stairwell because she’ll be back in a minute.” Danny spoke in the coaxing voice he used when he wanted something he couldn’t get with force. “Don’t get all panicked on me, now. It’s gonna work out. Just trust me. Do what I say. And remember, I was with you all weekend working on the plans for remodeling the inside, we went to the—” Beth flattened herself against the side of the staircase and craned to hear him, she missed a few words because he was practically whispering.

“There’ll be no trace that I was ever with her here. No video cameras. That’s why I picked this dump. So stick with the plan.”

Beth clenched her hands into tight fists. A terrible sickness threatened to rise out of her throat and spill onto the floor.

“Use my credit card tonight at a drive-through and a few times tomorrow, but make it all seem business related, during the day, nothing too private. You know what I mean? And nowhere with video cameras. Got it?”

There was silence and then Danny laughed.

“After she’s gone, just a few months more, and then we can do whatever we want. One million dollars buys a lot of everything, baby.”

Another pause. Another deep, soft laugh. “Wish me luck. Love you, gorgeous.”

An icy current snaked through Beth’s chest at the same time she felt like she’d been slapped hard, knocked off balance. The scraping of shoes on the concrete told her he was coming closer. She froze, fear and anger forming a tight ball in her throat, choking her.

Just a few steps away, he switched direction and walked up the stairs. At the top, a door opened and closed.

She waited another minute, trembling, her mind racing, her stomach rolling with nausea. She swallowed hard. She slapped her cheek, hoping to wake up from a horrible, ultra-realistic nightmare. Surely, she had misunderstood. It couldn’t be what it sounded like. It couldn’t, because if it did, that would mean . . . *Oh, God!* It meant she was a pathetic, misguided fool. She had no one. She had nothing. Her whole life was worthless.

She crept up the stairs, the last three years of her life flashing through her mind in sharp snippets, the best and the worst of it all: meeting Danny at her sister’s wedding, his proposal the following Valentine’s day, the first time he’d slapped her when they were on their honeymoon.

Slowly she opened the door to room 234, afraid her face would give her away. How could she possibly hide her hurt and shock? She stuffed her hands in her pockets to keep them from trembling.

Danny was stretched out on the bed again, head propped on all the pillows – having left none for her—watching a game on television. He glanced at Beth—as if she was an annoying mosquito who buzzed inside when the door was open—then back to the screen. In that brief instant, she saw the coldness in his dark eyes, darker than usual. Her heart ached. How could she have been so stupid? Mini vacation? So close to hitting the jackpot with his business venture? She shuddered. She had

trusted a cheater, a man who would rather she was dead than alive. She finally averted her gaze from him, feeling painfully alone, more alone than she had ever felt before.

In the wall mirror, she caught her reflection, ashen skin and worried eyes. She wiped at the tears spilling down her cheeks. Her gaze dropped to her suitcase. A new sick feeling of shame and stupidity arose inside her like a sudden wave of violent illness. Inside was the present she had bought him, her own surprise. A power station charger and Wi-Fi hotspot he could use when traveling. Something he said he needed.

“Did you get my gun?” he grunted.

“Yes. I’ll just keep it in my purse.” Trembling inside, she sat down at the tiny desk, grateful it was positioned in a hideaway around the corner, away from Danny’s line of view. She shoved off one shoe and then the other.

“What took you so long?”

“I um, I got something from the vending machine.” Her voice came out thin and weak. She reached for her laptop.

“What are you doing now?” The volume on the television increased.

“Nothing.” She opened her computer and powered it on.

“Nothing?”

“I’m uh—I’m checking a site with things to do in the area.”

“We’re going to hike to the top of the waterfall. Rain or shine.”

“Uh, huh.” She typed furiously.

“I can barely hear this show. You’re making too much noise.”

“Sorry. I’ll be more quiet.”

Quickly, as if her time was running out, which apparently it was, she logged into their checking account expenses and searched through the charges. She hoped and prayed for some sort of mistake, some crazy misunderstanding. Danny snored loudly on the bed, sounding like a fat and congested hog.

Most of the recurring payments belonged to Danny. A video game subscription, a music subscription, the internet, and cable. Only one monthly payment stood out as something she didn’t recognize. It went back several years, starting a few months after their marriage. She traced the payment to an insurance company, didn’t even have to hack into their system because dumb-ass Danny used the same login and password—baddanny1—for everything. She entered his email and password. There it was—the insurance policy she didn’t know they owned. One million dollars to be paid to Daniel Dellinger in the event of Beth Dellinger’s death.

Scenarios flashed through her mind, each more terrible than the next. How did he plan to do it? Push her off the waterfall when she was admiring the view? Or shoot her first and then push her? Was that the big surprise? Because if she hadn’t overheard him downstairs, then yeah, it would have been the mother of all surprises.

Staring at the screen, the cold, hard pang of her sadness wrestled with the hot fury of her rage. *How could he do this to me?! How could he?! Then came more anger, directed at herself. How could I have been so stupid and unsuspecting? How could I have almost let this happen?* Part of her perched on the brink of exploding, part of her threatened to crumble and break like old brittle bones. *Confront him? Or run?*

One overriding urge emerged through her tumultuous, warring emotions—the fierce need to survive. He was not going to kill her. She was not going to die.

She pulled her pocket book closer to her side. The hard muzzle of the gun pressed through the material and against her hip. She opened a new browser and typed: how to shoot a revolver. She read

the first set of instructions and clicked on another. How hard could it be?

“You’re acting strange, Beth.”

He’d gotten off the bed and snuck up behind her. She slammed her laptop closed and jumped sideways in her seat. “What? No, I’m not.”

“What’s going on?” Hovering over her shoulder, his hot, beer breath warmed her neck. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” She wrapped her arms around her chest instinctively. “I wasn’t doing anything.”

He eyed her with an intensity she now recognized as hatred. “I’ll be the judge of that.” He pushed her out of the way and grabbed for her computer. He lifted the top. The screen flashed to life and he clicked on the tabs she hadn’t closed.

Clutching her purse, she made a dash for the door and ran out. Tears stung her eyes. She flew barefoot down the back stairwell, taking them two at a time, without looking back over her shoulder. Yanking the hallway door open, she ran through the corridor and straight into the hotel lobby, gasping for breath. She stopped for a second, eyes darting from the exit to the front desk. The office door swung shut on the backside of a man in a cheap black suit. There was no one else in sight. Jumbled thoughts raced through her mind. She could scream for help. Surely the employee, or someone, would come out and help her, or call the police. But what good would it do? If Danny didn’t kill her tonight, he’d be even angrier after a run in with the cops. What proof did she have that he was going to kill her? “Kitten” wasn’t going to back up Beth’s story. And even if she did, Danny wouldn’t be the only one taken to jail. Identity theft carried a longer sentence than domestic abuse. Danny would see to it that Beth would pay for their crimes. She could count on that.

Decision made, she kept her mouth closed and sprinted down the hall to the back of the hotel. Had she made a conscious decision to run to the woods behind the hotel? She didn’t know then and she didn’t know now. The will to survive superseded all else. She flung open the back door, barely even registering the man who stood aside to let her pass and the attractive woman with dark hair who hurriedly leapt out of her way.

Danny breathed heavily behind her. “Come back here! You don’t understand. What you saw—the insurance thing—it’s not what you think.”

She ran. Her violent entrance into the woods was echoed by branches cracking and snapping close behind her.

“Stop! Come back here!” Danny yelled.

An approaching train barreled down the tracks like it was coming right at them.

He wanted her dead.

He would kill her.

But not if she killed him first.

She yanked the gun from her bag. She aimed. She fired.

The incessant barking and growling of the two littlest dogs snapped Beth back to reality. Her hands were shaking so hard it looked like the gun was vibrating. *Danny is dead. I killed Danny. I killed my husband.* A muscle below her eye began to spasm.

“We don’t want to hurt you, but I’m counting to three and if you don’t put the gun down, you leave me no choice. One.”

Agent Heslin let the odd number hang in the air, as if she knew what it would do to Beth.

Danny laughed again, a cruel, mocking sound. “You got yourself in a real doozy now, dumb ass. How are you getting out of this one? Can’t wait to see how this works out for you.”

“How could you? How could you do that to me?” She screamed, and the gun jerked up and down in her hand.

“Two.”

“Guess you’re going to prison after all, Beth.” Danny’s laughter grew louder.

“No! I’m not!” Beth shrieked. In one swift movement, she whipped the gun toward her head.

“Nooo!” Victoria shouted.

Three shots rang out. One from each gun in the room.







TREMBLING INSIDE, VICTORIA lowered her gun. Four of her dogs raced away, tails underneath them, terrified of the gun shots.

Beth was lying motionless on the ground, blood spewing from her shoulder and neck. Rivera crossed the room. With a swift kick, he sent Beth's gun spinning across the floor and away from her.

Victoria hurried to Ned's side, followed by the remaining dogs, and gripped his upper arms. She gazed up at him. "Ned! I was so worried I might lose y—." She removed her hands and took a quick step back. "I mean—are you hurt?"

Ned shook his head, closed his eyes for a second. "No, I'm fine. Shaken as hell, but fine. That might be an everyday occurrence for you two, but not for—"

From the floor, Beth let out another moan.

Rivera shouted, "She's still alive," and pulled out his phone.

Gasping, Ned ran to Beth and kneeled by her side. He tore off his shirt and pressed it against her neck. "I don't think the bullet hit the jugular. Get me some towels."

"This is Federal Agent Dante Rivera. We have a serious gunshot victim who needs immediate medical assistance. The address is—Victoria!"

"1406 Arbor Way," Ned answered.

As Rivera repeated the information to the dispatcher, Beth's lips moved rhythmically.

"What's she saying?" Victoria asked.

"I think she's counting," Ned answered.

Beth's eyes flew open and rolled back into her head. She fell silent.

"Go!" Ned yelled to Victoria.

Victoria rushed away with dogs trailing after her.

"Wait," Ned hollered. "Get a tie, or a scarf, too! And get tampons!"

"Okay," Victoria shouted from the hallway.

"And gloves if you have them!"

With her breath coming in fast gasps, she hurried to the master bedroom. She yanked a scarf from a rack in her closet, snatched tampons from under her bathroom sink, and grabbed a tall stack of crisp white towels from the linen shelves. She rushed back with her arms full. She'd been involved with life and death emergencies before, but never in her own kitchen. With Ned, Rivera, her dogs, and so much blood. . . there was something surreal about the entire situation.

The dogs surrounded the spreading pool of blood and lapped at it. She swung her leg toward them. "Out! Get away!" They scattered, spreading bloody paw prints across the floor. "I still have to get gloves."

"I've got some." Rivera grabbed them from his pocket and held them out.

Ned's hands were already soaked with blood. "You put them on," he told Rivera. "Then grab a towel and put your hand where mine is. Press down like you mean it."

Victoria dumped the load she was carrying onto the floor and tossed Rivera a towel. He took Ned's place.

Ned straddled Beth and began chest compressions. He glanced up at Victoria for a fraction of a second, just long enough for her to know he was telling her what to do. "Tie the scarf or—whatever you brought—tie it around her shoulder like a tourniquet," he said breathlessly. "Then plug each of

those holes with a tampon.” He did another series of compressions. “Then one of you needs to get behind her and stabilize her neck, don’t let her head move at all. Damn it! We should have done that first.”

Victoria knelt and tied the scarf around Beth’s shoulder and pulled it tight. Sweat slid down Ned’s temples as he continued pumping Beth’s chest. Her blood spread across the floor, soaking through their pant legs as they knelt around her. The dogs returned and licked at the blood while Victoria yelled, “No. Get away,” in a futile attempt to make them stop. Rivera sneezed violently, four times in a row.

Ambulance sirens wailed in the distance as Ned continued compressions.

“I have to let them in.” As Victoria keyed the code to open the gate into her phone, and the approaching sirens grew louder, Ned and Rivera worked furiously to save the killer’s life. Rivera’s lips moved silently, and Victoria knew he was praying. The woman bleeding out on the ground was a dangerous killer with severe psychological problems. They would do everything they could to save her.



• • • •

VICTORIA LOOKED FORWARD to getting home early. It was only a matter of time before something would happen and she would be called away by the FBI for a new case. She hated not knowing how much time she had—an hour, a week?—but that was part of the job. It was in her best interest to relish the downtime while she had it. She was only a few miles away from her house when her father called. After exchanging a few pleasantries, he got right to the reason for his call.

“Fenton is always keeping watch for our names in the media.”

Victoria coasted the Suburban to a stop sign. “I know he is.”

“Well, you’ll never guess what he dug up.”

“What is it?” She looked right and left before easing the car into motion.

“He found an online newsletter for a shelter in Seville Spain. It’s called the Abigail Heslin Foundation for Animals. It’s a large facility built to house over 700 dogs at a time, with an onsite Vet.”

“Wow. Really?” She gripped the wheel tighter. “Sounds just like something mom would do.”

“Yes, I thought the same. Except the shelter didn’t exist until a few years ago, Victoria. Your mother didn’t do this.”

Victoria sighed. Bracing herself for the questions that would follow—exactly how much did she spend? Did she know that the money was being used wisely, etc.

“But she would be very, very proud of you.”

Victoria smiled, and a warm feeling radiated through her. “Thanks, Dad. I hope she would. I’m going to visit the shelter next week. I’m taking Ned with me. We’ll fly back with some dogs and help them find homes here. Can I mark you down to take one, or two, or three? Three is a good number.”

Her father laughed. “I admire what you’re doing, but I think you know the answer to that question.”

• • • •

THE DOGS GREETED VICTORIA in the mudroom with a flurry of huffing, puffing, and smacking their tails against the walls. She stroked their heads as they bounced around her. “That’s right. I’m home, babies.” Izzy shoved her head into Victoria’s shopping bag.

“No. That’s not for you,” Victoria said, gently pushing the dog’s head away.

Ned walked in from the direction of the guest wing. With him came the slight scent of a fresh, sporty aftershave or deodorant. She liked that smell. His hair was wet. His skin glistened from his shower.

“You’re early.” He slid his phone from his pocket. “Did I miss a call?”

“No. I didn’t call. I had mountains of paperwork to do today. I could only take so much of it, so I left early. I was hoping you could hang out for a while and talk about our trip.” Victoria lifted the bag. “I brought dinner. Hope that’s okay and you haven’t made anything yet.”

“No. That’s great.”

She set the bag on the counter. Ned walked forward to open it. “Wow. Is this just for us or do you have friends coming?”

Victoria laughed. “Just us. I wasn’t sure what you wanted, and I know you’ve been training hard. Thought you might eat a lot.”

Ned chuckled. "I'm always hungry. Izzy and I just had a long run."

"No one else is coming for dinner, but someone is coming to get Leo and Bella."

"Oh." He crouched down and scratched Leo behind the ears. "Hear that, little guy. Hope wherever you're going is almost as good as this place."

Victoria pushed the bag further toward the center of the counter where it was safe from the dogs. "I just need to change my clothes." She walked to her bedroom and stripped down to her underwear and sports bra. She replaced her work clothes with jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt and went back out to the kitchen. In the short time she'd been gone, Ned had set out plates, silverware, and napkins. He'd transferred salmon, rice, and grilled vegetables from boxes into bowls. He smiled when she entered the kitchen and pulled a chair out for her.

"Thanks." The wonderful aroma of the food filled the kitchen as she sat down, feeling warm and relaxed. "So. Only a few more weeks. Have you ever been to Spain? I can't remember if I asked."

Ned tipped the bottle of wine to fill Victoria's glass. "I spent half my junior year of college studying in Barcelona."

"Oh! That's wonderful. I had no idea. So you speak the language fluently?" She took a sip of wine and set her glass back on the table.

"Well . . . I used to speak it well. But it's been awhile." Ned scooped up a spoonful of rice and ate it.

"I'm sure it will come back to you once we get there. We'll check into our hotel and freshen up. Then it's straight to the shelter."

"How do we get all the supplies there?"

"They'll be there already. I shipped them last week." Victoria took another sip of wine. "They're so glad you're coming. There are always dogs who need surgery. Many of them were hit by cars. We've had a few where their owners didn't need them anymore so they broke their legs then dumped them far from home so they wouldn't get back." Victoria closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Holy crap." Ned let his spoon clatter onto his plate. "This is going to be tough."

"Yes, it is. And it's going to be exhausting, but everyone will be so grateful, especially the dogs."

Ned smiled. "My dad used to do mission trips to Haiti every two years with some of the physicians from his hospital. That's what this seems like to me."

"That's exactly what it's going to be like for you, except your father probably didn't take any of his patients back to the US with him." Victoria took a bite of her food and sighed. It was delicious.

"After the first time he went, he couldn't wait to go back. Even though a lot of what he saw was heartbreaking."

"Yes. Same," Victoria said.

The intercom buzzed. Someone was at the front gate. Victoria tapped the code to open it and walked to the front door.

A woman wearing running shoes, jeans, and a sweatshirt stood on the other side of the door. "Hi. Are you Victoria?"

"Yes." Victoria smiled warmly. She liked the woman already.

"I'm Sarah. I'm Ann's sister."

Leo and Bella ran to Sarah and sniffed her.

"They know you?" Victoria asked.

"Oh, they know me all right. I take care of them whenever my sister and Robert need help." She dropped to her knees and let the dogs lick her chin. "You're coming home to live with me now." She

stood up and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Being with them will help me cope with losing my sister. This is a good thing."

Victoria smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. I'm sure your sister would be so grateful if she knew."

Sarah sniffed and nodded. "Thank you for taking care of them." She looked around, taking in the beautiful home, and laughed. "They might not want to leave."

"Dogs don't care where they live as long as someone there loves them," Victoria said. "I'll go get their leashes."

Ned introduced himself to Sarah. "We're going to miss them."

Sarah petted Eddie and Myrtle, her eyes roaming over the house, the dog beds and toys. "I guess you and your wife are really dog lovers."

Ned smiled. "Oh. I'm just—"

Victoria walked back in carrying leashes and a dog food bag. "Here they are. And this is the food your sister was feeding them."

"Thank you." Sarah attached the leash and they watched her leave with the dogs. When she was inside her car, they closed the door and returned to the kitchen.

"How about a walk?" Ned asked. "After we clean up here."

"Sure. Who should we take?"

"Let's try and take them all. Three for you. Four for me."

She laughed. "Really? This will be a first."

They put on their own jackets, and then put sweaters on the dogs to protect them from the chilly air. They headed across Victoria's backyard to one of the main trails.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about. Something from, you know, the other night." Ned said, walking with two dogs on one side and two on the other.

"Sure. It's normal and healthy to talk about things like that—the fear, the stress. It's important to talk it out with someone who will understand."

"I was afraid, yeah, I mean, Beth Dellinger was disturbed, but I'm dealing okay with what transpired."

"She might be in a coma forever. The doctors aren't sure."

"I know, and I have to admit I feel bad for her, she was not healthy, talking to her dead husband like he was really in the room with us." He shuddered. "But that's not what—it's about something you said."

"Me?" Victoria swapped Eddie's black leash with Myrtle's pink one as the dogs crossed in front of her.

"Well, I'm guessing you've handled situations like that before, hostage situations. But maybe not where the hostage is someone you know, right?"

"True. That was a first."

"So—I'm going to be direct here—when you said, 'I was so worried I might lose you,' were you worried about losing me as in, now I have to find someone new to take care of the dogs? Or was there something else?"

Victoria smiled, their eyes met. Her heart skipped a beat. "A good dog walker is hard to find, Especially one who . . ."

"Especially one who?"

"Maybe I'll wait until we get to Spain before I fully answer that question."

He smiled. "Can't wait to hear your answer."

They couldn't clasp hands, not with seven dogs between them. Victoria slipped the leash loops up her forearm and reached her free hand over to squeeze Ned's.

• • • •

**The End**

***READY FOR BOOK TWO, Pretty Little Girls?***

**Until you know who you can trust, you trust no one.**

**CONTINUE the story with *Pretty Little Girls, Book Two.***

**[Read It Here!](#)**

Keep reading for the next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

**[Join Jenifer's Reader's Group](#)**

JENIFER RUFF IS A USA Today and International Bestselling Author Jenifer Ruff writes dark and twisty mysteries and medical thrillers in three series: The Agent Victoria Heslin series, The Brooke Walton Series, and The FBI & CDC Thriller series. Her novels showcase contemporary issues and bring complicated characters to life. An avid fitness enthusiast and hiker with a background in epidemiology and public health, Jenifer lives in Charlotte, NC with her family and a pack of greyhounds.

[www.jenruff.com](http://www.jenruff.com)





# DAN ALATORRE: THE GAMMA SEQUENCE

---

The GAMMA SEQUENCE  
BY DAN ALATORRE

**Author's Rating:**

**Language: \* Sexuality: \* Violence: \*\***

**F**or your convenience each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

© This eBook is licensed for your personal use only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. © No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means without the written permission of the author. Copyright © 2019 Dan Alatorre. All rights reserved. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.



**H**e wasn't sure he believed her...  
...but DeShear took the case.

Why would anyone be killing geneticists?

It was one wrong move, standing up for what was right, that cost him his career on the force. Now, DeShear must rebuild his life as a P.I. and this case seems simple enough. But looks can be deceiving. Had his client, geneticist Lanaya Kim, really found a thread that links the murders?

Why is she so frightened?

Years before, Lanaya had worked with them all. One accident could be believed, but the more they happened, she knew it just didn't add up. Who was killing her colleagues?

Could she be a target?

You'll love this fast-paced thrill ride, because everyone enjoys a struggling detective trying to rebuild a life and a strong woman hoping to uncover the truth.





THE MURDERER PULLED a black ski mask over his face and stared at the ornate entry to his next victim's house.

*On TV, cops and angry boyfriends can always kick a door open. In real life, it's a little more complicated than that.*

He hefted the 40-pound battering ram to gage its balance. According to the website that sold them, these heavy steel rams replaced a swift kick for police officers around 1975, and had been reliably opening the entries of stubborn perpetrators ever since.

*Hit the knob with it straight on, and it will do the rest.*

Taking a deep breath, he rubbed the knot growing in his stomach. He leaned away from the door and peeked through the large bay window, focusing on the fat old man at the dining room table. The overhead chandelier cast a warm yellow glow over the walls, spilling onto the yard outside in a misshapen rectangle.

The man inside carved a tiny slice of something on his plate, gently lifting it to his mouth, the fork upside down like European royalty. Good posture, too. No doubt that was the way Dr. Faustus Braunheiser demanded the students at Wellington Academy to eat, all prim and proper. Students watching from their tables would see the rigid old man operating as any good headmaster should, a perfect example of stuffy grace and tedious dignity.

But tonight, the old man dined alone.

No gawking teenage boys in matching shirts and ties, no suck-up faculty. And best of all, no family members.

*That's no way to celebrate your birthday, Doctor.*

A breeze tugged at the killer's collar and brought the stench of the bay at low tide. He peered at the tall hedges lining the driveway.

*Thank goodness for privacy.*

He reactively went to wipe his hand on his pants, stopping when he remembered the latex gloves he wore. After patting the butt of the big revolver strapped to his belt, he regripped the 40-pound steel battering ram. Its two handles allowed it to swing like a giant pendulum, and according to the website, the concentrated impact at hand speed was somewhere in the vicinity of 6,000 pounds per square inch.

*More than enough to do the trick.*

He took another deep breath, straining to guide the tip of the thick black ram to the shiny brass knob, but not touch it. He held it there for a moment, lining up his shot, then he let the ram swing backwards. The momentum of its short, stubby mass wanted to carry him backwards with it, off the elegant front porch and down the majestic home's marble stairs, but he forced his arms and shoulders to contain the pendulum.

When the battering ram reached the peak of its backwards arc, he brought it forward once again toward the door.

*One.*

Exhaling hard, he rocked the ram backwards again. A bead of sweat rolled past the bandage and down the side of his face.

He swung it forward again, nearly touching the knob.



*Two.*

The ram arced backwards one last time. With a grunt, he squeezed the steel handles and gritted his teeth, heaving the ram toward the door knob.

*Three.*

The impact sent a jolt up his arms and a thunderclap that boomed down the doctor's long driveway and past the vintage Jaguar parked there, before fading into the night. As the door knob disappeared, a cloud of splinters took its place. The momentum of the ram carried him into the door frame, the ram disappearing up to the handles inside the thick wooden door.

He yanked the heavy steel tool a few times to get it free, then dropped it over the mansion's stone porch rail and into the manicured bushes. It landed with a thump in the thick mulch. The massive front door stood, cracked in several places and with a big hole where the knob used to be, but it inched open.

The killer raised his foot to do the rest. Kicking the door, it swung open and crashed into the mahogany-paneled wall. The old man at the table was already on his feet, his eyes wide and his mouth half open with the next tiny bite of his elegant birthday dinner. He stormed toward the entrance of his home. "What do you think you're doing? Who are you? Get out!"

Heart pounding, the intruder pulled his large gun from its holster and pointed it at the old man. "Shut up and sit down, Dr. Braunheiser."

The headmaster stopped in his tracks, jaw agape. He slowly raised his hands.

"You don't remember me, do you?" The Greyhound said. A tall, athletic-framed man, he knew he cut an imposing figure. The black ski mask was a nice touch, too. It had a way of keeping the victim slightly terrorized and completely focused. Still, the intruder fought to keep the adrenaline from showing in his voice or making his hand quiver.

"This—this house has an alarm," Dr. Braunheiser said. "The police. They're probably already on the way."

The Greyhound shook his head and crept toward the old man. "I disabled that. Your phone wires run right alongside your electric meter and cable lines, over on the pool side of the house. Besides, when you came in, you didn't re-arm the system, so let's not lie to each other, shall we?" He raised the gun to eye level, staring down the barrel to his victim. "Now get on your knees."

Dr. Braunheiser frowned, lowering his hands. "I'll do no such thing."

The Greyhound swallowed hard to quell the knot in his stomach. "Yes, you will." He inspected the long, carved wooden mirror hanging next to a massive aquarium in the foyer. A very scary man in a black ski mask and blue jeans stared back at him. Cocking his head, he returned his gaze to Braunheiser. The old man was probably used to a stern tone of voice sending fear down the spines of grade schoolers. Not tonight. The Greyhound squeezed the thick handle of his .45 tigher. "You'll get on your knees and do what I say, or I will catch the next flight to North Carolina and I will kill your daughter Jenifer in the office of her clinic. Then I will track down your wife Sandy at her seminar and kill her in her hotel room." He narrowed his eyes and growled at the doctor. "Get the picture, birthday boy?"

Braunheiser's hands trembled as he held them in the air. "There's no need for any of that. Just . . . just tell me, what do you want? I can—I, I have . . ." His voice trailed off, much quieter now, and not nearly as stern as a moment ago.

The Greyhound advanced and put his gun near Braunheiser's temple. "I already told you. Get on your knees."

The doctor lowered himself with a grunt, easing his hands down to the shiny wooden planks and steadying himself as he slid each foot backward. Hands at his sides, he raised himself to a kneeling position, wincing, and faced his intruder.

“The car keys to the Jaguar,” The Greyhound said. “Where are they?”

The doctor glanced toward the entrance. “On the hook. By the door.”

“Okay.”

“Do you . . . do you want money, then? I can get—”

The Greyhound hooked a thumb under his ski mask and slid it up past his face to rest on his forehead. The air was cool on his skin. “So, you don’t remember me?” He glared at his victim. “Well, I was pretty young at the time. It’s not like they took class photos at the facility or anything.”

Braunheiser blinked a few times. “Facility?”

“Angelus Genetics.”

The old man’s face went white.

“Oh, now it’s starting to come back to you.” The Greyhound lifted a finger to the bandage over his eye. He winced, sweat rolling down his neck and along his back. “I’m glad you remember. I like reminiscing. But first, let me tell you how this is going to go.” He slid the mask back down over his face.

“I—I can get you money,” the doctor whispered, his voice quivering. “Drugs. Medicine. Whatever you—”

“Just shut up!” The Greyhound screamed, leaning close to the old man’s head. “You are not running this show, Doctor!” He turned to the mirror, admiring the mask and the way it hid his features while creating an ominous presence. “You know,” he wheeled around to the man kneeling in front of him. “It’s amazing you got as far as you did. You’re just about the worst liar I’ve met from the facility—and I’ve met quite a few of your colleagues over the years.”

The Greyhound pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket.

“Here’s the deal. You’re gonna put a few drops of ether on this handkerchief, and then you’re going to inhale it.”

“I won’t.”

“You will.” He dropped the cloth in front of the doctor. “If you try not to, I’ll put a few rounds into your thighs, and you can lay on the floor kicking in pain while I hold the handkerchief over your face.” He lowered his voice to a whisper and put his mouth close to the doctor’s ear. “Totally your call.”

“Gunshot wounds . . .” Braunheiser swallowed hard, sweat appearing on his brow, “tend to get noticed by detectives.”

“Coroners, too, Doc.” The Greyhound sniffed. The old man’s Clive Christian cologne and aftershave filled the assailant’s nostrils. “But if you think somebody’s going to come poking around in the middle of the Great Cypress Swamp, way out past the Indian reservation, and dig through a bunch of gator dung to find your injuries, well, just remember—those Miami detectives didn’t even bother to get their feet wet when ValueJet flight 592 went down in the Everglades. I doubt the deep swamps are the first place anyone would think to look for you, anyway.”

The old man trembled now, his whole body shaking. “So . . . you, you do need to kill me?”

The Greyhound righted himself. “Oh, without a doubt. Was that not clear?” He strolled down the long hallway toward the Christmas tree, admiring the vases and statues as the dark floor gently creaked under his feet. “You have a few minutes. Use them wisely. Pray, maybe—to whatever you believe in. Science. Money, possibly. Power. But make no mistake, in a few minutes, one of us will

be dead.” He swallowed hard. “And since I happen to be holding the gun, I’ll bet it’s going to be you.”

“You’ll never get away with this.” Anger seeped into the doctor’s voice.

“I already have,” The Greyhound said, walking back to the doctor. “Several times. But I’m tired of talking to you. It’s showtime. Three deep breaths ought to do it—and I’ll be able to tell if you’re faking, so don’t.”

With trembling hands, the doctor reached out and lifted the white handkerchief from the floor.

The Greyhound produced a small vial from his other pocket. “Three drops of this. No more, no less. Remember, there are lots of bad ways to die. This doesn’t have to be one.” He held out the bottle, waving it back and forth like a clock pendulum as he stared into the old man’s eyes. “It must be terrible, knowing you’re going to die very soon.”

The doctor gazed at him, the handkerchief in his shaking hand. “If you tell me what you want, maybe I can help you.”

“No! I’ve had all the help I care to endure from you, Doctor Braunheiser! Now, one last time.” He stretched his arm out and leveled the big gun at the old man’s head. “Start sniffing or I swear the walls will be painted with your brain splatter.”

The old man uncapped the plastic bottle, the lid slipping from his trembling fingers. It rolled across the floor. The Greyhound stooped to pick it up. “Can’t leave evidence laying around.”

The vial had a tip like an eyedropper. Braunheiser lifted the bottle, squeezing three small drops into the center the handkerchief.

“Over your nose and mouth,” The Greyhound said, waiving the gun at the doctor. “Please breathe through your nose deeply, and count backwards from ten.” He snorted. “Just kidding. You don’t have to do that.”

The old man took a hesitant breath.

“Deeper than that. Gun shots hurt really, really bad, from what I hear. First there is the impact—like getting hit with a baseball bat, wham! Knocks the wind out of you. Then there is this sharp, searing pain that rockets up your body and bashes your brain. Then, there’s the intense burning feeling. Some guys say they can even smell their own flesh smoldering from the hot lead. Then wave after wave of nonstop agony overwhelms your whole system and sends you into shock—after enduring ten or fifteen minutes of dire pain. Probably put an old boy like you straight into coronary arrest. And at close range, this .45 can take a whole leg off as well. Now, if you can’t do it for yourself, think of your poor innocent wife and daughter. Jenifer and Sandy don’t deserve to die, too. Think of the rancid, sticky mess of blood and goo we’ll be leaving for the maid to find on Tuesday. So, please. Do it right.”

The doctor squared his shoulders and inhaled deeply.

“That’s more like it. Better go ahead and count.”

Trembling, the man nodded. His eyes filling with tears, he spoke through the handkerchief he held to his face. “Ten . . .” His voice wavered. “Nine.”

He closed his eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks. “Eight . . .”

Another deep, shaky breath.

“I’ll help you,” The Greyhound said. “Seven.”

The doctor’s shoulders sagged as he inhaled a third time. His hand fell to his side, the cloth floating to the floor. His head bobbed, tipping to the right slightly, and then his body slumped. He crashed face-first onto the polished oak planks.

The Greyhound took a deep breath and released it slowly, rubbing the knot in his belly. “That’s more like it. Now, if you’ll allow my friends to escort you to your car, we’ll start phase two.”





HAMILTON DESHEAR DABBED his face with a towel and leaned over the canvas camping chair, snatching his phone from the lid of the cooler before it could vibrate into the sand. He never took the phone with him when he ran, figuring he was allowed an hour at dawn to himself. His daily three-mile run on the beach was one of the few pleasures he permitted himself these days.

A nearby fishing pole rested in a half-buried PVC pipe but showed no indication of having caught a fish. He held his towel over the phone to cast a shadow in the bright light, then read the screen.

*Unknown number.*

*Good. It's not Tullenstein again.*

He tapped the green icon and raised the phone to his ear. "DeShear Investigations."

The woman on the other end spoke with a quiet but rushed tone. "Hello, may I speak with Hamilton DeShear, please?" Her words wavered slightly, like someone who doesn't quite know how to ask for what they want.

Maybe a wife who wanted her husband followed, but definitely not one of Tullenstein's minions looking to slap another lawsuit on him.

DeShear held the phone away from his face to note the time. Seven-thirty on the dot. "This is Hank DeShear. What can I do for you?" Setting the phone back on the cooler lid, he pressed the speaker button and brushed sand from his taut, shirtless torso.

The caller cleared her throat. "I'm not sure how to say this . . ."

"Okay, well, take your time."

A well-toned young lady—easily half his age—jogged by wearing a sports bra and pink yoga pants. Her blonde ponytail bobbed at the back of her baseball cap, but her eyes stayed on DeShear. She smiled and gave him a wave. He lifted a hand and nodded. Her long legs churned through the soft sand as she turned and continued down the beach.

"I require your services," the woman on the phone said. "But you must start right away. Will you meet with me? I spoke with Mark Harriman of the Tampa police department. You were very highly recommended."

"Well, that was nice of Harriman. What's this about, Miss . . .?"

"You may call me Lanaya Kim. I assume you've read about the death of Dr. Braunheiser last evening?"

"I caught part of it on the news. Wellington Academy. He was the headmaster." DeShear grabbed the phone, thumbing icons in an attempt to find the Tampa Tribute website. The service indicator flickered with one partial bar as it searched for a stronger signal. His laptop was in the trunk of his car, but it wouldn't power up fast enough to let him find the story quickly and read more—if it got a signal at all.

"The news reports say he died in a single-person car wreck. I want to look into a wrongful death case, but you must start immediately. Are you available to meet me tomorrow?"

"Sure." He brushed the sand from his legs. "I can even meet you this morning if you want. What law firm are you with?"

"Tomorrow. And I am a private individual. An attorney of my employ will contact you soon if you take the case."

"That'll be fine. Can I ask what your relationship to the case is, Ms. Kim?"

“As I implied, the death of Dr. Braunheiser was something other than a simple accident. We can talk in detail about that tomorrow. I’d like to—”

“What do you think happened?” He squinted into the calm waters of the bay as they glistened in the morning sun, tiny diamonds dancing with each ripple.

“I . . . I can’t discuss it over the phone. If you—”

“Tomorrow it is, then, Ms. Kim. And don’t worry, I’m pretty well versed in these types of things. I do excellent trial research, and like Harriman probably told you, I used to be a cop. So if we need to get a wrecked car’s brake lines checked, or a power steering mechanism inspected to find a faulty repair or a manufacturing issue, that’s no problem. I can locate the best experts, compile all the research, and present it so anyone on a jury finds in your favor. Of course, for it to go anywhere, you first have to show you’re an affected party. Can you tell me how you connect to Dr. Braunheiser?”

A few seagulls landed next to his fishing rod.

“The news . . . the news says that Dr. Braunheiser’s death was an accident.”

“And you wanna sue.”

“No. I want . . . my interest . . .” She took a breath. “If an advanced toxicology screen is performed, it will show Propofol in Dr. Braunheiser’s system. Enough to where he would not have been able to drive a car.”

DeShear rubbed the beard stubble on his chin. “That’s a little different. You think the wreck was intentional? A homicide?”

“I really—I don’t want to discuss this over the phone. When we meet in person, I can tell you more.”

“Okay, but from what you’re saying, you—or someone else—thinks the doctor’s death was a murder.”

“Mr. DeShear—”

“Ma’am, it’s an important distinction for me. I don’t do murder investigations.”

“Mr. DeShear, please listen to what I have to say.” Her voice quivered. “Please.”

The quiver hooked him. Fear in others had a way of making him sympathetic. He put a hand on his hip. “Okay, I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“Not on the phone. Tomorrow. In person.”

He pursed his lips. Something about her didn’t feel right.

“You do bail bonds work, correct? Finding criminals who skip out on their bond? And your bail retrieval account is with Mid Florida bank. Check your balance. You’ll see a five-thousand-dollar deposit has been added by Credit Suisse, from an account ending in two-zero-one. Would you like to take a moment to verify the funds are there?”

He snapped upright. “I’m, uh, not really at my office right now.” Glancing at the car, he regretted not firing up the laptop earlier—and not jogging where there was a better signal.

“Can you check from your phone? I’ll wait.”

“Yeah, there’s not really a signal here. Five thousand, did you say?”

“Do I have your interest now? It’s all yours for simply meeting me tomorrow on Bayshore Boulevard. Hear me out and the money’s yours, no strings attached. Afterwards, we can see if you’d like to handle my case.”

He nodded. “Five thousand dollars will certainly buy a few hours of my time. I’m available later today if you want.”

“Tomorrow. I’ll be coming in from Texas.”

“What time should I pick you up at the airport?”

“Please pay attention. I need you to report the information about the Propofol to the police. It won’t show up in a standard toxicology report, so the coroner will specifically need to look for it.”

“Okay. They’re gonna wonder how I got the information.”

“Tell them the truth. You got a tip over the phone. Tomorrow, meet me at noon, at the corner of Bayshore Boulevard and Gandy. I’ll be dressed in red jogging gear and stretching on the grass in the median.”

He stood and held the phone to his ear with his shoulder. Folding the canvas chair, he grabbed the cooler and fishing rod as he made his way to the car. “A thousand people jog on Bayshore every day. How will I find you?”

“Your picture is on file with the department of professional regulation. I’ll find you. I must go now.”

“Just to make sure we’re on the same page—if we meet, I get to keep the five thousand.”

“Correct.”

“Well, you just bought yourself a meeting.” He smiled. It might be a merry Christmas this year after all. “So how’s the weather out there in Texas during the holidays?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t say I lived in Texas, I said I was coming in from there.” She huffed. “I do hope you pay better attention to detail going forward than you have so far, Mr. DeShear.”

He shifted on his feet. “Yes ma’am. Sorry. I sure will. As a private investigator, we often need to deduce things, so—”

“Try not to deduce incorrectly, then. One last thing. You are not to try to contact me in any way. For the moment, assume every aspect of your life has been compromised. Your office, your computers, everything. Operate as though your phones are bugged and your home is under surveillance. I’m calling you from a disposable phone, so don’t try to call me back on it.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but that sounds a little over the top.”

“For five thousand dollars, I get to sound as over the top as I want.”

“All right. Fair enough.”

“Come alone tomorrow, and don’t tell anyone about the meeting.”

“No problem.” He set down his gear and rubbed his forehead. “Ah, Ms. Kim, this may cost me the job, but I feel obliged to say this again—I can’t get involved in an active murder investigation. It’s just not allowed. So, when I tell Harriman about the Propofol, if that pans out—that’s it. I’ll have to step aside.”

“I’ll be hiring you to handle a missing persons case. You still do that, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“As an investigator working for a law firm in a wrongful death suit or missing persons case, you’ll be able to interact with every law enforcement agency necessary. Enough discovery motions will be filed in enough cities for you to act with virtual impunity.”

“Okay,” DeShear said. “But who’s the missing person?”

The line went silent. Just as he was deciding she’d ended the call, her reply came.

“The missing person is me.”





After driving to the bank and cashing out his newfound five thousand dollars, DeShear opened a safe deposit box and put most of the cash inside. He then got a haircut and a shoeshine, and spent most of the rest of the day alternating between hunching over his computer and pacing back and forth around his living room like he was trying to wear out the carpet.

Lanaya Kim had been right about Braunheiser's accident—as far as what the news and the Tampa police were reporting. A single-car wreck ended the doctor's life, after apparently losing control of his 1968 Jaguar convertible. With no air bags, no shoulder straps, and no roof, the doctor was crushed under the car when it went off the road south of his home. The vintage vehicle dropped the ten or so feet onto the rocks lining the bay, flipping over and crushing the doctor underneath.

Nothing too interesting there; a case of bad luck on the old boy's birthday, maybe after a few too many glasses of wine.

Propofol, on the other hand, was a very interesting drug. Anything with the nickname "milk of amnesia" had to be. A restricted use anesthesia, it was mainly accessible to nurses, doctors, and pharmacists, but it had been known to be a target for hospital break ins. Propofol had the added distinction of being part of pop singer Michael Jackson's demise, which made it a headliner for a while with some illegal drug users. Since it could cause irregular heartbeats, an overdose might appear as a heart attack. Being an injected drug, Propofol would usually be easy to spot if it was the cause of death.

The fact that it was a standard anesthesia in colonoscopies and many surgeries was most interesting to DeShear.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at his computer screen.

*It's a knockout drug. It'd be hard to drive at all when you're looped.*

Now that he knew a little about the subject, DeShear called the Tampa Police Department. He used the main line so his call would be logged and recorded, instead of attempting to contact Harriman on his cell phone. The information might make DeShear a suspect in a murder investigation. He wanted it all to be on the record.

"Hank DeShear," Harriman said. "Old Hanky Panky. Long time. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Work, Officer. It's not a social call today."

"So I figured. If we were still social, I'd probably have seen you at the hockey game last week like we planned. How's your cough?"

"It put me on the couch for five straight days, but I'm all cleared up now—and trying to catch up on work. Maybe we can see a game later this month." Reaching across his tiny dining room table, DeShear grabbed a yellow legal pad and a pen. "What about you? How you managing?"

"Day by day, man."

DeShear chewed his lip. "I need a favor. It's about the Braunheiser accident."

"Okay, sure. Whatcha got?"

He tapped the pen and took a deep breath. This information could go a lot of ways, and most of them would be bad for DeShear. The legal pad was filled with various scripted versions of how to deliver the tip to Harriman so it raised his interest enough to order the tox screen but didn't get anyone brought in for questioning. It was a dicey route. Harriman's ambition blurred his judgement at times, and DeShear had a five-thousand-dollar lunch date the next day. He couldn't risk getting locked up for forty-eight hours if Harriman's boss got a bug up his butt and wanted to press him for more.

*Downplay it.*

“I got a tip that the good doctor was drugged and that’s what caused his wreck. Seems like a stretch, but I thought I should report it.”

DeShear held his breath.

“It is a stretch. Our guys checked the scene. He rolled his car on top of himself, end of story.”

“I know, but my source says if you do a tox screen for Propofol, you’ll find it in his system.” DeShear’s heels bounced on the vinyl flooring as he waited for an answer. “That’s the stuff Michael Jackson was on when he croaked. Can you request one and let me know?”

“Sounds pretty thin. How good is the source? I don’t wanna raise a ruckus over a respected member of the community and end up looking stupid. What if you contact the family directly and see if they’ll ask the medical examiner?”

*Terrific.*

Harriman’s ambition could make him a jerk, but he wasn’t usually this thick. “Mark, old buddy, if you get information that kicks this upstairs to major crimes, it’s another step up the ladder for you. Run the screen. It’s a legit tip, and it might prove something. How long would it take to get a result?”

“If I request it and there’s nothing there, you owe me a dinner.”

That was a good sign. The possibility of getting some kudos from his boss might have worked. “Okay.”

“At Bern’s, and I choose the wine.”

Of course it had to be at the most expensive steak house in town, the one known world-wide for its expansive wine cellar. “Steaks at Bern’s, and we drink beer. How long until I can hear back?”

“A day, maybe two. I’ll call over there after we hang up.”

With the fish on the hook, DeShear decided to press his luck. “That’s more like McDonald’s Big Mac speed. If you want a steak dinner, I need steak speed.”

“Kinda pushy when you’re asking me to do work you’re getting paid for, but I’ll see what I can do. Because you’re a friend.”

“Thanks,” DeShear said. “Good talking with you.”

He ended the call, then returned to the business of wearing out his carpet.

• • • •

HIS 7 A. M. BREAKFAST at Ihop wasn’t as leisurely as he’d hoped. Five grand was a lot to lose if the interview went bad. He’d have stayed home, but his carpet had suffered enough—and there’s only so much nervous energy you can vent at the gym. If he ate really slowly, a big plate of pancakes and eggs might fill some of the gap before his meeting.

At 7:30, shoving his untouched breakfast aside, he opened his laptop and returned emails for a while, trying to not look at his phone every five minutes to see what time it was. Then he went outside and bought a copy of the Tampa Tribute from the box in front of the restaurant. He sat down and perused the pages of each section while quietly bouncing his heels under the table like a madman. At ten thirty, after staring at the newspaper without actually reading anything, and surrendering to daydreams about a lavish cruise to the Bahamas paid for with the cash from his safety deposit box, he gave up stalling and headed toward his appointment.

The drive to Bayshore Boulevard was quiet. Morning traffic had already subsided, and things hadn’t yet picked up for the lunch rush. But the south end of Bayshore wouldn’t be too busy anyway. MacDill Air Force Base lay at the tip of the Bayshore peninsula, and any contractors there who wanted lunch offsite would stay farther south. Downtown Tampa lay at the north end of Bayshore, and

office workers there tended to stay north so they could get back to the grind in less than sixty minutes. Bayshore itself was the scenic respite of big houses and old money, back from when Tampa first became a major shipping port over a hundred years ago. The doctors and lawyers who later moved into those mansions maintained the exclusive aura of Florida's very well-to-do.

Along the route, DeShear passed by the Braunheiser residence. A few police cars lined the driveway. Mrs. Braunheiser and her adult daughter would have gotten the bad news and come home, and by now they were probably meeting with the police to answer any questions as a matter of routine.

DeShear reached up and loosened his tie, more from nerves than from being hot. December in Florida was a fickle thing, causing people to run their air conditioners one day and wear leather jackets the next as Canadian winds struggled with Caribbean currents to see whether there would be a frost on Christmas day or swimming and sun tans. Today, Canada was winning—but only barely. The breeze off the bay created a light chop in the water, and it sprayed onto DeShear's windshield when the occasional large wave crashed into the rocks. Whitecaps were visible past the Tampa Yacht Club. It would be rough sailing for anyone who ventured out, regardless of the size of their boat.

Parking a few blocks from Kojack's Ribs, DeShear walked toward the designated intersection in the hopes of catching a few extra details about his mysterious client before she arrived. He shouldn't have bothered.

"You're early, Mr. DeShear."

Lanaya Kim had long legs, and she was a little heavier than he expected. A middle-aged woman with dark brown hair, almost black, but with few other overt Asian features, running didn't appear to be her thing. She sat in the middle of the wide grassy median that separated Bayshore Boulevard's northbound and southbound lanes, her legs in a V, arching herself toward one foot and then the other.

DeShear crossed the asphalt to stand near her. "Yeah, you never know with traffic around here. Nice to meet you, Ms. Kim."

She continued stretching, not looking up. "You came early to see if you could learn what kind of car I drove, or who else might be with me."

He smiled. "That's just good detective work, ma'am. Don't think anything of it."

"I won't. You are younger-looking in person than your online profile." She sat upright, putting her hands behind her on the grass. "Based on the college graduation date you listed on LinkedIn, you're in your mid-fifties. You could pass for thirty-five."

"Thank you. Good genes, I guess."

"Hmm." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Do my questions make you uncomfortable?"

Yes. "No, ma'am."

"Your hair has almost no gray. Do you color it?"

He stepped back a bit, putting a hand to his head. "Color it? No." His cheeks grew warm. This was already a very strange interview.

"Okay, then." She took a deep breath. "Shall we start?"

"Please."

She extended her hand and he helped her to her feet. The running shoes looked new. So did the red workout shirt and jogging shorts.

"Do you mind if we walk while we talk? It may help maintain the illusion that I'm here to casually exercise."

"Sure." He shrugged. "I'm not exactly dressed to work out, though."

“No, you are not. Next time, I’ll be more specific—although I thought it would have been obvious after I said what I’d be wearing. Lesson learned. This way, please.”

She crossed to the other side of Bayshore and headed north on the big sidewalk that ran several miles along the bay. Whether it was freezing out or hot, the bay always gave a breeze. Sometimes that breeze smelled of low tide, but the joggers didn’t seem to care.

“You have questions,” Lanaya said, pulling her hair into a ponytail as she walked. “What are they?”

DeShear followed her, gazing at the concrete railing that lined the sidewalk. “Well, I took the five thousand dollars out of my account and put it in a safe deposit box, so if you change your mind after our meeting, you can’t grab it back.”

She moved at a brisk pace, swinging her arms. “I have no intention of grabbing it back. It’s for services rendered. As of a few minutes from now, it’s yours. Then we’ll see about me hiring you to take my case.”

“Okay. You also mentioned some things yesterday that you said you’d explain today.” He loosened his tie again. “So I guess I’m really here to listen.”

“Fine. Let’s pick up the pace, shall we?”

He winced, wishing he’d worn different shoes, but took off his suit coat and swung it over his shoulder. Though he worked out every day, he still got sweaty easily when he did physical activity. The breeze from the bay could only do so much.

Between breaths, Lanaya spoke in short huffs. “I have information about a murder.”

“I know. The news and the cops still say it was just a car wreck, but we’re running down your drug tip.”

“I’m not talking about Dr. Braunheiser. The authorities dismissed the last two murders as well. Accidental deaths in all cases, except they weren’t. If Mark Harriman has requested the advance toxicology screen, we’ll have the report soon. Like the others, it will show Propofol.”

“That’ll be big news.”

“That’s not the big news. If somebody calls up the police and says a prominent physician didn’t die in a car wreck on his birthday, but was actually murdered, and three of his colleagues were murdered on their birthdays in the last twelve months, that’s big news.”

DeShear stopped walking. “If that were happening around here, I’m sure we’d have heard about it.”

“No, that’s exactly why you haven’t heard about it.” She ceased walking and came back to him. “It hasn’t happened around here. Dr. Braunheiser isn’t linked to the other murders because of where he lives. He’s linked by where he worked.”

“Which was where?”

She looked down. “I’m afraid I can’t divulge that at this time.”

Leaning against the thick concrete rail, DeShear frowned. His fifty-four-year-old knees preferred the padded comfort of running shoes to hard concrete and the thin leather soles of his dress shoes.

But that wasn’t the only reason for his discomfort. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something didn’t add up with Lanaya Kim. Maybe he was being played. Nobody spends five thousand dollars on a PI for a meeting. Not *just* for a meeting, anyway.

“You’re looking at me strangely.” She put her hands on her hips, drawing hard breaths. “I’m not crazy, but what if I am? The money is good.”

“Well,” he sighed. “I can’t argue with that.”

“See this?” She patted the thick concrete railing. Waves crashed on rocks a few feet below. “It’s designed to have cars not go through it, and it runs the entire length of this scenic drive, without a break, for over four miles. Guess where Braunheiser’s wreck occurred?”

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “The paper said it was south of here, at Ballast Point. Near the park.”

“Twenty feet past where this big railing stops. Coincidence?”

“Maybe. Most people don’t go for a drive and stay in front of their house.”

She folded her arms. “Let me turn the tables on you for a moment. You were highly recommended. I’m not seeing it. You said you were a police officer. Why did you leave your career after so many years? Did you not like it?”

“I’m not sure you want to hear my story. It has a sad ending so far.”

“Our future work arrangements end now if I don’t hear it.”

That got his attention, but it was a delicate topic. His instinct was to stare at the sidewalk, but he forced himself to look into her eyes and be firm and candid. “I got let go,” he said. “I received three commendations in two years, and had just gotten my picture taken with the mayor, when they fired me.”

The wind lifted a tuft of her long hair. She pushed it from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear. “What was the picture with the mayor for?”

“I was fishing at a marina, and I’m on the dock next to some of the bigger boats. Some guy jumps in this one boat and steals it. Problem is, he didn’t realize there were little kids down below. He gets about three hundred yards offshore and stops, and he throws the kids overboard. Now, there’s nobody around. The boat owner is in the bait shop getting ice and sodas, and I’m standing on the dock watching this thing unfold. The thief takes off again, and the kids are drowning in the channel. I don’t have a boat, so I jumped in. Swam over, saved the two kids. The waves were pretty good sized that day. The kids wouldn’t have lasted five minutes. Anyway, it made the newspapers, and I got my picture taken with the mayor. ‘Off-duty cop makes city proud.’ That kind of thing.”

“Fishing again. Do you do a lot of that?”

“I used to fish a lot with my dad when I was a kid.” DeShear stuck his hands in his pockets. “He died when I was in high school.”

“I’m sorry.” She shifted her weight. Her tone had softened. “What about the commendations?”

“You need the whole bio, huh?” He shrugged. “Okay.” He took his hands out of his pockets and counted on his fingers. “I got one for stopping a school shooting. Busted in the door and knocked the kid to the ground when he was still scaring everybody and firing holes into the ceiling. One was for a big drug bust where we saved a hostage. The other was for getting people out when the library was on fire.”

She shook her head, tucking another strand of hair behind her ear. “Why on Earth did they let you go?”

DeShear turned around and leaned on the railing, facing the breeze. In the distance, across the choppy water of the bay, stood the skyscrapers of downtown Tampa and its police headquarters.

“My partner and I went to a dirty apartment building, a little rat hole, where this guy was selling drugs. It was a domestic dispute call, and everybody in the place looked like they were starving to death except this big guy. He’s on meth or something, but the kids haven’t been showered in weeks. The girlfriend is full of bruises. So I’m talking to this guy, and he just let loose. He smacks his daughter, right in front of me. The kid’s about four or five, and she was crying because she was hungry, and he backhands her and tells her to shut up. Sends her flying.” He peered at Lanaya. “I had a

bad temper. A quick temper. So I laid the guy out. I let him know what it was like to be on the receiving end of violence, so he'd think twice about hitting somebody next time. And . . . I busted his jaw." DeShear sighed, looking over the water. "Turns out, his dad is a big shot attorney, and they sued me for everything under the sun. I lost my job, and the big lawyer took my house, my car, my bank account, everything. Now I do this. And try to work on my quick temper."

"You still got three commendations. Those go to heroes." She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. "I believe I'd be proud to have you work on my case."

He nodded. "Thank you."

The wind picked up again, taking a few scattered leaves from the sidewalk and carrying them across the wide boulevard. They came to rest on the manicured lawns of the mansions on the other side.

"When the Propofol is confirmed," Lanaya clasped her hands in front of her, "the police will demand to know where the information came from. If you tell them it was me, then that will make me a suspect. If you don't, they'll hold you as a suspect. I am not the person who did any of this, but if my name comes to light—from being booked as a suspect or being named in a news story—then people who want me silenced will know where to find me. Meanwhile, there have been several associates of Dr. Braunheiser's who lived around the country and who have died under ordinary-looking circumstances. Upon deeper investigation, their deaths were quite suspicious. Whoever did that is involved here. There may be other things involved as well."

He leaned against the concrete railing. "Well, again—murder goes over into the Tampa PD basket, and if they are around the country, it goes to the FBI."

"Yes, and while they assemble a task force and jockey for jurisdiction and rent office space and try to piece together what we already know, others will die."

"That's . . . not really my problem. I just can't—"

"Of course it's your problem." She stared straight into his eyes. "There are ruthless murderers after me. They'll happily kill you to get me."







DESHEAR GRIPPED THE steering wheel and frowned as he drove toward Tampa International Airport. Driving a client to the airport wasn't a big deal, but potentially putting his life at risk and still not getting the whole story, that didn't sit well. He valued his butt a lot more than five thousand dollars.

He also didn't feel he was in a position to argue. He needed the money, but people who can drop that kind of cash on an hour-long interview can probably hire people to get it back, too.

*But a cruise to the Bahamas would be nice . . .*

Then there was the story itself. Plausible, but thin. But there wasn't any harm in getting paid—and paid well—to listen to somebody's far-fetched story. It was a part of the job he didn't like, but it was still part of the job.

As long as he wasn't getting played somehow.

*Maybe poke the bear one more time. See if she'll spill something.*

"Listen," he said, adjusting his sunglasses. "If you really think your life is in danger, you need to go to the police."

She sat with her hands in her lap, clutching a small purse and staring out the window. "You still don't believe me. Well, what if I already did go to the police? You were a cop. What can they do? How many stories have you heard where some girlfriend was being battered, or an ex-wife's life was being threatened, and the police can't do anything until the guy makes a move? Well in my case, the move will be my death—and that's not really a good option."

"But I mean—"

"This is much bigger than that, and the best solution is for me to stay on the move, which I am. And you are potentially linked to me now. I've wired money to your account and we've spoken on your cell phone. We've met in person. I took precautions by using a numbered bank account and disposable phones, but any number of things could have been noticed on your end."

He nodded. "Well, thanks for that."

She turned and stared at him, keeping her hands in her lap. "Pull over."

"Don't get in a huff. You asked for a ride to the airport and I said I'd take you. Delta, was it?"

"Pull the car over right now."

He sighed, slowing the vehicle to make a turn. "I'll stop over here. This road's too busy for theatrics." He pointed to the vast, mostly empty parking lot of International Mall. "How's that?"

"That will do fine. Thank you."

Pulling past the rows of regal palm trees and coiffed topiaries, he eased into a parking spot away from any other cars. After turning off the engine, he turned and rested his back against the driver's side door, studying his soon-to-be-former client.

She stared at the small purse in her lap. "I've been trying to do you a favor, Mr. DeShear. Five thousand dollars is a lot of money, but I'm desperate. You can walk away right now and keep the cash. You did your part. You met with me." The quiver in her voice returned. It hooked him over the phone, and it reset the hook again now. "I . . . can get a cab from here. That's what I did to get to Bayshore. And I can—"

"I'll take you to the airport." He spoke in a low, soothing tone, almost a whisper. It was like a husband who was making up with his wife after a tiff where the words had been flung too hard. "I'm

not a jerk. Not that kind of a jerk, anyway.”

She raised her head and swallowed hard. “I’m not crazy. I have proof that I’m in danger, and I have information about much more than that. But . . .” Turning to him, a tear ran down her cheek. “I don’t want to die.”

He pursed his lips, drawing a deep breath. Her fear was real. That mattered.

A tiny *pop* opened the little purse, revealing a thick wad of hundred-dollar bills and a driver’s license. She pressed them to one side and took out a few folded pieces of paper, handing them to him. “This is what you’ve been wondering about.”

He removed his sunglasses. The papers were photocopies of newspaper articles. One reported the accidental drowning of Emmet Kincaid, a winemaking consultant in northern California; the other was the accidental overdose of Nilla Cunde in Missouri, from painkillers. Both had died within the last thirty days.

She glanced at the papers. “At one time in their careers, they were geneticists. Like me.”

“Okay.” He handed the photocopies back to her. “But I can’t shake the feeling there’s something a lot bigger that you’re not telling me.”

“What if I told you both of these people had Propofol in their systems at the time of death, and that they both used to work together—at the same facility where Dr. Braunheiser once worked?”

He sat back. “Is that true?”

“What if I told you that someone knew they worked together with the others, and now all the geneticists who worked there are being systematically killed, one at a time? I can show you a list. But not here.” She stuffed the papers back into her purse. “I’ll show you in Atlanta.”

The hook was already set, and he was the fish. He had to learn the rest of her strange story.

“Why Atlanta?”

“Will another five thousand dollars get you to come with me?”

*Another five thousand dollars!*

He tried to remain calm. Money caused people to do stupid things, and his spider sense was pinging away at this woman.

*But ten grand is ten grand.*

“A smart guy would say no. I get the feeling you’re a rich lady who needs a body buried, and I’m gonna end up doing the digging. I’d like to still be a PI when this is all over, and not be in jail or the morgue.”

“I’m not rich.”

He put on his sunglasses and reached for the ignition. “You have ten thousand dollars to hand over to me in cash. That doesn’t make you poor.”

“I have a limited budget I procured for this instance, and I hoped it would never arrive.” She lowered her voice and sighed. “I have the other five thousand in cash, in a locker at the airport. Can I hire you to go with me to Atlanta or not?”

“Cash in a locker at the airport. Sounds ominous.”

“Yes. People with bad intentions stash boodles of money in lockers at the airport. You’ve been watching too much TV. Innocent people who need to move in a hurry might do it, too. I am not a person with bad intentions.” She sat upright and wiped her eyes. “Start the car. I’ll explain more in Atlanta. You can see the cash when we get to the Delta terminal. I’ll give you half the money when you buy your ticket. The rest, you get when I’m safely checked into my hotel.”

He glared at her, his jaw hanging open. “You’re not gonna take no for an answer, are you?”

“Not when ‘no’ might get me killed.”

He started the car, smiling. “Well, I guess I’d better pack a bag for my trip to Atlanta.”

“There’s no time. And I don’t want to risk going back to your apartment. We may have already been compromised.”

“Compromised, huh? You working for the CIA now?” He put the car in gear. “My place is on the way.”

• • • •

THEY NEVER GOT PAST the fire trucks.

Smoke was still billowing out of DeShear’s apartment building when they drove up. The captain motioned residents of the Polo Club Apartments to the front parking lot, and DeShear walked the rest of the way with Lanaya following. Three engines had been called out, but they hadn’t extinguished the fire before his apartment was incinerated—along with half of the building.

Residents and pedestrians gawked at the carnage, gasping and pointing at the black mess.

All DeShear could do was stare.

Lanaya viewed the charred damage from over his shoulder. “Now do you believe our lives are in danger, Mr. DeShear?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I sure do.” He was a talking statue—and barely that. Through his sunglasses, he watched firefighters spray water at columns of smoke that jumped and danced in the wind. Some white, some black, but all stinking of charcoal and lost memories and pain. And under it all, the burned-out remnants of his life.

Lanaya tugged his arm. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“All my stuff . . . my files, clothes, my furniture. Business records.”

“Mr. DeShear . . .”

“Pictures.” He turned to her. “Files.”

“You backed your computer up, right?”

“I—sometimes. On a hard drive. That was also in there.” He turned back to the blackened apartment building. “Crap!”

“*Mr. DeShear.*”

“And I did have some money stashed in the drawer of my desk. Not a lot, but—”

“Hank! Look at me.” She took his arm and pulled him aside, toward the hedges of the next building and out of the view of the gawkers. “This was not an accident. The arsonist who did this probably wanted you to be in that fire, and he may be nearby waiting for you to show up so he can finish the job. Let’s not make that task any easier. We must go. Now.”

“Yeah.” He backed away from the smoking mess of his home, letting her guide him. “Yeah, let’s get to the airport.”





THE GREYHOUND WAITED in the ER lobby for over an hour, a small canvas gym bag at his feet, pretending to read his cell phone. Right after the evening shift change, a very concerned Hispanic family entered the hospital. From what he could overhear, there had been an automobile accident involving the young parents and their small son. The father had arrived a few moments ago in an ambulance. The wife and little boy were apparently unharmed except for a good scare.

The grandmother arrived shortly after, and then the sister, with her husband and their young daughter; eventually the grandfather appeared as well, and an uncle. Within thirty minutes of their arrival, the young couple's entire extended family was gathered in the ER.

The Greyhound had been waiting for a group like this all night. He left his chair by the TV and newspapers, walking to the water fountain. When he returned, he sat near the family. None of them appeared visibly upset; the paperwork gave the wife the most concern, not the car wreck or her man's broken leg. A few minutes later, the wife had been called to come visit her husband somewhere down the hall. The grandfather and sister went with her, leaving the boy with his grandmother until they were certain Poppy's leg injury wouldn't be too much for little eyes to see.

But they were distracted. They wouldn't be checking for injuries that weren't obvious.

"*Abuelita*," he said in a low tone.

The family had been speaking English since they came in, with an occasional smattering of Spanish by the older woman, so the term of endearment—addressing her as "little grandmother" in Spanish—would get her attention without raising her concerns. She turned to face him.

"Ask the doctors to check the boy for internal injuries."

Judging from his height, The Greyhound estimated the little boy to be about three years old. He had been scampering around the ER with the girl, bouncing on chairs or hiding under them, until she wore out. Chattering away to anyone and no one, the boy had continued to race around the lobby until his mother shoved his iPad into his hands and instructed him to play a game with his cousin. After a few minutes, he tossed the tablet aside and was up again, searching for the few toys in the lobby and grabbing his grandmother's hand to find *My Little Pony* on the TV.

The old woman smiled at The Greyhound's question and waved her hand. "They say he's alright."

"I know, he seems fine. A little ball of fire. *Bola de fuego*." The Greyhound leaned toward her. "But in any car wreck with a small child, you must check for internal injuries. For safety."

The boy had been persistently grabbing at the crotch of his pants since coming into the emergency room.

"*Chico*," The Greyhound said as the little blur ran by. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

The boy stopped and looked at him. "No."

"He grabs himself like that all the time," the grandmother said. "He's just at that age."

The boy sprinted away to check the mulch of the large planters. His aunt and uncle were on the phone updating other family members, and his cousin sat mesmerized by whatever was on her iPad screen. But having put the idea in play, his grandmother stood and asked if the boy needed to use the restroom. Again, he declined. With a quiet grunt, she got up out of her chair and strolled toward him, holding out her hand. "Come on, we might be here a while. Let's try to go potty."

He plopped to the floor in protest. "But I don't have to go."

“Lorenzo! Up!” A sharp snap of Grandma’s fingers ended the standoff, her scowl rousing the child to his feet. The pair walked hand in hand to the ladies’ restrooms and disappeared inside.

The Greyhound returned to reading his phone, waiting for the next round of the grandmother’s family members to be called back to visit the injured father. A moment later, the wife and Grandfather returned to the lobby, announcing that her husband’s leg was badly broken and he was headed for surgery. He was going to need pins and would be wearing a large cast for a few months, but otherwise he wasn’t hurt too badly.

The ladies restroom door flew open.

“Cristina!” The grandmother’s face was white. “Call the doctor. He’s peeing blood.”

The ER sprung into calm but fast action. Nurses and aides in scrubs appeared, ushering the boy and his angry-faced mother toward the triage rooms, and a chunk of the family followed. The sister’s husband and daughter stayed behind with the uncle, but most of the rest—from what The Greyhound could see—followed along.

The Greyhound stood up and went with them.

He shoved his phone under the mulch of one of the large planters, picked up his gym bag, and moved with the group. The internists would eventually shoo the overflow of family from the boy’s room, but The Greyhound only needed to walk with them past security. Since the shift change, no one on staff would know how long he’d been there, and with him sitting next to the family, they’d assume he was with them.

At the first corner, he turned left when the family cluster turned right.

The hospital’s cameras and watchful eyes were everywhere, but The Greyhound knew as long as someone acted like they were where they were supposed to be, no one on the staff really noticed if they weren’t.

He only needed to find one small room, make a quick adjustment to their inventory, and he’d be on his way.

Entering an empty elevator, he peeled off his shirt and sweat pants to reveal the scrubs he’d purchased at the uniform supply store. He shoved his clothes into the gym bag and pulled out a long, heavy metal box. Thanks to the ever-increasing need for businesses to put everything about themselves online—including their floor plans—he knew exactly where on the third floor to locate the surgery center. Down the hall from pre-op was the main drug holding area, a small, heavily locked area that contained the anesthesia. Near the surgery center was the holding room vault.

The Greyhound smiled as the elevator doors opened. Crossing to the nearby vending area, he slipped the gym bag into the trash, opened the heavy metal box, and withdrew its contents.

The best part about technology is how complacent it made everyone. Companies that sold things to hospitals didn’t make any money if the hospital wasn’t constantly upgrading to the latest, greatest thing. Oxygen sensors needed to be more portable and super lightweight; x-ray machines need to take digital images and send them instantly to the laptop waiting a few feet away. A heart rate monitor needed to slip over a finger and be every bit as accurate as its earlier, bigger, heavier versions. Everything—simply everything—must be high tech.

Newer hospitals utilized biometrics now—a password, followed by a fingerprint. Certain older ones—like those targeted for acquisition by the Angelus Genetics group, for example—still only required passwords.

With a steel-cased, electrically-encoded lock, a digital keypad on the door, and an overhead security camera, the most restricted drugs in the hospital would be unwatched ninety-nine percent of

the time. Even the best security guards couldn't stay focused on a door that only opened a few times a day.

Complacency. The Greyhound counted on it.

Most of the time, a well-placed, powerful electromagnet would zap an older system, defaulting to not holding the deadbolt in the locking position—and rendering the door temporarily unlocked.

After that, the drug vault itself needed to be accessed. The same magnet would open it, too.

The Greyhound held his heavy electromagnet close to his hip, walking straight to the meds vault like he was the head of the hospital. His heart pounded as he moved toward his target. Would it open? He never knew until he tried. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

At a prior attempt at a different hospital, an intern had stepped ahead of him and opened the door to the vault. That made access easier, but it meant disabling the man with some close quarter punches before grabbing the goods. He fingered the bandage above his eye. The fight hadn't been quick enough. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Holding his breath, he stood in front of the secured room and pressed the big magnet against the lock, to the side of the knob and keypad, where the circuit board and deadbolt engagement system were located. The keypad's blue LED screen went black, and a clunk came from the thick door's insides.

His heart thumped in his ears as he reached out and grabbed the handle. With a gentle tug, the door opened.

A rush of adrenaline surged through him as he crept inside. Now, to the meds vault.

He blinked a few times, realizing that he was panting hard. His pulse was throbbing and sweat gathered on his brow. The small room was uncomfortably warm, but he focused on the vault.

The thick, tempered glass door displayed rows of tiny bottles behind it, each with an important-looking label. Black ink with a blue square or a red dot made about the only discernible difference in the bottles, aside from the bold print identifying each drug.

He lifted the magnet onto the side of the vault, waiting for the readout to fail and the default spring to be released, causing the noticeable clunk the same way it had on the vault.

The LED screen stayed blue.

The Greyhound swallowed hard, his heart in his throat. He forced the magnet downward an inch, scraping the painted steel side of the vault. Its metallic screech was like nails on a chalk board.

Nothing.

A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead and off the tip of his nose. Huffing, he gritted his teeth and shoved the magnet back an inch. It was only a matter of time before someone from security barged into the vault. He had less than a minute, at best.

*But how long have I been in here already?*

He wiped his brow with his sleeve and put a hand on the vault. Gripping the big magnet, he forced it to move in a circular motion over the side panel.

*Engage. Now.*

Time. There wasn't much time.

Blinking sweat from his eyes, he worked the stubborn magnet around, searching for the locking hardware. The electronics had to be there. It was on all the diagrams. Opposite the vault's hinges and an inch or so from the front.

*Where is it?*

The one in LA had given him trouble. Several had, in fact. St. Paul, Baton Rouge . . .

He tried to force that out of his mind, heaving against the magnet to get it to budge.

*Keep moving it. The lock is here. It's on all the diagrams.*

With each thrust of his sweating hands, the magnet scraped along the side of the vault in fractions of an inch. Would this be another one he had to walk away from?

Seconds ticked by. The guards would have been notified by now, and they would be on the way. A whole-floor lockdown would ensue in a matter of moments, and then he'd be—

*Clunk.*

His heart leaped. He righted himself and yanked open the vault door, reaching past the red and green labels to the large teal bottle that said Propofol.

Grabbing it, a bolt of pain lurched through his stomach. He winced and doubled over, groaning as the air rushed out of him. The bottles nearly fell from his grasp. Making a fist, he pressed his other hand to his belly and squeezed his eyes shut, leaning on the countertop to keep from falling to the floor.

*Not now.*

A wave of nausea swept through him. The room grew warmer. He sunk to his knees and leaned against the wall, swiping his shoulder across his forehead again. Swallowing hard, he pushed down the urge to vomit and slapped a hand onto the countertop, forcing himself back to his feet. He stood there, gasping and dripping, as he slipped the Propofol bottles into his pocket.

He glanced at the door. It swayed back and forth.

*Get it together.*

Closing his eyes, he hoped the door would be standing still when he reopened them. It complied. With a deep breath, he tightened his gut and took a step forward.

His legs went out from under him and he crashed to the counter again.

*Walk. Move it or go to prison.*

With a groan, he pushed off the counter and grabbed for the door latch.

*A few seconds of acting normal and you'll be home free. It's less than sixty seconds to the elevator. In three minutes, you'll be outside.*

He eyed the door. "Suck it up," he whispered to himself. "You can manage for three minutes."

He knew the nausea and pain would pass soon, but the bouts had been getting stronger, and each round was knocking him down for longer and longer periods of time. The last one came on fast and took him down for a week. That couldn't happen now. This needed to be a wave; it needed to come and go, not be the start of another crash.

He didn't have time for a crash.

*Breathe.*

Sixty seconds to the elevator. Another hundred and eighty to the rear parking lot.

*The rest of your life depends on the next four minutes.*

Nodding, he straightened up and clenched his gut. He opened the door and stepped into the hallway. The air conditioning was cooler there, for some reason. Less stuffy than in the small vault.

The nausea subsided. He took a few steps.

*Normal. Walk normal. And with confidence.*

He quickened his pace, glancing down the corridor to the elevator.

Fifty feet, then forty.

As he neared the elevator, relief swept through his system. He was going to make it.

The light over the elevator came on and the bell pinged. As the doors opened, several dark uniforms came into view.

Security.



He peeked to his right. The vending area. He slipped inside and faced a big machine filled with potato chips and granola bars. In the machine's glass, the dark uniforms raced by behind him. He dropped the magnet into the trash can and waited, closing his eyes to catch the sound of the elevator closing.

When they did, he walked to them. He waved his hands between the doors, forcing them to open. Once inside, he could collapse.

"Long day?" The petite African-American woman in the corner wore a light gray suit and carried a clip board.

And a badge.

*The security captain.*

The elevator doors shut as he faced the panel of buttons. "Yeah, I pulled a double."

The indicator was lit for the next floor down. He pressed L for lobby, the ground floor, and kept his face to the front.

"I work doubles all the time. Seems like the hospital admins never work late, but us low level folks can't work enough hours for them. You look exhausted."

"I feel exhausted. Like I'm going to pass out if I don't get to bed soon." He mustered a smile and glanced in her direction, not long enough to be perceived as checking her out, but not so short as to be dismissive. He needed to act normal and engage the way a hospital staff member would with someone they might run into again—and to not draw undue attention to himself. "Sorry. Guess I shouldn't complain."

She was attractive, wearing her black hair pulled back in a tight bun, but with high cheek bones and big eyes. Her suit was just snug enough to show off her figure, but this wasn't the time for that. He had to fight to act normal until she got off the elevator.

The nausea crept back to him. He pressed his hand to his gut and swallowed reflexively to keep the queasiness at bay, but it wouldn't stay back for long. When it came, it'd stay for a few hours or stay for a week, depending on if it was a small wave or a tidal wave.

The elevator pinged. The woman stepped to the front. "Well, see you around."

"Cheers." His gaze lingered just beneath the hem of her short jacket as she walked away.

Then the knot in his stomach seized up on him again and he leaned against the wall as the elevator doors closed.

He reached his rental car without further incident and crawled inside. He managed to drive to a fast food place a block away before he threw up, then he slouched in his seat until the pain in his stomach subsided. Once he made it back to his hotel, he could rest until the wave passed. Some water and carbs would be a good idea, too, before he regrouped to pursue the real target of his trip.

St. Anthony's hospital across town, and a rendezvous with its chief of medicine, Dr. Asher Fishel.





THEY PASSED A FEW HOURS in the airport lounge—gate side—with DeShear bouncing his heels under the chair and staring at his newspaper, doing his best not to get up and wear out the airport carpet.

*If they tracked her to Tampa and connected her to me, then they can follow us to Atlanta.*

He studied every bulge in every passenger's suit jacket to be certain it was not a gun, and reassured himself that every fleeting look from a maintenance worker was not a covert enemy operative calling in a kill squad.

When their flight boarded, he was finally able to relax.

His client was another matter.

The locker contained a laptop and a few other essentials. While they flew, she typed furiously—and constantly checked over her shoulder and up and down the aisle to ensure no one was watching her.

He toyed with his complimentary miniature bag of pretzels. Lanaya needed to calm down a few notches. “You warned me about being tracked digitally,” he said. “Do you think it's safe to use your computer on an airplane?”

“They don't collect Wi-Fi data from devices on airplanes. It's too expensive to record all the searches and tie them back to the end user.”

“What are you checking?”

She didn't look up from the screen. “Googling former co-worker names.”

“To see which ones are still alive?”

“Basically.”

“Okay.” He reached over and gently closed her laptop. “I don't know exactly what kind of trouble we're in, but that's not helping you.”

“I—”

“You need a break. Check it later. Right now, let me buy you a drink.” He pressed the overhead “call attendant” button. In the front of the plane, an electronic bell dinged.

Settling back into his chair, he smiled at the flight attendant when she appeared a moment later. “My lady friend and I would like a drink. Do you have any Mexican beer?”

The young lady scribbled on her pad. “Yes, sir.”

“Perfect. I'll have one. And my friend will have . . .”

“Tequila,” Lanaya blurted out. “A shot of Tequila.”

DeShear raised his eyebrows. As the flight attendant went down the aisle, he faced Lanaya. “Tequila? I figured you for a chardonnay gal.”

“Normally, yes. But I realized my life may be ending soon, and there's a lot of things I haven't tried.”

DeShear opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He opened the bag of pretzels instead, and popped one in his mouth.

Lanaya slipped the laptop into the seat pocket in front of her. “I've arranged for two business class suites at our hotel.”

“Okay. Good.” DeShear lowered his voice. “You know, I've been wondering how you book airline tickets and hotel rooms.” He held the tiny foil bag to his lips and tapped a few more pretzels

into his mouth. “After a while a fake ID can be tracked just like a real one. You must have several.”

“I have a friend’s prepaid debit card.” Lanaya whispered, rearranging the copy of *In Flight* magazine and the safety card that rested in the seat pocket with her laptop. “I gave her ten thousand dollars and she got me the card. We are close enough in appearance that I’m able to travel using her driver’s license.”

“That works?”

“Most women change their hair style over time, Mr. DeShear. Longer, shorter, highlights—or they gain or lose weight. They take their glasses off for the photo but wear them in person. If a license is more than a few years old, the image will have faded. At my age, as long as the resemblance is close and no one’s calling the credit card services, it’s not a big deal.”

The flight attendant returned with their drinks. DeShear picked up his plastic cup of beer. “Cheers.”

Lanaya lifted her cup and raised it to her lips. It hung there, suspended in midair.

“Is there a problem?” DeShear asked.

“I’ve never had tequila before.” Lanaya stared at the clear liquid in the cup. “It smells awful.”

DeShear chuckled. “It tastes even worse.”

She sniffed the cup. “Why do people drink it?”

“Most? To get drunk.”

“Oh. Of course.” She inched the tiny glass closer and stopped again.

DeShear sighed. “How about we share drinks? Take half your shot, and chase it with a big sip of my beer.”

“That—thank you. That sounds like a good idea.” She closed her eyes and put the cup to her mouth, allowing the tiniest of swallows to cross her lips. “Oh!” She stomped the floor, shaking her head. “Oh! Oh! Oh!”

DeShear flinched.

“Ew! Oh my!” Lanaya screwed up her face, waving her hands. “Oh, that is awful. Quick, give me the beer.”

DeShear handed over his drink. Lanaya gulped hard—and kept gulping. The cup went horizontal, then three-quarters vertical, then straight up. She slammed it on the folding table, shaking her head again. The last bit of beer had been completely drained from it. “Bleh.”

She took a few deep breaths as DeShear held out a miniature pretzel. “So—ready for another?”

• • • •

DURING HER SECOND MEXICAN beer, Lanaya finally seemed relaxed. DeShear was a few drinks in, too, so he probed a little more about her strange associates.

She wasn’t having any of it.

“At the hotel, and definitely not while drinking.”

DeShear knew when he was beat. He sipped his beer and made small talk, keeping her mind off their troubles—to the extent that was possible.

“I misjudged you, Mr. DeShear.” Lanaya slurred her words a little. “You’re brave and smart, and you have the commendations to prove it.”

“I did have them. They went up in flames with that picture of me and the mayor.”

“Yes.” She took another sip of beer. “I’m very sorry about that. Your pictures were the only personal thing you really mentioned at the fire. They must have been very special. Family?”

DeShear sat forward. “Why are we on a plane to Atlanta?”

She shrugged. "Because walking would take too long." She burst into laughter at her joke. Alcohol consumed at high altitudes was allegedly more potent than at sea level. DeShear hadn't factored that in when he ordered the second round. Or the third.

"No." DeShear smirked. "I mean, why Atlanta? Do you have something hidden at the gate for when we land?"

"Killers tend to be less effective in places that use metal detectors to find guns." She giggled, waving her cup at him. "That's a plus for us."

He watched her, not smiling and not frowning, just waiting.

"Because," she sighed. "It's a major hub for nearly everywhere else in the United States, and we need quick access to California, Montana, Ohio, Minnesota . . . Now, that's all I'm telling you until —"

"—until we are checked safely into our hotel," he said. "Okay. You win."

"Mr. DeShear—Hank DeShear—why do you go by 'Hank'? Hamilton is a perfectly good name. Hamilton DeShear. It's practically regal-sounding."

"It's a little long."

"What's your rush? Hamilton DeShear is far more memorable."

"I guess I hadn't thought about being memorable."

"You were certainly memorable to those girls you saved. And to those library workers." She took another sip of beer. "Tell me more about Hamilton DeShear, the man I'm entrusting my life to."

DeShear reached over and took her cup, placing it on the empty tray table on the other side of him. "What would you like to know?"

"Tell me a fishing story about you and your father."

"He was my foster father. My real parents died in a car wreck when I was a baby."

"That's terrible."

"Now, Curt DeShear, he was a good guy. I loved him a lot. Good dad. I went to a couple of foster homes and stuff before he and his wife adopted me. I only remember a little about her."

"What happened to her?"

"Cancer took her when I was about ten. She gave it a good fight. Lasted a couple of years, but she was constantly in the hospital, and back then they didn't really have the things they have now. She suffered a lot."

"I'm very sorry," Lanaya said. "I shouldn't have pried."

"It's okay, you didn't know." DeShear drained the last of the beer from the cup. "I made the best of the family I got."

"Hmm." Lanaya settled into the seat, pressing her cheek to the cushion and drawing her knees up. "Was there ever a Mrs. Hamilton DeShear? Or children?"

"I told you, my story was a sad one so far. Are you sure you wanna hear it?"

"Perhaps we can change it going forward. Besides, you can't give a reply like that and then not tell the story. Give."

"We met in graduate school, got married right after. I started teaching and she landed her dream job at a big accounting firm, so we waited to have kids. But after a couple of years, we stopped waiting—and then it was the babies who wanted to wait. We just couldn't get pregnant, and then we had miscarriage after miscarriage. I just . . . a guy can only watch his wife's heart break so many times. To be so excited and then have it all crash, then the crying—for weeks. I couldn't keep putting her through it. But then we found out we were pregnant again, so I didn't say anything. And this time we had a baby. A beautiful baby girl, who erased all our sadness just by showing up. When she was

born, she was the biggest ray of sunshine in our lives. The sky was bluer, the grass was greener. Then . . . when she was three . . . she got sick. She just, faded. They said it was similar to Leukemia. No cure. We spent a year watching her go. Most marriages can't last through that. Ours didn't. Each time we saw each other, we saw our daughter not there, and we just couldn't do it."

They sat there in silence, the low hum of the engines filling the plane. When the flight attendant dimmed the lights, the last of the passenger conversations dimmed as well.

Lanaya snuggled into her cushion. "You've had a lot taken from you in your life."

"I told you, I'm down but I'm not out. Not by a long shot." He took off his tie and rolled it up, stuffing it into his pants pocket. "And after we check into our hotel, you're telling me your story. The one that put us on a last-minute flight to Atlanta."

"Okay," she said, her eyes half closed. "I promise."





THE PEACHTREE PLAZA was a downtown skyscraper of a hotel, one much nicer than DeShear expected his client to provide. Low key seemed to be Lanaya's M. O., but he wasn't arguing. Room service and a hot bath sounded good.

They passed through the crowded lobby to the front desk, where she checked them in. Holly had been strung across the countertop, and a big Christmas tree adorned the area near the elevators.

Lanaya had procured adjacent rooms. "So we can go back and forth to talk without stepping into the hallway where we might be spotted."

Shaking his head, DeShear slid his plastic key through the slot on the hotel room door. "I think you can calm down a little here. We should be fine in a busy hotel."

Lanaya opened the door to the room next to his. "You're the one who's been bouncing your feet all day."

Once inside, she knocked on the interior door. DeShear flipped the deadbolt and opened the door. Two inches away, Lanaya had cracked hers open. "When we're asleep, you keep yours open. I'll keep mine locked. Otherwise," she stepped back and pushed her door open the rest of the way. "We can work in here and strategize."

"Sounds good. Let me wash my face to wake up, and I'll be right over."

He returned a few minutes later with a towel around his neck and a Coke in his hand. She waved for him to join her at the little desk by the window, opening her laptop. She glanced at his soda. "Would you mind grabbing one of those for me?"

"Not at all." He tossed the towel onto the bed and opened the panel on the console under the TV, accessing the mini fridge. "Coke? Or something else?"

"Coke's fine."

"Not tequila?"

"Never again." She shuddered.

He smiled and handed her the little bottle. Aside from being her semi-body guard, he still wasn't really sure why he was here. But as she said, the money was good, so he could afford to be patient. She'd tell him when she was ready.

"I think our killer or killers will head to Minneapolis next." She pointed to a map on the laptop screen. "The researchers in the group I worked in were recruited from all over the country. I think that was on purpose. They'd have less in common, but upon release they'd return home—and be far less likely to connect with former co-workers. Two from my group work together in Minneapolis."

"I think you're about two jumps ahead of me," DeShear said, glancing at the lights of the Atlanta skyline out the window. A few blocks away, a tall, thin crane dangled a wreath above a construction site. "Let's back up a bit. You said the murder victims worked together. When?"

She closed the map window and a black screen appeared with lines of code. She typed on the keyboard and closed the program. "The better question is where."

"Okay." He lowered himself onto the bed, reclining on one elbow. "Where and when?"

She spun in the chair to face him. He said nothing, just cradled the Coke in his hands.

Lanaya sighed and cracked open her soda bottle, staring at it. "People don't set out to do bad things. I don't think they do, anyway." She raised her eyes to meet his. "I was a good scientist, Hamilton. I won the Tewksbury award my final year in my doctorate program. My parents were so



proud. I got recruited to Centaur Genomics, and life was good. My work was highly praised in numerous publications. Then I got a call from Angelus Genetics. They weren't as established, but they were very cutting edge. Marcus Hauser didn't talk about changing the world—he was doing it. And they had it all, at Angelus. A big raise, free day care, student loan forgiveness. They offered below market rate loans to employees for cars and houses because they wanted the very best people on their team. I was young and ambitious. I jumped at the chance.”

He let her talk. He'd learned confessions take time.

She leaned back in the chair, holding the Coke in her lap, slowly turning the bottle. “Fast forward a few years and you realize they own you. You're not going to make that kind of money anywhere else, and if you leave, you'd have to drastically change lifestyles. No more private schools or semiannual vacations to Hawaii and Aspen.” She shrugged, watching the little bubbles work their way up the side of the plastic bottle. “Then one day they announced they were downsizing. Some of us were offered positions at their subsidiary in Arizona—Onyx Research. This facility was very different. Specialized. Very compartmentalized, and extremely secretive. You barely knew the name of the person in the next cubicle, much less what they were working on. I was assigned to a project that was the cream of the crop. The one that was going to make Angelus Genetics famous. These people weren't just curing cancer, they were removing the possibility of anybody getting it to begin with. And not only cancer. Diabetes, MS, Heart disease—all the biggies.

“Some of the younger employees created an online black screen site, to do at home what we couldn't do at work—talk—but using symbols instead of names. One girl, Double Omega, said her project's success rates were inflated. A week later, she was gone. Rumors on the black screen site said it was suicide. I didn't know her, but it seemed possible. Positions at the Onyx facility were extremely high-pressure, and the lack of interaction was depressing for a lot of people.”

She sighed, getting up and facing the window. Her reflection showed her lost in thought, reliving things she wanted to forget. “I got reassigned to a new project. That happened a lot. Segmentation. One person started a project, another finished it, and who knows how many worked on it in between? But that way, Onyx guaranteed employees couldn't take secrets to a competitor. I soon realized I'd taken over Double Omega's project. She had it backwards. They were not inflating the success rates, they were hiding the failures. If the classification group succeeded at all, the viables were segregated out and given a new group name. This would show something like 80 or 90% success in the new classification group, but they were only taking 10% of the entire pool. So the project actually had a 90% failure rate or worse. That's much closer to industry norms.”

She shook her head, turning to him. Her eyes were red and brimming with tears. “I was a very good scientist, Hamilton. And now . . .” Her voice broke. “I'm probably going to be publicly discredited and murdered in a way that looks like an accident.”

DeShear sat up on the bed. “So these killings, our case . . . somebody's committing murder over a bunch of faked reports?”

“It's big money, Hamilton. World-wide patents that might eradicate life-threatening afflictions are worth billions of dollars, possibly trillions. People shoot each other in a neighborhood poker game. They can certainly be killed over billions of dollars. But no, our murders didn't take place because of Onyx's DNA sequencing successes. They're happening because—”

There was a knock at the door. “Room service.”

DeShear slid off the bed. “I'll get it.”

“Don't!” Lanaya hissed. He stopped and looked at her, opening his mouth. Her eyes were wide. “I didn't order any room service.”

The knock on the door came again. "Room service."

DeShear put a finger to his lips and rushed to the door. Through the peep hole, he could make out the top half of a large man in a white culinary service jacket. He went back to Lanaya, whispering in her ear. "Get up. Tell him to leave it outside, then go into the bathroom."

She rose, her hand to her mouth. DeShear quietly placed his drink in the trash can by the desk, then put his hands on Lanaya's shoulders and leaned in close. "Thank him first. I've got this."

"Thank you," she said, inching across the room. "Please leave it outside."

"Good job," DeShear whispered. "You're doing fine."

"Yes, ma'am. I need you to sign for the bill."

DeShear moved in front of her, holding a hand out and moving the other one back and forth under it.

She nodded. "Can you slide it under?"

Giving her a thumbs up, DeShear looked around the room for a makeshift weapon.

The man in the hallway thumped the door bottom a few times. "No, I'm sorry, it doesn't fit. This new carpet's too thick."

"One minute." She faced DeShear, mouthing, "What do we do?"

He guided her into the bathroom and pulled the door halfway closed. "Stay here. Don't say or do anything."

He went to the door and stared at the handle, drawing a deep breath. Glancing to the bathroom to make sure Lanaya wasn't visible, he leaned close and held his hand above the latch.

*Could be an honest mistake by the hotel.*

*Could be an execution.*

Jerking the handle downward, he flung open the door. The waiter stood next to a room service cart. Two flat metal plate covers rested on top of the cart's long, white tablecloth.

The waiter launched himself into the doorway. Jumping backwards, DeShear grabbed the man's collar and heaved him face-first into the heavy door. He held the intruder by the back of the neck, pinning him. The man grunted and flailed, reaching for the waistline bulge at the small of his back. DeShear rammed a shoulder into him, slamming the man into the door again. Grabbing the intruder's hand, DeShear forced it skyward. The assailant howled in pain.

DeShear dropped the man's hand and yanked up the jacket, revealing a holster and a large gun. He pulled the weapon free and gripped it tightly, then slammed the butt of the heavy gun into the side of the man's head.

The intruder slumped and fell to the floor.

DeShear stood over him, panting. Grabbing his assailant under the arms, DeShear dragged him toward the bed, then went back to retrieve the room service cart.

He called to the bathroom. "You can come out now."

Lanaya peeked past the bathroom door.

DeShear rolled the cart toward the bed. "It's okay. This guy's done for the night."

As his client crept out of the bathroom, DeShear lifted the metal plate covers from the room service cart. There was nothing underneath. He tossed them onto the bed and flipped up the tablecloth, exposing a sawed off, pump action shotgun. He grabbed it and took it to Lanaya. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

She recoiled. "I'm a scientist, not a cowboy!"

"Okay." He tucked the pistol into his belt and went into his room, ratcheting the shotgun barrel repeatedly until all the shells were ejected onto the mattress. After sliding the shotgun under the bed,

he gathered the expended shells and carried them to his bathroom, where he deposited them into the toilet tank.

He pulled the pistol from his belt and sprung the magazine, checking its ammunition.

*Full load.*

Motioning to Lanaya, he stepped toward the door and pressed himself to the wall. She followed.

“Keep quiet,” he whispered. “If our friend has somebody waiting in the hall, we don’t want them to know it’s us coming out.”

He eased the handle downward and inched the door open. At the end of the hallway stood a man in plain clothes, doing nothing.

*That’s unusual for a hotel.*

DeShear opened the door the rest of the way. “Keep calm. We’re a husband and wife going to dinner.” She went through, then he joined her, walking side by side with the gun behind her lower back.

They moved down the hallway toward the man.

“Honestly, darling,” DeShear said. “It’s very late. I’d just as soon skip dinner and grab a drink at the bar.”

Lanaya said nothing. She swallowed hard and trembled.

DeShear carried on the act, solo. “Hmm? Well, if you insist, my love.”

The man stared at them as they approached.

DeShear smiled at him when they got close. “Excuse me, friend, but do you have the time?”

The man looked past him.

“No?” DeShear pulled out his gun and shoved it into the man’s face. “Well, then, can you turn around and grab the wall? Feet spread.”

The man hesitated.

“Your buddy’s dead,” DeShear scowled. “Don’t join him.”

Lanaya gasped. “You killed him?”

DeShear winced. “Shh!”

He patted the man down and relieved him of a .45 caliber revolver.

“Walk with me to the elevator,” DeShear said to the stranger. “You’re going to get in and go straight to the top floor.”

When the elevator arrived, DeShear shoved the man into the back and leaned inside to press the top button. “Don’t get cute and exit early. If I see you downstairs in the next hour, it’s not gonna be pleasant for you.”

As soon as the elevator doors closed, DeShear stepped back and watched the floor indicator light show the man was going up.

“Now,” DeShear said. “We take the service elevator to the laundry room and get out of here.”

He grabbed Lanaya’s hand and they raced down the hallway.





DR. ASHER FISHEL BLEW a long stream of smoke at the computer screen, scowling at the spread sheet displayed there.

“Don’t you ever go home, Ash?” Dr. Kuntara leaned in the doorway of her friend’s office, fanning the haze of smoke away from her nose. “And open a window, would you?”

Fishel coughed a few times, pulling the cigarette from his mouth as he lumbered to heft his massive frame up from his desk. A half-eaten cheeseburger rested on a cafeteria tray, next to an overflowing ash tray and a can of Diet Coke. “I have work to do. Marcus is up my rear about the merger.”

“Maybe another cigarette will help you with that cough.”

He walked past his dusty treadmill to the window, sliding it open. The blinds swayed in the night’s chilly breeze. “We can’t all be smoothie drinking marathoners like you, Tahvia.” Fishel held his cigarette out the window. “Between the merger, the board review, my high blood pressure, my high cholesterol, the new regulations . . . there’s so many things that are trying to kill me, I’m lucky I’m still standing.”

“It’s possible we board members have concerns about the long-term health of our key man. But suit yourself, boss. See you tomorrow. And don’t let Dr. Hauser work you too late.” Kuntara grabbed the door knob and pulled the door shut behind her.

“When do I ever?” Fishel grunted. He went back to his cluttered work space and swigged his soda. A computer screen full of spread sheets stared at him. He took a swig of his drink, sucked on the cigarette, and hunched over the keyboard.

A knock came from the door. Fishel glanced at his watch. According to his Rolex Presidential, it was almost eight-thirty. “Housekeeping,” he muttered. “As if I didn’t have enough distractions.” He called out in the direction of the door. “Come back in an hour.”

The man on the other side mumbled something, then knocked again.

Fishel didn’t look up from the computer. “I said come back later!”

The door opened and a tall man in blue coveralls backed into the room, pulling a large cleaning cart. Rags and spray bottles hung over the sides, and a big trash can rose from the center.

“Are you new? Or deaf? I’m busy. You’ll need to clean later.” The doctor glared at the cleaner and took another drag on his cigarette. “*Habla* English, you moron? Later. Come back later.”

With his back to Fishel, the cleaner pulled something from his pocket and raised it to his head. When he turned around, his face was covered by a black ski mask.



THE GREYHOUND SHOVED the office door closed and leveled a gun at the frightened chief of medicine. “Do you *habla* .38 caliber, Doctor Fishel?”

The blood drained out of the doctor’s face. “I—I . . .” His hands slid from the keyboard and disappeared under the desk.

Keeping the gun aimed at the doctor’s head, The Greyhound held up a smart phone with a video image playing. “You have a silent alarm button under your top drawer. Before you answer the phone and give the security answer for an emergency rescue, you need to look at this.”

His mouth hanging open, Dr. Fishel peered at the screen. The Greyhound came closer, holding the phone in front of him. “This is live streaming video of your wife at the bookstore where she is attending her book club. As long as you do exactly what I say, when I say it, your wife will not be hurt. If you do *not* do exactly as I say, she will be murdered in the parking lot on the way to her Volvo. Nod if you understand.”

The doctor stared at the screen, white faced. “Shanna . . .”

The Greyhound slammed a hand down onto the desk. “Nod if you understand, Dr. Fischel.”

He nodded.

His heart pounding, The Greyhound swallowed hard and set the streaming phone next to the doctor’s keyboard. “Do not touch the phone. My man on the other end needs to hear me every thirty seconds or he kills your wife. Nod if you understand.”

As his office phone rang, the doctor glanced at it, then back to The Greyhound. He nodded again.

Stepping around to the chair, The Greyhound put his gun to the doctor’s head. The phone rang a second time.

A sharp pain ignited in The Greyhound’s stomach, throbbing and sending stabs in all directions. He winced and re-gripped the gun with his sweaty fingers, forcing himself to remain upright. He balled up his other hand and pressed it to his abdomen.

The pain flared again.

The Greyhound sucked in his breath and leaned on the credenza. “When I tell you, answer the phone and give security the ‘all clear’ password. If you do not, your wife dies. If security comes in and tries to apprehend me, my man at the bookstore opens fire. Nod if you understand.”

The doctor nodded. The phone rang a third time.

“Answer it,” The Greyhound said. His lungs ached and his head throbbed. Pulses of green and red flashed over his vision. The gun stayed pointed at the trembling doctor.

Fishel lifted the black receiver from its cradle. He held it to his head and closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “This is Dr. Fishel. Nightingale. I repeat, Nightingale.”

The Greyhound breathed hard, sweat running down his neck. He raised his other hand to steady the first, the gun staying pointed at the chief of medicine.

“No, everything’s fine. The cleaner came in and I mashed the panic button trying to get up. Getting too plump for my chair, I guess.”

Eyeing the doctor and then the video playing on the phone, The Greyhound shifted his weight. So far, so good.

“Thank you. Happy holidays to you, too. Goodnight.” Fishel hung up the phone. “I did it. They aren’t coming. Now . . . what do you want?”

“We’ll get to that.” The Greyhound panted. “First, I need you to take this.” He tossed a white cotton cloth onto the desk, then pulled a small bottle from his pocket. “Put one drop of ether onto the handkerchief, hold it to your face, and inhale it deeply.”

The doctor’s shaking fingers stretched in the direction of the cloth. The Greyhound reached past him and placed the bottle on a stack of papers. He dug into his pocket again and withdrew a syringe.

“One drop only, Doctor.”

The knot in his stomach erupted, sending The Greyhound to his knees. He grabbed a corner of the desk to keep from crashing to the floor, coughing uncontrollably as his lungs burned like they were on fire. The room swayed.

“You’re ill,” the doctor said. “You—you’re white as a sheet. You need help.”

The Greyhound shook his head, staggering to his feet. “Not from you!” He pointed the gun back at the doctor. “First, do no harm.” Steadying himself, he wiped the spit from the side of his mouth. “Or were you absent the day they went over the Hippocratic oath at medical school?”

“Son,” the doctor spoke in low, calm tones, his voice wavering. “Whatever’s bothering you, we can talk about it. Let me get you some help first.”

“Put a drop of ether on the cloth.” He grimaced and cocked the gun. “Shanna’s keeper will lose patience soon.”

Fishel lowered his gaze to the bottle. He picked it up and unscrewed the cap, then held the vial over the cloth. The bottle shook in his grip. A drop of liquid fell onto the small white cloth. He set the bottle down, quivering so much he almost knocked it over. The wet tiny dot spread across the handkerchief.

“Put it over your nose and mouth, and inhale. One big breath. If you try to cheat, I’ll know.” The Greyhound pointed the gun at the video. “Think of your wife.”

The doctor nodded. “I’ll do as you say. Don’t hurt my family.”

Blinking the colors from his eyes, The Greyhound glared at his victim. “Don’t talk to me about hurting people. Let’s go. One big breath. Do it.”

Lifting the cloth near his face, a whimper escaped the doctor’s lips. He raised his eyes to the man in the black ski mask. “Why are you doing this?”

“Angelus Genetics and Onyx Research. You remember them. You were a big deal over there before you bought your way into respectability.”

The doctor’s jaw dropped. “We-we did legitimate research there.”

“You,” The Greyhound narrowed his eyes, “are a despicable human being for what you did.”

“I—I didn’t. I . . . in the Arizona facility, they—I had no idea until—”

“You had every idea. Nilla Cunde said it was your goal from the outset. Emmet Kincaid said the same thing. They’re both dead now. So is Dr. Braunheiser. And Dr. Contiglio. Bendina Tasson, Theo Waldrop, Mina Farris—all gone. But not before they gave me things.”

“Oh, no. No . . .”

“I have notes from meetings you attended, where you and Hauser rolled out your grand plans. How you’d get the financing. I have it all, doctor.”

“We . . . shut it down. We stopped!”

“You moved it to Indonesia, you lying piece of garbage. U. S. laws couldn’t touch you there. Do you want to try to explain the deal you did with Cambodia? What you allowed to happen there?”

“Please.” The doctor swallowed hard. “Science. We . . . our ideas were for the benefit of mankind.”

“Stop lying! Ideas are one thing. What you put into practice—deciding right and wrong, life and death. You made up the rules, like the megalomaniacs you are. I’d shoot you right now, but I need to fly under the radar until—” His lungs exploded. He coughed, backing away and gasping for air. When he recovered, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Blood stained his sleeve.

He pointed the gun to the handkerchief. “Let’s go.”

The doctor lifted the cloth and pressed it to his face, closing his eyes. His chest swelled and relaxed as he inhaled, then he looked at The Greyhound.

“Put it down.”

When he did, The Greyhound went to him and held out the syringe. “Inject yourself with this.” He handed it to the doctor. “If you do not, my man will kill your wife.”

The old man lurched forward, grabbing at a letter opener. The Greyhound shoved him back into his chair. "Your wife is alive, doctor. Do you want her to stay that way?"

"Help!" Fishel yelled, his words slurring. "Help me!"

The Greyhound curled back his fingers and rammed the butt of his hand into the doctor's ear. The old man crashed to the desk, grabbing his head and wailing. "Don't kill me!"

"Administer the syringe! Now! I have people watching your son in Malibu and your daughter working at the Cleveland Clinic."

"You're sick," the doctor cried. "You're enjoying this."

"I hate every minute of this, believe me. But I will see your wife die if you don't plunge that needle into your arm right now."

The doctor sniffled. "Okay." He picked up the syringe and stared at it.

"Do it."

Dr. Fishel placed the wavering tip of the needle near the crease of his forearm, sliding it along a raised blue vein. The skin depressed for a moment until the needle penetrated the skin, then he pressed the plunger.

He winced as the fluids entered his system.

The Greyhound took the syringe and slipped it into the pocket of his coveralls. "Now, up. To the treadmill, doctor."

Perplexed, the old man rose and slowly went to the treadmill.

The Greyhound followed, his pain and nausea subsiding. He reached over to switch on the machine and pressed a button on the keypad. The console beeped, and the dark gray vinyl tread rolled backwards.

"Get on."

The doctor's trembling hands grasped the rails. He climbed on the exercise machine and eased one foot onto the moving tread. As it went backwards, he stepped forward with his other foot and started walking.

"Now, I need you to take this respirator gage and put it into your mouth." The Greyhound held an opaque hose and mouthpiece up. They were standard equipment in stress tests, as the doctor well knew. The Greyhound held out a heart rate finger monitor to the doctor, keeping the readout in his hand.

As he put the equipment on, the old man shivered violently. The Greyhound retrieved the cell phone and placed it on the treadmill's console, shoving aside a yellowed magazine. The streaming video continued to display his wife.

Brandishing the gun, The Greyhound gestured to the screen. "Here's where we are. Your wife is alive and well. All you have to do is stay on this treadmill and keep moving until I say stop. This won't take long." He reached across the doctor and pressed the "up" arrow. The treadmill increased its speed. "If you stop, she dies. If I stop talking, or if I don't get what I want quickly, my friend on the other end does his job."

The doctor wheezed into the respiratory gage, his brow brimming with sweat and his hands shaking.

The heart rate monitor read 120.

"Keep going."

Fishel gasped, rubbing his chest.

"That's the Synthroid you injected. Keep going."



Sweat formed on the fat old man's face. The synthetic metabolism hormone was overloading his system. But at his age, a dead guy on a treadmill wouldn't even get an autopsy.

Moisture stains appeared on the doctor's shirt collar and under his arm pits. His abductor kept his eyes on the readout. "It hurts, I know."

The doctor groaned, grabbing his chest.

"Keep that hose in your mouth, doctor." The Greyhound raised the gun. "And stay on that treadmill." He pushed the "up" button again.

The doctors' eyes grew wide. His pace became unsteady, wobbling as he walked. He hunched forward, clutching the rails of the exercise machine.

The Greyhound pulled a stun gun from his coveralls pocket. Lifting it in front of the doctor's face, he pressed the button that sent a two-inch lightning flash across the electrodes on the tip. "Faster, doctor." He reached over and pressed the "up" button again.

The old man wobbled and bounced on the treadmill, wheezing and moaning through the tube as the video of his wife's meeting ended and the camera holder followed her into the parking lot.

The Greyhound viewed the heart rate monitor. It spiked to over 200. The doctor wheezed and gasped, leaning on the railings of the treadmill. His eyes widened. The hose fell out of his mouth. A long string of saliva dropped onto his shirt. "You—you're . . . an animal."

Gritting his teeth, The Greyhound scowled at the old man. "Would you have ever stopped if I didn't do this? If that makes me an animal in your eyes, I wear the label proudly. This has to be done, and not to gain the respect of someone like you." He jabbed his chest with a finger. "I didn't decide my ambitions were more important than other peoples' lives. Not like you. I'd never do that. Not for all the money in the world."

Fishel leaned on the rail, his feet moving but his face gray. The readout jumped to over 200 again.

"Keep going." The Greyhound picked up the streaming phone and gathered the rest of his things. "It's almost over."

The old man gagged and fell sideways into the railing, his arms flailing. He threw his head back and clutched his chest, sliding down onto the treadmill and collapsing. The tread pushed him backwards until his body came to a rest on the office floor, only his head remaining on the dark gray vinyl. His jaw hung open and his eyes stared outward at nothing, the tread churning against his cheek. Blood tricked from his nostrils, but otherwise he was still.

The monitor read zero.

Sagging into the wall, The Greyhound lifted the phone to his mouth and blinked tears from his eyes. His voice fell to a whisper. "It's done."





CENTENNIAL PARK BRIMMED with giant, twinkling Christmas trees and hordes of holiday revelers. Ice skaters glided over the temporary rink, and vendors plied everything from hot chocolate to snow globes. Holiday music filled the air. With Lanaya at his side, DeShear eyed the wide spans of grass beyond the paved pavilions. He raced toward the park, each breath throwing a puff of white in front of them.

“I can’t run anymore.” Lanaya gasped. “Where are we going?”

DeShear slowed to a walk. “I’m sorry. I’m a runner. I forget other people can’t keep up sometimes.”

She shivered and rubbed her arms, glancing over her shoulder. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Good. Let’s hope it stays that way.” DeShear slipped out of his suit jacket and put it around her shoulders. “We might be able to get a souvenir sweatshirt over there.” He pointed to the little vendor kiosks clustered near the ice rink. “But we can probably find a café that’s open down the street, and get you out of the cold. Either way, it’s best for us to be somewhere public right now.”

They walked past a police officer on horseback near the park entrance. Inside, several teenagers with hockey sticks sent an old sneaker back and forth over the ice. Several extra sticks rested against the wall.

A “hot coffee” sign flashed from the vendor on the other side of the rink.

“That sounds good,” Lanaya said. “Buy you a cup?”

“Sure.” DeShear tucked his hands under his arms and followed her to the kiosk.

She pulled the jacket close around her. “Why don’t we take a cab out to the suburbs? I’m not crazy about downtown Atlanta right now, and I’m sure we can find a Starbucks or coffee shop there.”

“I bet there’s a MARTA hub near here.” He glanced up and down the adjacent street. “Train stations have security cameras, so our friends from the hotel won’t try anything if they spot us. Plus, it’ll be warm.”

Lanaya ordered two coffees from the man in the wooden window and handed him a twenty-dollar bill.

“Can we grab the train around here?” DeShear asked the vendor.

“About two blocks that way.” The man pointed toward a big intersection, then handed Lanaya her change.

They stepped to the side to wait for their order. Two picnic tables and an overflowing trash can stood behind the kiosk, under some pine trees.

“Okay,” DeShear said. “Now we have to figure out our next move.”

“I have that already. Minnesota.”

“But our little chat got interrupted.” DeShear cupped his hands to his face and blew warm air through his fingers. “You know why these doctors and scientists are being murdered, and by who. You seem to know who’s next. What am I missing?”

She shivered. “Let’s talk about this at the train station.”

“No, let’s talk here. Things have gotten awful dicey since I met you. I might be able to help us both stay alive if I know what you know.”

“But it’s freezing out here.”

“Then talk fast.”

Lanaya rubbed her hands together, then shoved them into the suit coat pockets. Over the speakers, *Silent Night* played. She stared at one of the sparkling Christmas trees. “If I tell you everything—what I know and what I think—you’ll say I’m crazy. Where do I start?”

“Start with the dead bodies we already know about.”

“Well,” she said. “The first several murders happened over a few years. The next six took place over six months. Now he’s killed three in three weeks—that I know of. It could be more. I don’t have all the names.”

“Why’s the pace getting faster?”

“I believe he’s running out of time. He’s from the third group, the Gamma caste. He’s taken out a lot of the top players from Angelus Genetics and Onyx Research—partners, senior management, project leaders. It’s becoming more and more difficult to get information off the black screen site. People always posted rumors and speculation about their projects, but now threads are being deleted out of rampant paranoia, and new posts aren’t appearing anymore. I get bits and pieces at best. Innuendo. Guesses. But occasionally someone posts a legit tip for a while. Like the newspaper clippings I showed you.”

“Or the employee roster.”

“Correct.”

“And no one, no authorities are looking for a connection between so many prominent scientists dying in a short time period?”

“They were spread out. It’s hard for people to see beyond what’s in plain sight. An old man’s traffic accident this week in Tampa doesn’t tie neatly to a forty-five year old woman’s accidental drowning last month in Missouri, especially when her resume doesn’t mention she worked at Onyx Research a dozen years ago. These jobs were kept quiet. When people left, they were threatened with nondisclosure lawsuits. Most don’t put it on their resume at all.”

“Ma’am, your order’s up,” the vendor called out. “Two coffees.”

DeShear went to retrieve them. “Well, your guy’s not running out of time based on anything I’ve done. I just found out about him. And it looks like he’s got help now.”

At the painted wooden board that served as the coffee kiosk’s condiment table, Lanaya poured cream and sugar into her steaming coffee. DeShear left his black, cradling it with both hands to warm his fingers.

“If they’re all Gammas, then they all have the same problem.” Lanaya picked up a soda straw and stirred her coffee. “There’s no assurance of that, but they’d all be driven by the same motive. The top brass at Onyx may not even be aware of what’s happening, or they concluded they could wait them out. I suppose if you’re wealthy enough, when a problem comes to your attention but you know it will go away in a few years, you might try that option. And it worked until the problem tracked them down.” She blew on her coffee, sending a little steam cloud into the air.

“But why would the killer—or killers—be limited on time?” DeShear frowned. “What keeps them from tracking down folks from Angelus and Onyx over the ten years or however long it takes?”

“The subgroup I worked on had an eighty-percent fail rate at the peak median point, once the Gamma sequence had commenced. The corporate high-ups are playing the odds.”

“Okay, now say it in English.”

“I worked in genetic sciences, Hamilton. DNA selection. People denigrate my field with phrases like designer babies, but this is more than pre-selecting a child to have blue eyes or an athletic build. We were developing ways to find and advance genes that were completely devoid of the most

common-occurring natural fatalities in human life. And it was applied science. But . . . there are down sides.”

She shuffled to the picnic table and stared into the shadows of the trees. “For every successful group of embryos whose DNA we altered to grow up and never get cancer, we had groups that failed. Rumor had it that the vast majority were terminus pre-utero, but not all. That was okay, we told ourselves. We could terminate any errant viables.” She turned to look into his eyes. “It was a gray area, but most of us felt we could rationalize taking that step with an embryo that couldn’t function without a host. Those who didn’t agree, left. But I think once a decision like that gets made, it’s easier for the top brass to make the next one. We heard that a huge opportunity opened up with organ harvesting. We had viables that weren’t cancer resistant, but we could grow their stem cells into whatever was needed. Again, tricky choice, but you could see how some scientists . . . the results could help a lot of people. Then, we heard some new ideas came in.” She circled the table, waving her hand. “You see, you’d work on the middle of a project that didn’t seem to make sense, but as long as the results were there, it moved forward. You didn’t know what its goal was, but from your end it looked like testing. That’s where the people on the black screen site could connect the dots. We weren’t compartmentalized there. We thought we could figure out what was happening.”

“Which was what?” DeShear set down his coffee on the picnic table and leaned on the side of the wooden kiosk.

Lanaya looked down, lowering her voice. “We heard someone at the top of Angelus Genetics realized it was far cheaper to allow the errant viables to continue than it was to attempt to grow mass volumes of healthy organ tissue from stem cells. Makes sense, from a numbers standpoint. The stem cell curation process alone would cost billions. They already had the embryos, so it would be easy enough for someone to take the next step. What did it matter if a viable was terminus at stage nine or stage nineteen, or stage three hundred and fifty four, it was always going to be selected for terminus.”

She swallowed hard. These were difficult confessions.

“So, we think they did it.” She shrugged. “That’s the rumor. They allowed the errant viables to develop—to grow up. Many of the resulting children would have severe deformities, or nonfunctioning higher brain functions—it’s much easier to choose a good gene to move forward with than to find the dozens of bad genes you want to leave behind—but if the children’s organs worked perfectly fine, then . . . I mean, if that’s true—if they used my research to . . .” She wiped a tear from her cheek, staring at the sky. “The world can be a cruel place. There were black screen rumors that errant viables were being sold. Some went to black market orphanages. Others, to the drug trade to serve as slaves, or to human traffickers. Media in other countries isn’t like what we have here in the States. With the facility in Indonesia, the news was more controlled, so negative information couldn’t get out. The politicians were in on it. We heard Onyx connected with a Cambodian human trafficking ring. The money poured in, all washed through a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a subsidiary, so the people at the top could claim they didn’t know—but they’d have to know.” She narrowed her eyes. “No executive makes that kind of revenue without knowing the source of every dollar.”

DeShear folded his arms. “You were involved in that?”

“I most certainly was not. They used information from employees like me to advance the programs, but we were kept in the dark. But if it’s true, it has to be stopped. Enough odd things have already happened to think this is possible. Double Omega’s death seemed far more nefarious based on what I’d learned, and I certainly didn’t think it was a mere suicide anymore. When I got the information about the other murders, I was scared. I decided to leave the company quietly, and not

raise any eyebrows while I got my ducks in a row. Possibly, find others to help, or who knew more. If anyone caught wind of what was happening before we pieced it all together . . .”

“If you can stay alive long enough.” He nodded. “Yeah, that’s a little more than a missing persons case.”

“Dying became a real possibility, but if the rumors are true, Angelus Genetics must be stopped. I’m sorry I deceived you, but I have to be careful about what I divulge. Many have already gone underground, which makes it difficult to know who’s still alive. Some have changed their names, or acquired different identities.”

“Like Lanaya Kim? Her name wasn’t on your airplane ticket. Or the hotel bill. Akina Cho flew on Delta Airlines and Dara Han checked into the Peachtree Plaza hotel.”

She held her hands out. “Does it matter? Would you divulge your name to a stranger in this circumstance?”

DeShear took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “No. And the killer we’re after, he got screwed by the company—so now he’s a psycho bent on revenge?”

“No, no. He didn’t get screwed by the company—he was born there. He’s an illegally produced, genetically altered human embryo. He’s part of a gene selection process that was made illegal decades ago in this country and in many others. And at the median age of fifty-five, over 80% of the viables that didn’t die post-vitro, die from overwhelming organ failure within ten months of detecting the start of the sequence. Just as we grow our organs in nine months as babies, the Gammas have a life curve that causes organ depletion. If normal humans lived to be two hundred years old, at some point the brain would naturally fall to dementia, the kidneys would suffer renal failure—all human organs wear out if the host lives long enough. With Gammas, that’s at a median age of fifty-five. If they’d have left his genes alone, he’d live to be a median age of eighty-five or older, like any normal person.”

“I can see how somebody might have a problem with that.”

“That and the other horrendous things the company may be engaged in. He obviously is taking measures to see that it stops. But he may have a limited time if the Gamma sequence has already commenced. Simply put, I believe the killer is dying, and he intends to kill the people responsible before he does.”

DeShear studied her face. “From what you’ve said about Angelus Genetics, I’m not sure he should be stopped.”

She set down her coffee and tucked her hands under her arms. “For the most part, he’s going right down the list I copied, with few deviations—probably people he can’t find. But the list doesn’t distinguish between people who were in a position to know what was going on, and people who weren’t. The executives and board members had to know about the horrendous activities, but the list has project managers on it—people who were compartmentalized, and who had no idea what the data was used for. People like me.” She lifted her head to bring her gaze to his. Her eyes brimmed with tears. “I don’t know how to contact them without potentially exposing myself, and what if some of them are working with him? It’s just—he doesn’t realize there are innocent people on that list.”

“Or he doesn’t care.”

She sniffled. “Oh, I think plenty of people would view him as highly righteous. He merely doesn’t have all the facts—and he doesn’t have the time left to get them.”

“Dara!” A man’s voice broke through the still, frosty air. “Dara Han!”

Lanaya glanced at the stranger. He stood next to a woman in a red leather jacket, just past the mounted police officer near the park entrance. The man waved a hand and ran toward them, putting

his hands in his pockets.

DeShear bolted upright. "Does anyone know you're here?"

"No, I—"

"Get down!"

The man pulled a gun from his pocket and fired. The bullet whizzed past DeShear's head and *piffed* through the pine tree branches, sending a cascade of twigs down on him. He grabbed Lanaya and pulled her behind the coffee kiosk. Screams went up from the tourists gathered around the park. People ran in all directions.

The assassin ran toward the kiosk, firing his gun repeatedly. A tree branch exploded behind DeShear. In front of him, a woman running with a shopping bag whipped her head backwards and dropped to the ground. The next shot pinged off the condiment table. The next hit a man who ran in front of DeShear.

The mounted police officer turned his horse and galloped after the crazed stranger. The woman in the red leather jacket grabbed a hockey stick and swung it at the officer as he came by. It broke over his chest, sending him backwards off the horse.

She chased it down and grabbed the pommel, flinging her leg over the saddle. Righting herself, she grabbed the reins. With a thrust from her heels, the horse drew up and raced forward toward Lanaya and DeShear.

The woman pulled a gun from her pocket, pointing it in Lanaya's direction.

"We're trapped!" Lanaya shouted.

"Stay behind me." DeShear peeked out from behind the kiosk and took the gun from his belt. He held the gun with both hands, lifting it near his face. The wooden corner of the coffee hut burst into splinters as another shot went past. Flinching, DeShear ducked back behind the corner and dropped to one knee, taking a deep breath.

Bullets ricocheted around them. Tourists screamed as they ran from the gunman.

Sliding his finger onto the trigger, DeShear swung himself around the corner and scanned his field of view. He leveled the weapon at the coming stranger, waiting for a clean shot. Running shadows crossed before his eyes.

As the man waded through the scattering crowd, DeShear squeezed the trigger. The shot caught the man's shoulder and pulled him backwards. He shook it off and raised his gun again.

DeShear stood and advanced. "Everyone, down, down, down!" The gun firmly between his hands, he stared down the barrel at the attacker and fired three quick shots. Three red puffs burst from the assassin's torso. The man sagged and fell face first into the ground.

Pivoting to the horse, DeShear fired again. The first shot missed the racing rider.

She aimed her gun at him. Flash after flash came from the muzzle. She was thirty feet away, then twenty. Her shots soared past him.

As the galloping horse drew near, DeShear ran forward into its path and dived into the grass. The horse leaped over him, unbalancing its rider. DeShear rolled onto his back and pointed his gun at her, firing.

She slumped forward and slid from the saddle. Tipping sideways, her body went limp and hit the ground, one foot still caught in the stirrup. The horse kicked and bucked, turning in a circle as it dragged her.

A pedestrian raced forward and grabbed the reins, calming the horse. DeShear sprinted back to the coffee kiosk. Lanaya stood there, her knees shaking and her mouth hanging open.

He put his arms on her shoulders and pulled her to his chest. "You did good."

She nodded. Her mouth moved but no words came out.

Taking her by the hand, he moved toward the shadows of the trees. "You can thank me later. It's time to go."







MARK HARRIMAN RESISTED the strong urge to shove the mountain of paperwork off the desk and into the trash can next to it. His eyes were red and sore from staring at a computer screen, and his back ached from slouching over its keyboard.

As the assistant duty officer approached, he leaned back in the chair and groaned. “Jayda, no.”

She shrugged, placing another set of reports on top of the pile. “Sorry, friend. You told the lieutenant you’d do them all. This is ‘them all’.”

He shook his head and reached for the new stack of reports. “Next time, tell me to keep my mouth shut.”

“Next time, ask me first.” Jayda strolled back to the elevator.

He groaned, flipping through the papers. “This would go a lot faster if these guys learned to spell.”

The phone console beeped. “Mark, are you still at Detective Sanderson’s desk?”

“Yep,” he replied to the speaker phone. “Whatcha got?”

“The fire inspector is on line eleven.”

“Thank you.” He waited for the speaker to cut off and lifted the phone from its cradle, pressing the flashing button. “Officer Harriman speaking.”

“Hey, Mark. It’s Dyson Spinks. We’re filing our PFR and you said you wanted what we had so far on the DeShear fire.”

“Yeah, thanks, Dyson. I appreciate it. How’s it look?”

“It’s definitely arson. We found accelerant everywhere. Gasoline, looks like, but we’ll know for sure tomorrow. And the swimming pool camera caught some images of a suspicious character lurking around the building right before it went up.”

Harriman rocked back in the chair. “Wow, that’s good work. Your gang is rocking it. I’ll let Hank know to keep his eyes open.”

“Well, that’s the thing. A neighbor of his was home sick with the flu all week. Said she saw our person of interest go into the apartment, alone, right before the place went up in flames.”

“The flu?” Harriman frowned. “What, was she spying on him from the toilet?”

“There’s different kinds of influenza. There’s the diarrhea kind and the upper respiratory kind. She had the cough. It’s going around. I had it a while back, and—”

“Anyway . . .”

“Uh, anyway, she knew DeShear from saying hi at the mailbox and the pool, so she noticed when it wasn’t him going into the place that day. She didn’t think anything of it at the time, except that normally no one would be going up there alone without DeShear. After the place went up in smoke, she thought it was suspicious. She gave a statement to our investigator, but it’s not much more than that.”

“Can you send me the images from the pool camera?”

“Yep. And Mark, there’s one more thing. The boss doesn’t like it—DeShear’s place burning and him suddenly out of town and not returning calls.”

Shaking his head, Harriman leaned forward in the chair. “Hank’s no arsonist.”

“Hey, stranger things have happened. The manager said he’d been slow with the rent a few times lately. He hasn’t paid for December yet, and it’s a week until Christmas. His credit report said his

insurance on the place lapsed, so we called the insurance company to verify. Guess what? The premium got paid the morning of the fire.”

Harriman winced. “Okay, the guy was having a bad stretch. Every time he makes a buck, that butt wad Tullenstein hauls him back into court and takes it. That doesn’t mean he torched his apartment.”

“All I’m saying is, lots of people get in a tough spot and want a clean slate. They figure an insurance check will buy them a new life. It’d be nice if DeShear would talk to us. A guy going away the same day his home burns to the ground, and then not returning calls—that doesn’t look good.”

Harriman sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

“He’s your friend. Give him a call.”

“I’m on it.” Grabbing a pen from the desk, Harriman scribbled a note on the pad. “Can you send me the video from the pool camera?”

“Sure. The hedges hide most of it, but we separated a few still images that look pretty clean. We’ll use those in the morning to get the neighbor to verify it’s who she saw. I’ll email them.”

“Thanks, buddy.” He tossed the pen onto the desk and rubbed his eyes.

“And Mark . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Have DeShear call us. Like yesterday. The longer this stays unresolved, the worse it looks.”

• • • •

THE NEARLY-EMPTY VENDING machines at the MARTA station provided their last bag of stale Fritos and some questionable-looking cupcakes to DeShear and his companion. He handed her the bag of chips and viewed the lobby. “At least it’s warm in here.”

Lanaya opened the Fritos and sniffed, scrunching up her nose.

DeShear took a bite of a cupcake, stopping midway through. “These are no better.” He tossed the package into a trash can.

With a huff, Lanaya sat down on a bench, shoving her hands into the suitcoat pockets.

DeShear paced back and forth across the unswept lobby. “If they’d shoot at us there, in a public place—with a cop present—they’re . . . well, they . . . I don’t know.” He put a foot on the bench and leaned forward, folding his arms over his knee. “What I wonder is, are these guys two steps ahead of us or are they tracking us somehow?”

Lanaya withdrew her hand from the suitcoat pocket. She held up a cell phone.

“Oh, crap,” DeShear said. “I thought I left that in the hotel room.” He took it and mashed the home button. “I put it on airplane mode for the flight, and didn’t remember to take it off.”

“They may have been able to track us using that.” Lanaya hunched her shoulders. “It won’t receive signals in airplane mode, but it’ll still ping cell phone towers and give your location.”

“Great. Sorry, I didn’t know. So I can’t use my phone, and we left all your stuff back at the hotel, your computer and—”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about that. My computer is encrypted and set up to not keep histories. The phone was a new disposable. They won’t get anything.”

“Good. What about the keys to your many secret airport lockers and the fake IDs? Those might be in the hands of our gun-happy friends now.”

“I doubt it. I tossed my purse and the keys in the hotel room safe when we got there. Until they get a hold of a daytime manager, they won’t be able to get into that safe—and even then they’re probably going to need the person registered to the room to do it.” She looked at him, raising her eyebrows. “Unless they’re law enforcement.”

“Nah. Not these guys.” He stood up and paced again. “The way they were shooting, they had zero clue how to handle a gun. There’s no—hey, that’s something.” He stopped and rubbed his chin. “Yeah, they’re amateurs. Even rookie cops wouldn’t fire into a crowd like that—there’s no chance of hitting your target. These clowns shot like they were in an arcade. That means they aren’t law enforcement or former military. They’re, like . . . well, like you. They’ve seen guns on TV, but they don’t know how to use them.”

“And that’s a benefit how?” Lanaya threw her hands up. “You said we’d be safe in the open, then the OK Corral happened!”

“It means they won’t use coordinated attacks or ambush planning. We can outsmart them. Plus, after that crazy melee in the park, there’ll be Atlanta police all over the place.” He frowned. “Which means the cops will be after us, since we were shooting, too.”

“It was self-defense,” Lanaya said. “They shot at us first.”

“Yeah, and that will all get sorted out eventually.” DeShear rubbed his chin again. “But not before we’re sitting in a holding cell—and *then* if they have any law enforcement help, we’ll be sitting ducks.” He looked at one of the substation security cameras. “We need to get on the move. Now.” He headed for the exit.

“Yes,” Lanaya said, jumping up. “To Minnesota.”

Stopping at the exit, he turned and waited. “Minnesota will require an airport. Airports have cops. Besides, we’re linked now. Booking me an airline ticket is almost the same as booking you one, so they’d be able to track us. You don’t have an ID anyway now—do you?”

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a driver’s license. “Lanaya can still fly. And I have some money stashed in a locker at the American Airlines terminal. One with a keypad. There’s enough for two tickets to Minnesota.”

“You are something else.” DeShear grinned, pushing open the door. “Well, anywhere but here is a good idea right now. But no trains and no buses until we’re at the airport—and then we get the first flight to anywhere. We can’t afford to get picked up in the airport while we’re sitting around waiting for a flight.”

She pointed to his cell phone as she breezed past him to step into the cold night air. “Call a cab. They don’t have security cameras, and we can hire one to take us a hundred miles if we need to.”

• • • •

DURING THE WAIT FOR the cab, DeShear checked his voicemail messages. One was from Mark Harriman. The toxicology report had come back positive for Propofol in Dr. Braunheiser.

There were standard, post-accident messages from his insurance company; he skipped over those to see what else was pressing. The fire inspector had called several times. Not surprising after an arson, but since DeShear was on the run, the folks at TFD could work things out for themselves for a while.

The last message was another from Harriman. The fire investigators had pictures of a person of interest, seen outside DeShear’s place right before the fire. Harriman would email it. And without directly saying so, apparently TFD as much as implied DeShear may have been working with the person to burn the place down.

*Fair enough. I’d have thought the same thing.*

He opened his email and waited as dozens of messages tried to load, but didn’t. The signal wasn’t strong enough outside the substation. He tucked his free hand under his other arm and shuddered against the cold.

A cab approached from the other side of the street, slowing to make a U-turn. DeShear walked to the curb and waved.

The driver didn't speak much English, but that was an advantage for the moment.

DeShear's phone might divulge that he'd called for a ride—if anyone was tracking him online—and maybe even where they were headed, but he figured powering down his phone would stop them from keeping on his trail through the use of cell towers. Then online trackers wouldn't know if he'd changed destinations or taken a detour after boarding the vehicle.

He opened the rear passenger door for Lanaya.

The wind whipped her hair into her face. "Are you sitting in front?"

"No, I thought we might both sit in back. So we can strategize."

"Oh. Very good." She climbed in. DeShear followed. The burst of air from the car's heater was a welcome relief. He rubbed his hands together and leaned back into the soft, warm seat cushions.

The driver had been instructed to take them to the airport, but Lanaya's earlier comment had some merit. Driving a hundred miles would deliver them halfway to the Florida-Georgia border, far away from the current troubles in Centennial Park and the Greater Atlanta police.

*The cab driver could call in a change of plans and take us to a rest stop, and we could hire a second cab to take us into Florida. From there . . . well, who knows, but at least we wouldn't be on anybody's radar screen, and that might keep people looking for us in Atlanta while we got to, say, Jacksonville—and took a plane to Minnesota . . .*

Except he didn't have a fake ID. If he used his real one, they'd be tracking him again.

*Crap.*

He sat back, sighing, and closed his eyes. The heat in the cab was nice on his feet and hands.

Opening one eye, he glanced at Lanaya-Dara. "What's in Minnesota?"

"Don't you mean who? I told you, there were two people from Onyx who now worked together in Minnesota."

"You and your husband?"

The headlights from an approaching vehicle illuminated her face. She was tired, but held her chin high. The car passed, sending the cab back into darkness. The only light was the green glow of the dashboard gauges.

DeShear's voice was soft. "It's the only place I've really seen you get excited about, so it had to be."

"Very good, Hamilton. My daughter and two sons are there, too. At a safe location. Not our house."

"Good."

It was a big admission, saying the kids were there. It showed trust, but it showed there was more at stake than just her own well-being.

DeShear rolled his shoulders and stretched his back, easing into the seat cushion. "I gotta admit, I feel a little silly about calling you the wrong name this whole time."

She shrugged. "Couldn't be helped. My sister Tinara went by different names. To our mother, she was 'Yeon-in'—Sweetie, in American English—but always Tinara to my father. My brothers and sisters and I called her Tia, as did her grade school classmates. High school friends called her Tina, and in college, she was Tinara again. When someone walked up and said hi to her, the name they used told us where they knew her from. That's where I got the idea of using different names on each missing persons case."

"How many people are you involved with?"

“No, I’m the missing person in each case. Dara Han might be looking for Lanaya Kim. In a different city, Akina Cho has hired a law firm to look into the wrongful death of Kiri Jiang.”

“Sounds like a CIA operation.” DeShear chuckled. “Let me guess. Lanaya flies to Tampa, but Akina checks into the hotel room and pays cash. Then Kiri flies to Atlanta. I like it. The killers can’t figure out where you are very quickly.”

“And different people would know me under different names, so . . .”

“So you’d know who to trust.” DeShear nodded. “I get it. Okay, then. You can still be Lanaya.”

She smiled. “How very generous of you.”

“You know,” he turned to her. “I was thinking. We can change cabs and get to a different airport, then head back to Tampa. Apparently I have some things to clear up there, but I might be able to call in a favor, too. If you think your family is safe—”

“They’re as safe as I could get them, but who knows for how long? My husband and I are on a short list that keeps getting shorter. If time is tight for the killer, two targets in one place would be very appealing. That’s where you come in. As a private detective and former police officer, you know how to set up stakeouts. We could even set up a ruse with the police—a break in or domestic dispute of some sort, possibly a stalker—anything that would get them involved and watching, so as soon as he showed, we’d have him. He might even know if any of the big rumors about Angelus are true, too.”

“It’s a good plan, but it could take a while,” DeShear said. “What if we crank it up a few levels?”

“What do you mean?”

“Our guy originally kept the murders quiet because publicity would cause people to eventually link the murders and take the fight to him. He couldn’t have that because he wanted to keep eliminating the people on the list. But after what happened in the park, that’s probably done. And if he only has a short while to live, that strategy doesn’t work anymore, anyway. But if he knew there was a gathering of all the high-level mucky mucks from the company that gave him an early death sentence, I would think that would prove too tempting to resist.”

“But I told you, they live all over the place. What would cause such a thing to happen?”

He leaned forward, tapping the seat with a finger. “You indicated that most of the top executives were motivated by money.”

“Most, but not all.”

“And Angelus Genetics is an American company?”

“Yes, but the work now takes place in subsidiaries located all over the world.”

Folding his arms, he sat back. “Doesn’t matter. Nothing will get an American company’s entire executive staff on a plane faster than the stock price falling, and nothing will make a stock fall faster than classifying its major investments and subsidiaries. You raise a stink with the IRS and cry for an audit, and the big wigs will come running to defend their numbers and keep everything quiet. They’ll all be in the same place at the same time, guaranteed.”

“Classifying?”

“It’s an accounting term. It means declaring the investments as crap. I learned it from my ex-wife, Camilla. She worked her way up at one of the big accounting firms. Now she’s a bureau chief with the IRS.” DeShear grinned. “Trust me, between your inside information and what happened in Centennial Park, the IRS will be conducting a severe rectal probe on Angelus Genetics in twenty-four hours. And as a bureau chief, Cammy can get us on the audit team.”

“Sounds intriguing.” She smiled. “I think Lanaya should rent a car at the airport so we can drive to Tampa tonight.”



• • • •

THE MAN STOOD ACROSS the street from Centennial Park. Christmas trees lined the grassy perimeter; police cars and ambulances lined the street. Victims covered by blood-stained sheets lay silent through the park while holiday music serenaded them from the public address system.

Frowning, the man pulled a phone from his pocket. He tapped the screen and held it to his ear. “This is your bird dog. Just letting you know, I’m out.”

“What! Why?”

He moved away from the gathering crowds and news van lights. “You said this was an eyes-on operation to follow a scientist. Well, she’s got a friend. After the two of them put your room service clown into a coma and sent me on an elevator ride, they went a few blocks down the street and took out your operatives in the park.”

“I told you, things can change on the fly.”

“And I told you, I’ve already seen the inside of a federal penitentiary. I don’t care to see another one. It’s amateur hour out here, and I’m done.”

“I can get you more money,” the man on the other end of the line growled. “How much? Name your price.”

“Lose my number.” The man ended the call and put the phone in his pocket, walking away from the park entrance and heading back toward the Peachtree Plaza hotel.

• • • •

“BUT YOU SAY AIRPORT!” The cab driver pulled his car into the Dunkin Donuts parking lot. “This, *not* airport.”

“Sorry. Change of plans,” DeShear said, leaning forward. “You can let us out right here.” He turned to Lanaya and lowered his voice. “Do we have enough for a tip?”

She counted out some cash. “Our funds will be nearly depleted after we pay for this little detour, but as long as we get to my locker at the American Airlines terminal, we can do whatever we want.” She handed the cash to the cab driver.

“Okay,” DeShear said. “Let’s go.”

They went inside as the cab drove off. DeShear chose a quiet booth in the back, away from the counter and employees. When Lanaya was seated, he leaned across the table and placed his phone in front of her. “Call another cab,” he whispered. “Take it to the American terminal, get your traveling money, and rent a car. Then come pick me up here.”

He glanced around. An eighteen-wheeler pulled into the massive parking lot of the Flying J gas station next door. “Better yet, pick me up there, at the truck stop.”

She nodded, staring at the phone. “What if . . .”

“If people have seen us together, splitting up makes the job of tracking us harder for them. But I’m a big liability to you right now.” He sat back, tugging at his shirt collar. “I’m wearing the same clothes I had on in the park when I was shooting the place up. If they put my image on TV and I step into a busy airport, it’s game over. My hands are still covered in gunshot residue.”

Lanaya pursed her lips.

“Hey.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “I’m not abandoning you. I kept watch to see if we were being followed on the ride over. We weren’t. In all the video footage anyone might



have, you're wearing my suitcoat. Leave it here. I'll throw it in the dumpster outside. Pull back your hair while you're in the cab. With what you have on, you'll look different enough to get in and out of the airport without raising eyebrows, so you'll be fine—right now. In a few hours, probably not.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “It'll work.”

“Okay.” She forced a smile.

“There we go,” he said. “How much cash do we have left?”

“Eighty-three dollars.”

“Okay. Give me twenty. I'll wait with you here until the cab comes, then I'll go next door and buy some kind of different shirt. Pick me up there. Between the ride to the airport and back, it shouldn't take you more than an hour.” He pressed the home button on the phone to check the time. “One more thing. Don't act nervous. The TSA folks watch for that. They'll stick you in an interview room to make sure you're not a terrorist, and you'll end up creating more questions than you can answer.”

“I know. *I have* been in an airport before.”

DeShear shifted on his seat. “Oh, I didn't mean to—”

“It's just—it's all suddenly gotten a lot more real.”

“Yeah. Bullets flying at you will do that.”

Lanaya's hands were shaking again. She stared at the Flying J parking lot. “What if I come back and you're not here?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Then they got me—and you head to Minnesota. From there, you call Mark Harriman and you tell him everything. All of it. Don't hold anything back.”

She swallowed hard, her voice wavering. “And if I'm not back in an hour?”

He picked up the phone and put it in her hand. “Then I will come find you. And whoever's in my way will pay a steep price.”

• • • •

DESHEAR WAITED AT THE booth while Lanaya climbed into her cab. As they pulled away, she saw him get up and head for the restaurant exit. They drove past the Flying J, its extra-long parking spots accommodating the many tractor trailer trucks of its clientele. Many would gas up and continue on; others would spend the night.

*Sleep. What a nice luxury.*

Remembering what DeShear told her, she gathered up her hair. “Do you have a rubber band?” she asked the cab driver.

He held up a plastic box of miscellaneous items—pens and paper clips, a butane lighter. Digging through it, she found a hair tie with two big beads on it. She held it up to the light. The platinum-haired super hero Storm adorned one bead; her alter ego, Ororo Munroe, smiled from the other.

Lanaya smiled back. “Warm it up a little around here, would you?”

The cab driver glimpsed Lanaya in the rearview mirror. “What, ma'am?”

“Nothing. Sorry.” She slipped the tie around her ponytail.

At the airport, she had the cab stop near the end of the departures area. Traffic was light, but there were still plenty of cars coming in and out. She put her hand on the car door latch. The cab suddenly felt very secure.

*TSA watches for nervous people in the airport. Act calm.*

She wiped her sweaty hand on her leg, then put it back on the latch.

*Here goes nothing.*

She opened the car door. A gust of icy wind rushed over her cheeks and hands, making her flinch. She exited the vehicle and walked toward the nearest entrance, hunching her shoulders against the cold. Her steps were awkward and stiff, like she'd forgotten how to walk and was trying to remember. Keeping her face to the ground, she entered the building.

She tried to walk fast without appearing to do so, but the trek to the American terminal seemed endless. She only peeked up to maintain her bearings, convinced that doing otherwise would bring forth swarms of gun-toting assailants. Her stomach was a knot, barely even taking notice when she passed the ever-aromatic Cinnabon.

As she approached the lockers, she slowed her pace and peered over her shoulder. If the killers had tracked her to DeShear in Tampa and then to Centennial Park, they could be anywhere. Sweat dotted her upper lip. Nobody seemed particularly interested in her activities, though. A maintenance woman pushed a trash cart through the quiet lobby. In a far corner, a man in coveralls guided a spinning floor polisher over the shiny surfaces between the acres of carpets. The distant PA system announced an arriving flight.

Lanaya stared at the rows of lockers and swallowed hard. She crept toward the one she'd rented, stretching a shaking finger out to the keypad.

*Beep, beep, beep.*

With her code entered, the latch released. Holding her breath, she opened the little door.

Inside, her belongings were just as she'd left them. She let out a sigh of relief, her heart settling back into her chest.

She leafed through the backpack holding her money. She'd managed to stash more than enough for a trip to Tampa, but how long would she be gone now? A few days? A week? She glanced around the area. No one was watching her, but there were a lot of variables at play. Take it all? Leave some in case she needed it later?

*Half. Take half.*

With trembling fingers, she pulled several stacks of hundred dollar bills out, tore off the paper band, and jammed the bundles into her pockets. With a shove, the backpack went into the locker and she closed the door.

The blue screen blinked at her.

Her stomach jolted. Money. She needed quarters to get the door locked again. Heat came to her cheeks. She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the wall of lockers. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

She scanned the lobby. A news stand-gift shop was still open. She could leave her belongings in the unsecured locker get to the store and back before anyone noticed. The thought made her stomach churn again. The locker held too much money to leave unattended. But the thought of getting identified halfway across the airport lobby with so much cash on her was equally unsettling.

Her heart throbbed. *Be calm. There's hardly anyone here. Go over, get some gum, and come right back.*

*And what if the locker's empty when you return? Then what? Years of saving, gone—and possibly your life with it.* These lockers had bailed her out of a jam more than once.

But she'd brought it in increments, never wanting too much cash on her at one time, and never fearing someone was on her tail. This was different.

She'd have to risk it. She had to take it all with her to get change.

She reached into the locker and stuffed everything into the backpack, then straightened up and smoothed out her clothes.

*“You’ll look different enough to get in and out of the airport without raising eyebrows. It’ll work.”*

She tucked the backpack under her arm.

The maintenance woman and floor cleaner both remained next to the trash cart, glancing at her as she passed. The radio on the woman’s hip crackled with indistinguishable chatter.

*It’s nothing. They aren’t watching you.*

Her pulse thumping in her ears, she stared at the floor and hurried across the carpet to the news stand.

She entered the shop, trying to control her nerves. Outside, the maintenance woman and the floor cleaner spoke for a moment, then parted ways.

*Focus. The shop has change. Get it and get back to the locker.*

She grabbed a pack of Juicy Fruit and placed it on the counter.

The cashier set down her phone. “Will that be all?”

“Yes. And three dollars in quarters, too, please. Thank you.” Lanaya looked around as the cashier scanned the gum. No one else was in the store.

“Ma’am?”

She looked at the cashier.

“I said, it’s a dollar seventy-three, please. Would you like your receipt?”

“No. Thank you.” Lanaya watched the lobby as she reached into her pocket, handing the woman a bill.

The cashier held it up to the light. Lanaya’s heart skipped a beat. A one-hundred-dollar bill! *What did you do with the twenties?*

The cashier picked up a yellow-colored marker and drew a line on the bill. She frowned, drawing another line. Then another. “Excuse me one moment,” she said, heading to the back of the shop.

“I have another. A smaller—” Lanaya rifled through the backpack, her pulse pounding. Nothing but hundreds.

Panic surged through her system. Lanaya patted her pockets. One was empty. Jamming her hand into the other, she found the money she’d been carrying. She yanked it out. “Here. I have—a twenty.” She slapped it on the counter.

The cashier disappeared through a door at the back of the shop. “It’s no problem. One moment.”

Lanaya’s heart raced again. What was the woman up to? She checked the lobby, holding back the urge to run from the news stand. The maintenance lady was standing in front of the shop now, near the corner of the front display window. Lanaya clutched the backpack to her chest. On the other side of the doorway, the floor cleaner moved his machine back and forth, watching her. She was trapped.

*I can’t run for it. I’ll never get off the airport property, it’s too big. It’s too far. I’ll need a car, but I have to . . .*

Her mind was a blank. A drop of sweat ran down the side of her face.

*. . . do what? What should I do?*

The maintenance woman peered into the shop. Her eyes met Lanaya’s.

Another jolt went through her. *That’s it. They’re coming for me.* She backed away from the counter. *They’re coming.*

Her eyes darted around the shop. *Where does that back door go? Was someone with the cashier, getting ready to pounce?*

Lanaya rubbed the side of her face, panting. *Think. Focus. How can you escape?*

The door opened and the cashier entered the shop again. Lanaya stared at her, trembling, but saying nothing. The woman walked toward the front of the store.

*This is it. She drops the security gate. Run. Run now.*

The woman went to the cash register. "All set." She held up a pen. "My testing marker was out of ink. I'll have your change for you in a second."

Lanaya inched toward the counter. She peeked at the rear door, then to the display window. The maintenance woman wasn't there.

With trembling fingers, she took her change and the red and white plastic shopping bag containing her gum, stepping away from the counter to scan the lobby again.

*Get to the locker, then get to the rental car desk. Fast.*

She hurried across the carpet, looking everywhere she could without raising her head.

*Act natural, act natural, act natural.*

The lockers were only a few feet away. When she reached them, she yanked open the backpack and grabbed several thick wads of bills. She shoved them into the shopping bag, pushed the backpack into the locker and slammed the little door shut, jamming coin after coin into the slot as fast as the machine could take them. She wiped her upper lip with the back of her hand, staring at the machine until the keypad read "Secure."

Turning, she ran a hand across her forehead. The car rental counter next, and out of here. Her ears hummed, a slight headache coming to her.

She moved quickly, her heart racing, walking to the rental counter. The young man there smiled. "Hello. Do you have a reservation?"

"No," Lanaya said, her voice wavering. "I don't have a reservation, but I do need a car."

"Thank you." He typed on the keyboard. "May I get your name and home address?"

As the young man registered her fake ID, Lanaya drummed the countertop.

"Nervous flier?"

"Excuse me?" Lanaya asked.

He pointed to her tapping fingertips.

"Oh." She dropped her hand to her side, shifting her feet. "Very sorry."

He slid a form onto the counter. "Sign here, please. Your car is in spot three-thirty-one. Through the doors and to the right."

"Ma'am." The woman from the shop called out to her.

Lanaya turned, heat rising in her cheeks. The maintenance lady was with the news shop cashier. They came toward her.

Her stomach churned. She grabbed the car key from the counter and headed to the doors.

"Ma'am." The cashier moved faster. "Ma'am!"

"No!" Lanaya screamed. She broke into a run. "No! Get away from me!"

The doors opened and a man in a dark suit came through, pulling a suitcase behind him. Lanaya slammed into him. He broke her fall, dropping his bag and backing up. They both managed to stay on their feet.

She pushed herself away, her heart racing and her ears humming.

"You left this." The cashier handed her a twenty-dollar bill. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"Oh, uh . . ." Lanaya swallowed hard, taking the bill. "The mistake was all mine. I'm very sorry." She turned to the man in the suit. "Please forgive me." She gestured to the clerk at the car rental counter. "I'm a nervous flier. I need to calm down."

The maintenance woman shook her head and reached for her radio.

“You’d better wait a few minutes before you try to drive,” the man said, bending over to pick up his suitcase.

“I will. Thank you. Sorry for the trouble.” Lanaya backed away. “Thank you.”

With the four of them staring at her, Lanaya disappeared through the doors.





WEARING A BLACK UNIVERSITY of Georgia “Bulldogs” sweatshirt and a gray pair of sweatpants he bought at the Flying J, DeShear drove the rental car onto I-75 and headed south. Lanaya had said she was too nervous to drive, and he didn’t question it. She looked frazzled when she finally came to pick him up.

It would be a long drive to Tampa—about 450 miles—but it was critical to get on the road before the inevitable Centennial Park investigation had a chance to review videos from witnesses and security cameras. The authorities would eventually see him on the MARTA substation videos with Lanaya, and then getting the cab, so they’d call the cab company and learn the car was hired to go to the airport.

The airport cameras wouldn’t show him at all, and if Lanaya had gotten in and out of the airport without drawing too much attention to herself, they’d have a decent head start on avoiding a holding cell and doing a lot of explaining.

DeShear checked his speed and set the cruise control at seventy miles per hour. The dashboard GPS said it would still take about eight more hours to get to Tampa. He preferred to drive about ten miles over the speed limit on long drives, to shave a little off the clock, but on this trip, he’d stick to the speed limit. Not getting pulled over was more important than saving a few minutes.

In the passenger seat, Lanaya knitted her hands as she stared out the window.

“What are you thinking about?” DeShear asked.

“Just . . . everything.”

“It’s all a lot to take in,” he said. “So don’t try. Not right now. Let the fog of war pass.”

“I can’t believe how many mistakes I’ve made. I can’t—I can’t focus. It’s very unlike me. Everything since Bayshore Boulevard has been a complete blur.”

“That’s adrenaline. It’s normal. In the army, after a firefight, you’d see soldiers rocket along for a while, almost numb to the intense loss of life happening all around them. Then after they’re safe for a bit, they crash like a ton of bricks. But all sorts of things can happen. Some get nervous and forgetful after the fact. It’s common.”

Her expression stayed the same. *Time to change subjects.*

“We’ll stop in a bit and get something to eat and a change of clothes.” DeShear rubbed the stubble growing on his chin. “A hotel would be nice, but it’s more important to get to Tampa fast, don’t you think?”

Lanaya didn’t seem to hear him. He tried again.

“You said the people who killed Dr. Braunheiser might be running out of time. But the disease—”

“The Gamma sequence.”

“Right, the sequence.” He didn’t necessarily want to make her have this discussion, but she seemed to need to unwind, and talking often did that for people. The subject might not even matter. “Do the killers know what’s involved?”

“Yes, I believe they know.” She folded her hands in front of her and looked at him. There were bags under her eyes. “Angelus intended for them not to interact, but I think the company kept tabs on them somehow. That was the thinking on the black screen site, because we’d see hospital data. Where else could it have come from? They had to be tracking the Gammas. No one else knew. But in doing so, the company may have inadvertently tipped off some of them that they were being observed. In any

case, the ones doing the killings certainly seem to know, and they are understandably concerned. It's an extremely harsh way to die, and for Gammas, there's no avoiding it."

DeShear shook his head. "They're acting like it's worse than death."

"In many ways, it is. It comes on with a harsh, persistent cough. Most people think they're getting the flu or pneumonia, but after a week or so, the symptoms clear up. But this isn't a virus, Hamilton. It resurfaces after about a month, accompanied by migraines and extreme fatigue. Kidney and abdominal pain follow. One by one, all the vital organs of the afflicted shut down. Lungs, liver. There is constant nausea, and symptoms associated with dementia. Some get massive skin sores that won't heal. Everything goes at once."

He placed his elbow on top of the car door while he drove. "There has to be something the doctors can do."

"Most of the people go into the hospital, but about one third don't. The result is the same either way." She sighed. "No team of physicians can rectify every organ failing at once. In an average case, once the sequence has started, the subject spends the next ten months in severe, debilitating pain. And somewhere along the line, they get overwhelmed and can't keep fighting. Only about one in five survive."

"No wonder they're killing the people involved. Can't be fun, knowing that's waiting for you. What is a person supposed to do when they discover they only have a few weeks or months to live? I mean, before the bad stuff starts." He glanced at her. "Have you thought about it?"

"Not recently. I've been pretty focused on trying to stay alive. I suppose I'd get my affairs in order, say my goodbyes. Prepare my children for a future without me." She turned to face DeShear. "What about you?"

"I don't know." He shrugged as he stared at the road. "I don't have any family. No real affairs to get in order. I'd try to enjoy what time I had left, I guess. Go on a cruise."

"Some do that. Many of the afflicted choose to not endure the eight months of pain at all. That's another indication they've found out about the sequence."

"I can understand that, staring at eight months of pain with death waiting at the end." DeShear held the steering wheel and sat up straighter. "There was a cop in my precinct a few years back—got diagnosed with cancer. Young guy, headstrong. He rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. Anyway, the cancer was already bad when they found it, so they told him to start planning. You know, like you said—get your affairs in order." DeShear stared at the highway. "Watching what he went through, week after week, it was hard. We'd visit him in the hospital, me and the guys. Most days he wasn't himself. He was a frail old man all of a sudden, and then he was in a lot of pain. Just nonstop. He was that way for a year, almost. I . . . it was a long year." He glanced at Lanaya. "A lot of people would have found a way to end it and get out of that nonstop pain, you know?"

Lanaya lowered her voice. "Did he pass away?"

"No, the kid was a fighter. He battled back. I'd get off work, I'd be tired or whatever, but I always went to go see him, at least a few times a week, usually more. I had to go. I felt like, if I didn't, he might not be there the next time, and I wanted to be sure he knew . . ." DeShear's voice wavered. "That somebody was still pulling for him. I went to that hospital for almost a whole year, and I never saw that kid give up. And he made it. He's been cancer free for almost ten years now." DeShear sniffled. "Whenever I'm in a tough jam, I think about him fighting death from that hospital bed all alone, with those tubes hanging off of him and all those machines . . . and I know that whatever challenge I'm facing, I can beat it if I just don't quit."



Lanaya reached over and patted his leg. “I’m sure your visits were a great comfort and inspiration to him, Hamilton. Do you still see him since you left the force?”

“Yeah. Harriman and I go to hockey games together when we can.”

“Mark Harriman? No wonder he spoke so highly of you.” She sighed again. “That’s a nice story. I like a story with a happy ending.” She clutched the red and white shopping bag as she stared out the window. “I hope mine has one.”



The hotel suite at the Fairmont *Le Château Frontenac* was littered with tissues stained with blood. The gold-colored trash can in the ornate bedroom overflowed with them, as did the one in the massive bathroom, where a large man stood vomiting in the steamy shower. Just beyond the rumpled bed, a cell phone rang on the nightstand. It vibrated against a box of prescription migraine medicine and an empty bottle of Pepto Bismol.

Coughing, the man wrapped a towel around his wet, muscular torso and grabbed the phone. “Hello?”

“I’m checking in,” the woman on the other end said. “You weren’t answering. I got nervous. Is Maya with you? Or Britt?”

“Not this trip. It’s only me.” He wiped his mouth as he sat on the bed. Blood smeared across the back of his hand. “What do you want?”

“I thought we all agreed you wouldn’t be traveling alone now.”

“I got new information, and it should be a fast trip. I’ll be back in New York tonight. Now—what do you want?”

“Like I said, I’m checking in—like you asked me to.”

“Right.” He rubbed his eyes. “Sorry. I . . . I had a rough night.”

“Aren’t the new drugs from Maya working?”

He glanced at the desk by the window. The top was filled with bottles and syringes. “It’s hard to tell. Transfusions have worked best so far.”

“You’ll have to wait. I don’t know anybody at the hospitals in Quebec, and I can’t just call and ask them to offer the blood and equipment. Transfusions cost a lot of money and they take time.”

“Money, I have. Time is a different matter. Speaking of which.” He lifted the Patek Philippe wristwatch off the night table. “I need to get on the road if I’m going to get all the way up to Saguenay before our target wakes up and gets moving. She’ll be much harder to get once she’s at the lab.” He held the cell phone to his ear with his shoulder as he strapped on the watch.

“Tristan, listen to yourself. You’re pushing too hard. You should rest up.”

“Can’t.” He stood, leaving the towel on the bed and going into the bathroom. “I’m getting weaker every time. The steroids and HGH can only do so much. I have big spans of strength—days and days where I feel great—but they’re getting more spread out, and the crashes are getting worse.” He reached into his shaving bag and picked up a stick of deodorant, swiping it under his arm. “If I can keep mustering a few days here and there for transfusions . . .”

“Do that. Rest up. We got this.”

“You got this?” He frowned. “You completely blew the last assignment. It was a mess.”

“We—”

“I’m not blaming you.” He stared at his reflection, running a hand through his damp hair. “It was a bad idea—my *bad* idea. From here out, I’ll handle it.” Setting the phone on the marble counter, he pressed the speaker button and ran the deodorant under his other arm. “I have an easy target here, then another in Maryland. Then I can get two in Minnesota. That’s four in a week, and I might start letting the word out that they’re connected.”

“How? It’s too risky going to the press. If we expose the others, they’ll be hunted down.”

“I’m not going to the press.”

“Well what, then?”

He peeked at the large gun inside the shaving bag. “Let me worry about that.”

“Yeah,” she huffed. “You’ll handle it—if you don’t pass out in the middle of the next one. You were running on fumes an hour after Tampa.”

“I’ll be fine. The transfusions help a lot.” He picked up the brown plastic medicine bottle from the counter and shook a few pills into his hand, swallowing them without water.

“But it doesn’t have to be *only* you. We can help. I know the last one went wrong, but—”

“You’ve been helping, and I’m grateful. But less blood on the hands of others is better.”

“That’s not realistic.”

“That’s how I want it. Now, I really have to go. I’ll see you in New York.”

She sighed. “Do you ever think we’re wrong about all this? Not in what we’re doing, but how we’re doing it?”

“Every day. And every night before I go to sleep. I wonder if what I’m doing makes me worse than they are.” He crossed the room to the window and stared out from the majestic Fairmont *Le Château Frontenac*, gazing over the lights of the Quebec City skyline. The castle-like hotel towered over the old city. In the distance, the big river rippled and flowed, casting shimmering reflections out from its dark, curving swath.

He swallowed hard, a knot forming in his throat. “But I think about innocent kids suffering and I remember how this started. Then I don’t worry anymore. It has to be done, and this is the only way. And now I know I’m the only one who can do the job.”

“Other greyhounds would probably step up if they were asked. Or if they knew.”

“But I’m not just any greyhound.” He squared his shoulders and stared at his reflection in the glass. “I’m *the* Greyhound. And as long as I’m breathing, the job stays with me.”





DESHEAR'S EYELIDS HAD been getting heavy as he passed by the odorous paper mills and swampy roadside ponds of southern Georgia, but the blue flashing lights in his rearview mirror took any sleepiness out of him. He gripped the steering wheel and glanced at the speedometer. Seventy-one. No way any cop—not even a Georgia highway patrol trooper with a quota—was going to pull someone over in the middle of the night for a measly one mile an hour over the limit.

Lanaya sat with her eyes closed and her head resting against the door, her red and white shopping bag in her hands.

*She finally gets some sleep, and now a state trooper's going to wake her up.*

*But why is he pulling us over?*

It seemed too quick for the Atlanta police to connect all the dots and track them down, but it still wasn't good. If the officer started looking around the inside of the car, he'd find a big bag of cash, a few unregistered guns—who knows how many felonies those were involved in—and he'd haul them in on suspicion. Then, while they were sitting in a holding tank, the authorities would eventually link them to the park shooting and the hotel assault. Sitting in lockup would also make things pretty easy for anybody who wanted to put some bullets in them—just wait for the arraignment, follow them outside to the car, and pop, pop, pop.

It was simply a can of worms DeShear didn't want opened right now. None of that helped protect Lanaya's family or stop the killers.

DeShear flipped on the rental car's emergency flashers and eased the car toward the side of the road. He drummed the wheel as options raced through his mind.

*It can't be about Centennial Park. There hasn't been enough time. The hotel incident wouldn't get attention this far away. It's not feasible that it was related to the killers, and if the killers were connected to the police, they'd have used the cops earlier in the game.*

But it didn't matter. He'd find out soon enough.

"Lanaya, wake up."

She didn't budge.

"Lanaya." He tapped her on the leg. "Hey. We're getting pulled over by the police. Wake up."

That did the trick. She gasped and sat upright, clutching her bag to her chest. "What's going on? And what's that smell?"

"The old paper mill, the Georgia swamps . . . Georgia in general. We have a state trooper pulling us over. Try to act calm, like you did when you went to the airport."

She swallowed hard, nodding.

He eyed the shopping bag. "See if you can—without bending over—see if you can slide your big bag of money under your seat."

"Why? It's my money. We didn't steal it."

DeShear held his hands out. "Look at us. Do you know what a Georgia cop thinks when he finds a couple of sleepless people, dressed like they're practically homeless, driving a car in the middle of the night with thousands of dollars in cash—ten minutes from the Florida border?"

"Drugs?"

"And they don't take kindly to that. Now, shove it under the seat without bending over. He'd see that from his patrol unit, and it would give him probable cause to search our car, and then he'll find

our guns. Try to slide the bag, and then kick it the rest of the way with your foot. If we don't give him a reason to search the car, we'll probably be fine."

"Probably?"

"We don't know why he's pulling us over yet. Maybe the rental agency caught the fake ID. Did everything go okay at the airport when you went to get the car?"

She stared straight ahead. "Yes. Why? Of course it did. Why wouldn't it? Take the ticket. Or talk your way out of it. You were a cop."

"I don't think that's our best plan of action." He pulled the car to a stop, glancing at the GPS. A blue car icon pointed down a purple highway, bordered on the right by the big green patch of a swamp. The Florida border wasn't on screen yet, but it was close. "These southern Georgia boys like to write their tickets. Just sit tight and act like a sleepy wife on a long, boring road trip. We went to Gatlinburg for the week."

The silhouette of the officer approached, one hand shining a flashlight into the rental car, the other resting on his gun. DeShear peeked at the side of the road. The narrow emergency lane had a short span of grass next to it that disappeared down a hill, no guard rails.

The officer was shorter and rounder than most state troopers. DeShear continued to hold the wheel with both hands, forcing himself not to drum his fingers. After the officer had come a few steps closer, DeShear slid a hand onto the armrest and pressed the button to lower the window. The sharp, cold wind bit his cheeks.

The beam of the flashlight bounced off DeShear's face, then moved around the car's interior.

"Evening, sir," the officer said, his breath making white puffs with every word.

The accent was thick. Pure southern Georgia. And his uniform wasn't the gray and light blue of a state trooper uniform and a Stratton hat. Some kind of county deputy, maybe.

*Why is he on the highway stopping us?*

"Evening officer," Deshear said, squinting in the bright light.

"License and registration, please."

"Sure. Why did you pull me over?" DeShear rubbed his eyes. "I had the cruise control set at seventy."

"Welcome to Chipley. It's fifty-five through here, right on to the Florida border."

He pronounced "here" as "hyah," with two syllables.

"Well, I'm sorry, I used the cruise control because I wanted to be sure not to speed." DeShear reached for his wallet.

"And you didn't pay attention when it went to fifty-five."

DeShear winced. The whole situation that was now putting them in potential jeopardy could have been easily avoided. "No. Guess I missed the slower speed limit sign."

"You and everybody else in a rush to get to sunny Florida."

Over the officer's shoulder radio, the dispatcher calmly gave instructions to another unit.

"Do y'all have the registration for this car, sir?"

"*Suh*" was another one, said southern style. In Atlanta, there wasn't a discernible accent at all.

"Uh, it—it's a rental." DeShear shrugged. "Let me look for it."

Stepping back from the vehicle, the officer shined his light on Lanaya. "Take your time."

She held completely still, more likely from fear than DeShear's earlier instructions, until the light passed from her face.

DeShear dug his wallet out of his pocket and withdrew the license, contemplating his next move. He couldn't risk the officer running his ID. The computer might not have the car flagged, but it might

have him. He glanced in the rearview mirror at the flashing blue lights behind him.

“Here you go.” He held the license up, but didn’t extend his hand outside the window. “I’ll check the glove box for the registration.” He leaned a little toward the glove box, inching his hand further into the car.

“That’s fine, sir.” The officer reached for the license.

The dispatcher came on again. “Unit 454, we have a make on your tag.” Static interference garbled the last part. It sounded to DeShear like she said, “TSA reports 10-29-F. Proceed with caution.”

DeShear recognized the code. The vehicle was wanted in connection with a crime, and by TSA. His heart pounded. They couldn’t get picked up.

*This guy’s not highway patrol or a county deputy sheriff. He might not have dashboard cameras.*

The officer frowned, leaning forward for the license with one hand as he pressed the mic with the other. “Say again, Dispatch.”

DeShear dropped the license and grabbed the officer’s wrist with both hands. He pulled him forward and grabbed the shoulder mic. As the officer scrambled for his sidearm, DeShear yanked the hip radio off his belt.

The officer jumped back, drawing his service weapon and pointing it at DeShear. “Stop! Get out of the vehicle!”

DeShear dropped the car into reverse. “Hold on!” he shouted to Lanaya. Stomping the gas pedal, he launched the car backwards. The wheels squealed as DeShear threw an arm behind Lanaya’s seat so he could keep his eyes looking out the back. The squad car grew in the window.

The officer chased after them.

“He’s coming!” Lanaya shouted.

DeShear steered the car wildly as it raced backwards. “I have to slow down to make sure the air bags don’t deploy on impact, but you’re still gonna feel a bump.”

Lanaya put a hand on the dashboard. “What about the cop?”

“He shouldn’t shoot at us. We’re not engaging him.”

“*Shouldn’t?*”

Aiming the car at the cruiser looming in the back window, DeShear hit the brakes. Lanaya bounced backward into her seat. The cars touched bumpers with a metallic crunch. Mashing the gas pedal, the tires squealed again as the vehicle strained to put the police cruiser in motion.

DeShear gritted his teeth. “Come on. Come on!”

Smoke poured off his tires.

DeShear forced all his weight onto the pedal as the officer closed in on them. The cruiser inched backwards.

“He’s right on top of us!” Lanaya screamed, sliding down in her seat.

“There we go.” The cruiser moved slowly, grinding over the asphalt, its locked wheels not turning as it slid. “Come on, baby.”

The grill of the squad car groaned as the sedan forced it to move. DeShear jerked the steering wheel to the left. The rear of his car went toward the highway, but the rear of the police cruiser went toward the side of the road.

The green swamp glistened in the night.

“There we go, baby! Come on!”

The cruiser picked up speed as it headed toward the embankment.



“Hang on!”

“I’m hanging on!”

He swerved, sending a jolt through the car as they sped off the asphalt and over the grass. DeShear and Lanaya bounced upwards into the ceiling.

The cruiser teetered on the edge of the short precipice, its tail pointing down toward the swamp.

The grill raised slowly, then the squad car slid down the hill. It gathered speed and bumped along over the wet, uneven ground until the angle got too steep, then it rolled over onto its side. A second later, it fell onto its roof with a muffled crunch. The patrol car slid sideways for a few more yards before coming to rest upside down, a few feet into the muck of the murky green swamp.

DeShear jammed his vehicle into drive and punched the gas again, sending dirt and gravel upwards as he sped forward. The officer took a position near the side of the road, pointing his gun and shouting. DeShear swerved wide to the left, nearly into the median, so the deputy wouldn’t think they planned to run him down. As DeShear passed, the officer kept his gun on them, but no shots were fired. Their vehicle sped down the highway and away from the scene.

DeShear squeezed the steering wheel, smiling and bouncing up and down as they raced past an exit. “Yeah! Whew, baby, we did it.” He looked at Lanaya. “You okay?”

“Barely.” She maintained her grip on the dashboard. “Slow down.”

He eased his foot off the gas and let their speed drop to fifty-five, his heart pounding. “Yeah, good call.” There might be more than one deputy on this span of I-75. No sense in getting pulled over again. They wouldn’t be so lucky a second time. He peered at Lanaya. “You did well back there.”

As they went around a wide bend in the road, a gravel swath appeared up ahead in the median.

“Okay,” DeShear said. “One more time. Hang on.” He swerved the car over the gravel and onto the northbound lanes.

“What are you doing?” Lanaya said. “The cop is this way and Tampa’s the other way.”

“There’s an exit before we get to him. We have a very short window of time before we’re right back where we started, getting pulled over.” DeShear checked the GPS, then picked up the officer’s radio from the floor boards and tossed it in the back seat. “When Officer Friendly doesn’t report in a few minutes, they’ll go looking for him—and then all of cop world is gonna break loose. They’re going to look at the last stop he called in. He would’ve given the make, model, and license number of this car. If there’s video in that squad car, they’ll download it and have the color of the car and the number of occupants. They already know it was headed southbound. So we’re going to go north for a minute, back to that little town we just passed. We need to be in a different car.”

“Where are we going to rent another car at this time of night in the middle of nowhere?”

DeShear took the first exit off the highway. “Who said anything about renting?”

• • • •

THE FIRST TRUCK STOP they came to was brightly lit, with a lot of eighteen wheelers parked all around it, but no regular cars. At the 7-11 next door, however, several cars out back appeared to be where an employee might park. The dingy bar next to 7-11 had even more selections.

DeShear circled back to the truck stop and pulled in. “Stay here. Keep your head down, but you’re not hiding. You’re just not drawing attention to yourself. If somebody sees you, don’t act like you’re asleep, act like your husband’s inside going to the bathroom.”

“What does that expression look like?”

“Annoyed. I’ll try to find a vehicle at the bar. If I’m lucky, the ones by the back exit belong to employees, so nobody’s going to need them too soon and come looking for them. But I don’t want to

have the bouncer catch me borrowing his car when he comes out for his smoke break.” DeShear opened the door. A blast of cold wind shot through the rental car. “Stay put. I’ll be back in less than ten minutes.”

She frowned. “But then you’ll be driving a stolen car.”

“You will, once I procure one, and only for a few minutes. I’ll drive the rental—the car the cops are looking for—and we’ll find a pond and roll the rental into it. Then I’ll hop in the stolen car with you and we’ll head south. First chance we get, we swap plates to a Florida tag. It’ll buy us a few hours, and by then we’ll be in Gainesville, and our Georgia deputy and the big bad Georgia Highway Patrol won’t be looking for us there. Neither will TSA, for whatever’s chafing their butt. We snag another car from the university in Gainesville, and keep on trucking until we’re in Tampa. Depending on if we make good time or not, we might get there before daylight. And whatever personality you used at the rental agency, she probably needs to disappear, too.”

Lanaya sat back, nodding. “You’re quite resourceful, Hamilton.”

“That’s what you’re paying me for, but let’s not start high-fiving yet. We’re not in Tampa, and we’ll have a bunch of killers looking for us when we get there.”





WHEN THE GARAGE DOOR opened and Danielle Tremblay's white Audi SUV backed out, The Greyhound was ready.

Arriving before sunrise, he had parked three blocks away from the quiet *Rue De Lampe* number nine, then braced the icy Canadian morning to wait outside the Tremblay residence. Wearing two thin jackets—to discard the outer layer after it got covered with blood splatter—he squatted behind the neatly trimmed hedge on the side of the house, trying to think about anything except what he was about to do. When the garage door rumbled, his stomach lurched with adrenaline and nervousness, his thoughts crashing back to the reality of his mission. He reached past the two layers, his gloved hand sliding to the shoulder holster that held his .22 caliber Smith & Wesson handgun.

The car's engine turned over and hummed. He exhaled slowly and slinked around to the driveway.

The weapon was scary-looking, with its long silencer. He confirmed that thought when he approached the car and held the gun to the window. Danielle Tremblay's jaw dropped and her eyes went wide as she leaned away from the stranger wearing a ski mask and holding a big gun.

His stomach jolted again. She had children; what if they were the ones to find her? There was a husband. Neighbors who thought they lived in a safe, quiet neighborhood.

Wincing, he forced all that from his mind. There was a job to do.

He squeezed the trigger.

The first muted blast put a dime-sized hole in the glass, coating the inside with red spray. The driver slumped over the center console of the Audi, her face to the ceiling, a red cavern in her forehead. The car rolled a few inches toward the street as The Greyhound tugged the door latch. Opening the door, he walked alongside and he pumped five more muffled shots into his victim's torso. When the car hit the stone mailbox, it came to a stop.

He stepped back, shaking the adrenaline out of his hands. Tucking the gun into its holster, he shut the car door and walked up the street to his vehicle, but not before leaving a message behind.

Stuffed in the victim's mouth, police would find a business card that read *Angelus Genetics*.



HARRIMAN'S PHONE RANG as he drove to the station. He lifted it from the cup holder and read the screen. The fire marshal was up early. It wasn't even seven yet. That meant it probably wasn't good news.

He pressed the button and held the phone to his ear. "Mark Harriman."

"Officer, this is Harmon Crenny." The man spoke in a slow, deliberate cadence, giving his words a nearly pleasant delivery—if there hadn't been iron in every word.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I understand you are friends with a certain fella by the name of Hamilton *Dee-shear*, and he doesn't seem to like returning calls from my field investigators."

"Well, sir. It's just that . . . I believe Mr. DeShear is on a case, and apparently—"

"Apparently he's dodging us. This here is what's known as a courtesy call, officer, and it's the only one you gonna get, 'cause I'm telling you, this kinda stuff don't fly. Tampa Fire don't mess around when it comes to arson, y'hear? Now, I've been patient so far—your department and mine, needin' to play nice in the sand box with each other and all—but that time is over, so listen up."

“Yes, sir.”

“I understand friendship, son, but this here is a serious matter. So I don’t care if y’all are friends or cousins or if your momma knew his family way back when. If I don’t hear from Hamilton DeShear in the next eight hours, I’m putting a warrant out for his arrest. And once I do, it might be a while before he sees the sky again. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, sir. I know you don’t have any choice. I appreciate the call.”

“Good. You’re very welcome. You have a nice day now, officer.” The fire marshal hung up. Harriman sat at a red light and pounded his steering wheel. “Dammit, Hank, where are you?”

• • • •

AS THE SUN PEEKED OVER the privacy fence and through the trees behind it, Lanaya sipped her coffee and stared at a large, two story house. “Are you nervous to talk to her, Hamilton?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s . . . this is just not the kind of story you want to show up with after not speaking for a while.” He moved his eyes over his odd assortment of clothing. Sweatshirt, sweat pants, dress shoes. Unshowered, unshaven, bad breath. “Especially not looking like this.”

“Forgive me for prying. Are you two not on good terms?”

“We are. We just . . . People drift apart.” DeShear toyed with the coffee cup, turning it slowly in the cup holder. “My work and hers don’t intersect much. We don’t run in the same social circles anymore. She remarried, so . . .”

“I see,” Lanaya whispered.

The home was impressive. The lawn looked freshly mowed—almost a formality this time of year in Florida—but most homeowners had their service continue mowing through the holidays to keep the weeds down. Not that this house had any weeds.

A corner of the swing set was visible from the street, and it needed a new coat of stain. That may have been the only thing on the property that wasn’t in showcase condition.

DeShear ran his fingers back and forth over his lips and along the beard stubble on his chin, staring at the house.

“I think you misjudge your wife,” Lanaya said. “She knows you and trusts you. I think she’ll understand your current appearance.”

“Yeah.” DeShear pursed his lips. He sat forward and put his hand on the door latch. “Guess it’s time to find out.”

He opened his door and stepped out into the frosty morning air. The thought of explaining—what to say, what to not say—worried him. The story had a lot of moving parts, none terribly believable until the part where the shooting starts, and then Camilla would refer it over to the police.

Lanaya followed him up the driveway. He thought about asking her to wait in the car, but Camilla would see her eventually and he’d have to explain anyway.

On the porch, he pressed the cold, glowing doorbell with his thumb and leaned back, drumming his fingers on his thigh. Three muffled tones came from inside the house, melodic and regal, like distant church bells, or a deep, well-trained wind chime. DeShear looked down and smoothed his Georgia Bulldogs sweatshirt.

The entry wreath swung backwards as the big door opened.

Camilla was a pretty woman, and she was dressed well. Her charcoal gray suit hugged her curves without being unbusinesslike, and her hair and earrings were both a radiant shade of gold.

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Dash?” A half smile came to her face as she opened the door wider, cocking her head. “What are you doing he—”

Dash. DeShear's enjoyment at hearing her old nickname for him vanished when her gaze dropped to his attire.

"Oh, my goodness. Dash, what's happened? Have you been in some sort of wreck?"

He opened his mouth, shrugging. "It's a long story, very involved, but it's one that I need to discuss with you. I'm sorry for showing up like this. If there had been any other way—"

"It's nearly seven." She adjusted an earring. "I have to get to the office."

"I know. It's important, though. I'm in the middle of a complicated case and the IRS is going to want to be directly involved."

A man's voice came from behind her. "Darling, who's at the door?" Harper Madison III, assistant U. S. Attorney, appeared. Tall, thin, and just the right amount of gray at the temples to seem distinguished without simultaneously appearing elderly. He worked on the last adjustment of his necktie as he approached, then slid the silk knot neatly into place at the front of his starched white shirt collar.

Camilla stepped back. "Honey, you remember Dash."

"Yes." Madison's face was rigid. "I'm sorry, Hamilton, but it's a bit early for a social visit, isn't it?"

DeShear nodded. "It is. But this information involves your department, too. And the FBI. If I could just come in for a minute, I can explain."

"You know," Madison said. "The fire marshal's office called us. They were asking if we'd seen you. Something about arson on your apartment. So we're required to call them and tell them that you're here."

"Honey, that's not—"

"Mom, where is my language arts folder?" A girl came down the stairs. She wore a plaid skirt and a stiff burgundy Polo shirt embroidered with the crest of the exclusive Tampa Day School.

"Cassidy." Madison swept his hand toward the door. "Say hello to Mr. DeShear."

"Good morning, sir. I mean, good morning, *Hamilton*." She stood by her father and stared at DeShear's ill-fitting sweat pants. "Ew, what happened to you?"

Despite the awkwardness of the entire situation, her comment made DeShear laugh. "I got into some trouble, and you noticed." Putting his hands on his knees, he leaned forward and faced the young girl. "You're smart, like your mother. How old are you now? Eight?"

"Ten," she said.

"Ten? Wow. Almost all grown up."

Mr. Madison cleared his throat. "Again, Hamilton, it's a bit early . . ."

"I know, I know. I think I have some information that you need to hear, and the reason for my appearance is because we've been on the run from—" he glanced at the girl "—we've been *working* on some things that will interest both of you. But time is critical."

"Fine," the attorney said. "I'll call the fire marshal and you can discuss it with them. If there's anything they need me to hear, they can tell me."

"Actually, it's primarily an IRS matter." His eyes went to Camilla. "A multinational corporation with illegal funds. It'll fall under a RICO statute violation, but that's just for starters. There's intent to defraud shareholders, and probably a ton of undeclared income. But it'll require federal marshals and FBI."

Mr. Madison frowned, putting his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Darling, I'm due in court at eight-thirty."

Her eyes stayed on DeShear. “Let me listen to what they have to say.” Camilla turned to her husband. “Then I’ll take them to my office. You come by after your hearing.”

Harper turned his chin up. “You sure?”

She patted his shoulder. “Drop off Cassidy on your way.”

He grumbled, heading down the hallway.

Camilla stepped back from the door, sweeping her arm toward the living room. “Please, come in. And where are my manners?” She held her hand out to Lanaya. “I’m Dash’s—Hamilton’s—ex-wife, Camilla Madison.”

DeShear let Lanaya pass him to enter the house. “This is my client, Lanaya Kim,” he said.

The ladies shook hands. With her arm still holding the edge of the big door, Camilla looked at her ex-husband. The half-smile came back. “It’s good to see you, Dash.”

“Thanks, Cammy.”

He ignored the butterflies in his stomach and stepped inside, the door easing shut behind him.







CAMILLA GOT UP FROM her living room sofa. “I don’t know, Dash. It’s pretty thin.” Glancing at her watch, she walked to the hallway and plucked a set of keys from a large, baroque armoire. “Look, why don’t you visit the fire marshal and get that situation cleared up, then we’ll sit down again in a few days and see where everything is.”

DeShear shook his head, rising. “Can’t. That won’t work. People shot at us in Atlanta. Her family’s in hiding, for Pete’s sake. The others on the list are in danger. Why won’t you act on this?”

“It’s not IRS jurisdiction. It’s mostly overseas, and what isn’t in Indonesia is a matter for the FBI and the police. I’ll act on it. I’ll refer it to the right agencies, and they’ll move on it. But it’s not really an IRS thing.”

“But IRS is the key. Cammy, these guys did a lot of illegal stuff, but they did it to make money. It’s not feasible to think none of that cash came back here. And when it did, they sure didn’t declare it to the IRS and pay taxes on it. Even Al Capone didn’t do that. All we have to do is show one dollar from that activity making its way back to the States, and we have the thread that unravels the sweater. Now, Lanaya has solid evidence of what activities occurred at the Arizona facility—”

“Ten years ago,” Camilla said. “Or longer.”

DeShear paced back and forth. “They’re still doing it, and they’re washing the money. So it’s tax evasion or it’s money laundering, or both, but that’s IRS all the way. If you declare an emergency audit on a publicly traded company, they have to comply. Demand to see all assets, leak it to the press, and they’ll have no choice. They’ll have to take you to Indonesia to inspect—or watch their stock price plummet.”

She folded her arms. “It’s not that easy. It requires coordination with a lot of federal agencies.”

“Which is what that Fast Fly team used to do, right? Storm into financial institutions without any warning and seize everything in a surprise raid? I seem to remember you going on a lot of those back when we were newlyweds. And when you leak the news about the audit, the killers will come out to take down the board members they haven’t already gotten. You stuff a plane full of FBI agents and federal marshals dressed like auditors, and take them down to arm the Indonesian facility like it’s Fort Knox. If the killers set one foot in the airport and buy a ticket to Indonesia, we have them on conspiracy. Lanaya doesn’t think there are more than a dozen of them, so a platoon of federal marshals will have no trouble bagging the thugs the second they make their move. IRS will look like a hero and FBI will get a bunch of arrests. Everybody wins.”

“Yeah, we could utilize the RICO statutes to get the ball rolling.” Camilla twirled her keys, her gaze focused on a distant wall, but not really looking at it. “Between the potential IRS violations, the racketeering, and the conspiracy to commit murder, it makes a compelling case. The political arm will like it, and Fast Fly is good at making headlines.”

DeShear leaned forward. “And who puts Fast Fly in motion?”

“IRS.”

“Yeah, but who, specifically?”

“Bureau chiefs. I can ring the alarm and engage a Fast Fly team.”

“Yes, you can.” He grinned. “Cammy, please. I’m not going to embarrass you. I didn’t burn my apartment down, and I’m not wrong about this. Do it, and put us on the audit team. Get me on site. I’ll find out what they’re up to.”

She checked her watch again. "I'm not doing anything until I get some more details."

DeShear stepped back, chewing his lip.

She sighed. "Ride with me to my office and we'll talk on the way. I need to clear my schedule."

• • • •

"GOOD MORNING." CAMILLA'S assistant stood and handed her a stack of messages.

Camilla took a glimpse at the papers as she crossed the outer office area. She turned to Lanaya. "Ms. Kim, would you wait out here for a moment please? Tonia, would you get Ms. Kim some coffee?"

"Of course, Camilla." The assistant stood and walked down the hallway.

"Dash, would you join me in my office?"

DeShear nodded. "Sure."

The door shut behind him as his ex-wife went to her desk and sat. She placed her car keys on a folder on her desk, leafed through the messages, then picked up a pen and pointed it at him. "What kind of trouble are you really in?"

"None, really," DeShear said, shifting his weight on his feet. "Not the police kind, anyway. My client has shooters after her, and they burned down my place and shot at us in Atlanta. I fired back."

"Using what?"

"A gun I took off a guy who attacked us in the hotel. Then we—well, I—assaulted a cop and stole a car . . ."

She winced. "Who did you hit?"

"I didn't hit him. I grabbed the deputy's arm to take his radio, but that's technically assault. On the video it will look bad, and he'll say I assaulted him. Then . . . I disabled his patrol car and put it in a swamp. Oh, and the guns are probably stolen. I don't think the guys we took them from were really the above-board type."

Camilla closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "Anything else?"

"That's about it."

"Well, it's good you aren't in any trouble." She tossed the pen to the desk. "What about the fire at your apartment?"

DeShear raised his hands. "I had nothing to do with that. I went to the gym and then had breakfast at Ithop, then I was with my client. That's all verifiable."

She leaned back and put her elbow on the arm of the chair, resting her chin in her hand. "Okay."

"So what I need is for you to arrest me."

"What?"

"Us. Arrest us." DeShear took a seat in one of the chairs in front of Camilla's desk. "Call a federal marshal from downstairs and arrest us, to be remanded into your custody. Then we'll be able to take care of business with you. The local jurisdictions don't supersede federal authority, so the Tampa fire marshal and the Tampa police, the Georgia deputy—none of them will be able to interfere with Lanaya and me unless you give the green light. Which you won't because I'm bringing this giant, promotion-getting case to you."

"Yeah, it's all for me. Thanks for making it so easy, too. The fire marshal and Tampa PD won't mind at all. Here's an idea. I think I'll get them over here and let them express their happiness to you in person before I take you out of their reach."

"That's a different way to go, but okay. They've all been leaving messages, anyway. But I was a little busy not getting killed to return their calls."

She sighed. “What about clothes?” Camilla pointed to his sweatshirt. “You can’t help run a task force meeting looking like that. I’d say you look like you slept in that gear, except you don’t look like you’ve slept.”

DeShear rubbed the beard stubble on his chin. “No, it’s been a while. But my place burned, so . . . we have some cash, though. We can buy some clothes. If we make a list, can somebody run to the mall for us? I mean, since it’s not really safe for us to be on the street.”

“I guess so. We’ve done stranger things. I’ll send an agent.”

He eyed the keys on her desk. “Would a federal marshal object to escorting us to your place so we can grab a shower?”

She frowned, sliding the keys to him. “Anything else? Want a pizza?”

DeShear stood. “We should contact the owner of the stolen car in front of your house. The license tag on the vehicle isn’t his, but they can track him down from the VIN number. And there are two stolen guns under the front seat. I think that’s it. Oh, no, there’s another stolen car in Gainesville.”

She glared at him.

“Yeah, that’s it. Have I told you how pretty your eyes are?”

She spun around in the chair to face the wall and a stack of folders piled high in front of a mirror. “Go. Get coffee, food, a shower. Then get back here. We have a big meeting to put together.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Cammy.”

As he moved to the door, he glanced back. Camilla had leaned forward to the mirror and lifted her chin, gazing at her reflection’s eyes.

DeShear smiled. “See?”

She looked at him in the mirror. “Go!”





THE GREYHOUND HELD a brochure in his hand as he stared out the penthouse window. Clouds of morning mist lifted and floated over the churning waters of Niagara Falls, the rocks around the basin white with a thick coat of ice. The railings of the observation deck were white with ice, too, like an artists' sketch that had run out of colors. Only a few people ventured out into the cold and past the wire Christmas trees to enjoy the view.

According to the brochure, the falls were to be bathed in colorful lights each night, and on New Year's Eve there'd be fireworks as well.

"The view from anywhere in this hotel should be beautiful." He tossed the pamphlet to the desk. "It'd be nice to use that to make a statement, somehow. Maybe throw Dr. Graff over the falls at the stroke of midnight. Maybe throw a few other board members from Angelus Genetics over, too. Really make a splash, so to speak."

As Maya readied her equipment, Dominique tied a length of rubber band to his arm.

"Why do you hate them so much?" Maya asked.

"I don't hate them." He tossed the brochure into the trash can and pushed himself back on the large bed. "I'm fine."

Dominique leaned in, lowering her voice. "You're not fine."

"Okay, have it your way. I'm not fine. I'll never be fine again, and I don't want to be. I hate what these people have done." He yanked the tourniquet off his arm and stormed to the window. "I had everything. A great job as a hedge fund manager, flying all over the world trading equities. Boats, cars, houses. A beautiful young family."

Britt and Maya stopped what they were doing, watching.

"I'd like to think I'm not motivated by hate, though, Maya. Some people might even say I'm being generous by not dragging this out somehow and hurting the people from Angelus the way they hurt others." His eyes narrowed. "They bred us like cattle or dogs, selecting the attributes they wanted to advance without worrying about what other latent characteristics might tag along. And the poor pups that didn't fit the bill? Oh, they were discarded like trash. Snuffed out, without a thought. Did you know, they even referred to us as dogs? It's in the records I discovered. Dogs! That's what we were to them."

Dominique stood in silence next to the transfusion equipment that awaited its patient.

"They called the alpha group Airedales. The betas were Bassets." He stared out the window. "And my group, the Gammas, we were Greyhounds." His voice softened, his thoughts elsewhere. "I think referring to us as something other than human made the byproducts of their research more palatable for them. The Nazis did the same thing. Ironic, for a company named Angelus—'Angel'—don't you think?"

The Greyhound turned to face his confederates, scowling. "But if people hate them, it's deserved. They earned it. Genetic changes don't just affect the subject. It's passed on. I watched so many die a slow, painful death because of what these monsters did. Then one day, my own children—one after the other, they'd fade and start their decline. As soon as we buried one, the next would get sick, like the Grim Reaper was taking turns as part of a sick game, to torture us."

His gaze fell to the floor. "After our youngest passed away, Megan was overwhelmed with grief and depression. Just overwhelmed. There's no word for that kind of pain. We tried to work through it.

We saw counsellors. You eventually try to live life again, but you never really do. During my next business trip, she called me in tears. She said she couldn't stand the pain, that all she could feel was darkness inside, and that each breath hurt to take." He lifted his eyes to Dominique. They were brimming with tears. "I understood. I felt it, too." The Greyhound swallowed hard, his voice a whisper. "Then she hung up and cut her arms open from the elbow to the wrist."

He closed his eyes and leaned against the window frame, the palatial suite in front of him and the massive waterfall churning behind him. "Angelus took everything from me. From me and a lot of others. I was able to build a new life for myself, but a lot of others—innocent people, children—they suffered and died for no reason other than for Angelus Genetics' bottom line." He clenched his teeth. "If evil has a face, it smiles from the board room of Angelus Genetics, in the body of Dr. Marcus Hauser. And as long as there's breath in my body, I'll keep fighting to stop them."

He stood, stepping to the bed, but stumbled.

"Doctor Carerra!" Britt ran forward, grabbing The Greyhound's arm as he slumped to the floor.

Dominique went to him, cradling his head in her hands. "Tristan?" He didn't respond. She glanced at Maya. "Help us get him to the bed."

"Yes, Doctor," Maya said. She grabbed one arm as Dominique held the other. Britt took hold of the legs, and they hoisted their unconscious patient onto the mattress.

Dominique leaned over him, gently lifting his eyelid and shining her pen light into his eye. "We need to start the transfusion, stat." After checking the other eye, she went to the centrifuge and turned it on. "Maya, get your meds ready. Britt, bring more units of whole blood up from the van."

He jumped up. "Yes, Doctor."

Dominique pulled another rubber swatch from the box and slipped it over Tristan's arm. "We have to act fast or we could lose him."





DESHEAR STROLLED PAST Camilla's Christmas tree and into the kitchen. A large, muscular man with a square jaw and a crew cut followed him, wearing a khaki t-shirt that read "Federal Marshal" across the front. His camouflage fatigue pants appeared to have been recently ironed, and his face was unwavering and stern.

DeShear pulled the coffee maker forward on the counter. "Officer, would you like some coffee?"

"I would not." He spit the words out like they tasted bad in his mouth.

"What about your fellow marshal?"

The officer straightened up and flexed his shoulders. "I'm sure neither I nor officer Vulpes wish to have any coffee with you or the other asset currently in our custody. Let's not dawdle. Ms. Madison wants us back at her office asap."

"Can't go anywhere without clothes, my friend. When they get here, we'll shower and dress as quickly as possible." DeShear opened the coffee. "But I can't get over feeling I must have wronged you somehow."

"Let's just say I don't appreciate escorting a felon around, and that I'd prefer our other hard-working officers take care of the proper business of the federal marshal's agency rather than be sent on a shopping trip to the mall."

It was too much to unscramble to someone who didn't seem to have an interest in the truth, so DeShear let it slide with an "I see." Hopefully, within an hour they'd part ways, never to see each other again.

"I'll have a cup." A large, muscular, female federal marshal walked into the kitchen. "Thank you."

DeShear looked at the officer with the crew cut, then called out to the living room. "Lanaya, coffee?"

"Are you making some, Hamilton? Are you sure that's allowed?"

He gathered cups from the cabinet. "I think Cammy will understand the intrusion. We can only watch so much TV while we wait."

"Then, yes, I'd like some very much."

DeShear pressed a button on the front of the machine. With a beep, it came to life. "There we go."

In the hallway, the doorbell rang with its elegant chimes. DeShear wagged his finger and grinned at the crew cut marshal. "Did you order a pizza?"

Frowning, the marshal headed to the door. He returned a moment later, following a third marshal holding several colorful paper shopping bags and a long plastic dress bag. "Merry Christmas," she said. "Your clothes are here."

Lanaya took the dress bag from her. "Thank goodness."

Taking the remaining bags, DeShear moved past the other marshal. "Let's do this again soon."

Following Lanaya down the hall to the master bedroom, DeShear emptied a bag onto the bed. "Pretty sure whatever's in that dress bag is for you. These men's pants are probably for me." He sifted through the garment packages. The next bag contained ladies' underwear. "Oops. This bag is probably yours. In fact," he glanced at the door. "I'm going to . . . if you want to go through the bags and pull out the men's clothes, I'll wait outside."

"Oh, nonsense," Lanaya said, dumping a bag onto the bed. "You were married. I'm sure there's nothing in here you haven't seen before."



“No, but it’s rare to know my clients’ underwear choices.”

“I see. Rare, but not completely unknown, then.”

“I, um. I . . .”

“Why, Hamilton, I believe I’ve made you blush.” She leaned over the bed and rummaged through the bags, handing him items. “These would be yours. Here are socks and a belt. Here’s another, a shirt. That looks to be about it.” She stood up straight. “If you’ll use the bedroom upstairs to dress, I’ll see you in the living room in ten.”

“Sounds good.” He stepped into the hallway, then stopped. “Lanaya, there’s one more thing.” He turned to face her, putting his hand on the door frame. “I’ll ask you this once, and whatever you say, goes—I won’t bother you with it again. You’ve gotten your family to a safe place. I don’t need to know where it is, but from what I’ve seen, you’re pretty good at that. If we’re successful in drawing the killers to Indonesia, that takes them away from your family, but it puts them in proximity to you. It’s very brave, but it’s also very dangerous. It puts you at risk, and I don’t want you to get hurt.” He shrugged, smiling. “I’ve kind of grown fond of you.”

A smile crept across Lanaya’s lips as well. “Possibly, you’ve merely grown fond of my money.”

“You said you didn’t have a lot of money.”

“I don’t.”

“Guess that’s not it, then.” DeShear locked onto her eyes, his face serious. “I’m just saying, you don’t have to do this. The people we’ve involved now, they’re professionals. They can handle everything from here. If you don’t like the odds, say the word and you can be out—no questions asked. You can watch it all from the sidelines and no one will think less of you. Tricking killers to come after us, that’s a risky game, and there are no do-overs.”

She folded her hands in front of her, looking down. “Hamilton, people are fond of saying that humans and dolphins share ninety-seven percent of the same DNA. Some say dolphins and humans are closely related—even though our most recent common ancestor died ninety-five million years ago. Humans and chimps share ninety-eight percent of the same DNA, but we can talk and they can climb trees with their feet.” She lifted her gaze and stared out the window. “The science of genetics is a journey into an amazing, powerful world, and it has fascinated me since I was a child, because it’s the little things in genetics that make *all* the difference.” Her eyes met his. “We share a high percentage of DNA with fuzzy animals and cute sea creatures, but we share 100% of the same DNA as mass murderers like Jeffrey Dahmer, the Son of Sam, and Adolph Hitler. That’s reality. When we bring a gene forward, who knows what things are brought with it? Given another roll of the dice, with the wrong environment and a little neglect, those things could create a group of Charles Mansons instead of Mother Therasas. I took part in what happened at Angelus. It may have been an unknowing role, but that doesn’t change the end result. A long time ago, I decided I wouldn’t sit by and let others do what I considered to be my responsibility. I need to try to correct what I am responsible for.”

“Can’t talk you out of it, huh?”

“I called you, remember? If I was able to be talked out of it, I’d have never started into any of this. Besides, we may be headed to Indonesia, but the destination is a genetics lab. That’s *my* turf.”

• • • •

“THANK YOU FOR COMING.” Camilla shook the hand of fire marshal Harmon Crenny and a lieutenant from the Tampa police force; then she greeted Mark Harriman. “Please, sit down. We’ll be starting soon.”

Harriman took a seat, leaning forward to whisper to his host. “Is Hank here, Cammy? I’d like to see him as soon as possible.”

“So would I,” grumbled the fire marshal.

“I know you all have business with Mr. DeShear, and you’ll speak with him soon.” Camilla sat, looking at the small group assembled in front of her. “But he is a principal source in an IRS matter that we are exploring, and it is of the utmost urgency. I’ll ask that you respect federal-state-county hierarchy and let us maintain him as our resource until the matter is closed. That said, I will let him speak with you, and he should be here any—well, speak of the devil.” She stood. “Here is now.”

DeShear strutted forth, in clean clothes and a necktie, leading a little parade of federal marshals, an IRS agent, and his client. He smiled as he approached Camilla’s group. “Remain seated, everyone.”

Harriman jumped to his feet, frowning. “Why haven’t you returned my phone calls?”

“Sorry, buddy.” DeShear clapped him on the shoulder. “Had to power my phone down to keep some killers from, well, killing us.”

The federal marshal with the crew cut approached Camilla. “Ms. Madison, will you have any further need of us?”

She nodded. “Stay close. It’s a secure building, but we’ll be assembling the task force and possibly leaving quickly. Coordinate with your sergeant, and be ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The fire marshal growled at DeShear. “Don’t think some fancy footwork by your ex-wife will save your butt from arson charges, son. They’re on my desk, signed and ready to go.”

DeShear swallowed and looked at Camilla. “Not while I’m working for the feds, right?”

“Maybe not.” Crenny scowled. “But the minute they’re done with you, I take you away—in handcuffs. And that’ll be sooner than you think.”

Camilla raised her hands like a traffic cop. “I’m sure there’s no need for—”

“What the . . .” Harriman stared at Lanaya, his jaw hanging open. “It’s you.”

Lanaya backed away, her face a puzzle.

“You okay, there, Mark?” DeShear said.

Harriman whipped around to him. “What are you up to?” he hissed.

“I guess our pictures finally got around from the park shooting and the other stuff. It’s all—”

“Other stuff?”

“It’s nothing.” DeShear shrugged. “Well, it’s not nothing, but it’s a self-defense shooting. We were completely in the right, we just didn’t have time to stay and clear it up. But we will. Promise. That’s all gonna go away.”

“But . . .” Harriman glanced at Camilla, then back to DeShear. “We need to talk. Now. In private.”

“Can it wait until after the meeting?” Camilla asked, taking a glimpse at a wall clock.

Harriman grabbed DeShear by the arm. “I don’t think so, Cammy. Can I use your office for a minute?”

“We’re waiting for a link up to Washington. I’d prefer we don’t keep the vice president waiting.”

“The vice president?” DeShear said. “Holy cow.”

“Yeah, you said some of the right buzz words.” Camilla stood, pointing to the clock. “Genetics and money laundering had the director’s eyes glazing over, but when I said human trafficking, that lit him on fire. That’s a hot button for the vice president, and that got us a big green light for our official inquiry.”

Official inquiry was a coded term for what the IRS asked for right before one of its raids. The board of directors of the company in question would turn their noses up at an official inquiry, getting some blustering lawyer to request a postponement, then the Fast Fly team would kick down the doors, having already been staged. The IRS investigators seized everything, in every location, while the executives at the home office peed down their legs. Camilla had delivered.

“Money laundering? Human trafficking?” Fire marshal Crenny narrowed his eyes. “DeShear, what kinds of seedy crap y’all involved in, son?”

“Not him, sir,” Camilla said. “The people he’s been reporting to us about.”

“Reporting?” Crenny echoed, pounding the arm of his chair. “*Reporting?*”

“Yes,” Camilla nodded. “We’re using Mr. DeShear and his client as informants.”

“How long has that—”

“Would everyone like to join me in the conference area?” She walked away from the fire marshal and pointed to a large glass room with a long table centered in it. “The vice president will be on the video call with the director.”

“We’ll be right there.” Red-faced, Harriman dragged DeShear into Camilla’s office and shut the door.

“What’s up with you?” DeShear said, shaking his arm from his friend’s grip. “I know I didn’t call the fire investigators back, and that was wrong of me. But like I said, the bad guys were shooting in my direction at the time.”

“Did you open the emails I sent you?” Harriman put his hands on his hips, shaking his head and staring at the floor. His face remained red. “On your phone or anywhere?”

“No. I powered down, and we’ve been on the run.”

“I sent you an image of the arsonist.” Harriman put his hand to his temple. “You didn’t check it?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“I’ve got some bad news for you, then.” Harriman stared at Camilla’s group as they crossed the lobby and filed into the conference room. He pointed to Lanaya. “The arsonist in the picture is your client.”





THE MOTEL DOOR BURST open, its wooden frame splintering as its door knob shot across the floor. Jim Clayman leaped off the bed, racing for the gun laying on the tiny desk.

“Don’t try it.” Two men and a woman charged through the broken door. The closest intruder, sporting a shaved head and a dark brown goatee, spoke first. “There are more of us than there are of you, and we’re better armed.”

Clayman stared at the intruders. They stood side by side, each pointing a large gun at him. Two said nothing, just kept their guns aimed at his head.

He slowly sat back down onto the bed.

“You called your employer and said you were out,” the man with the goatee said. “He says you’re not.”

“What?” Clayman said.

“You said the situation in Centennial Park was amateur hour. Well, now he’s hired some professionals, and we say you’re not out until the boss says the job is done. Is that understood?”

Staring at the three large guns pointed at him, Clayman nodded.

“You didn’t do your job, little bird dog. You were supposed to keep eyes on the targets, and you ran away instead. That’s amateur. So now you’re going to come with us and make things right.”

Clayman swallowed hard. “How?”

“We’ll explain in the car. Let’s go.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, you think you’re in a position to ask us questions, huh? Okay. I’m Elvis Presley.” He pointed to the others. “That’s Janet Jackson on the left, and the other one is George Michael.” Elvis raised his gun and smashed it into Clayman cheek, sending the hostage’s head back. “Any other stupid questions?”

Clayman gasped, putting a hand to his face. Blood covered his fingers.

Elvis leaned in close, raising his voice. “I asked you a question. I expect you to answer me. Do you have any more questions of any kind, at this time, for myself or my associates?”

Clayman flinched. “No.”

“Then let’s go.” Elvis stepped back and gave him a big grin. “We have a car in the parking lot. Walk to it quickly and quietly. Don’t say a word. If you try anything funny—or anything at all—we’ll shoot you to death right there in the parking lot. Don’t think we won’t.” Elvis waved his gun at the door. “You’ll disappear like your targets did, but you won’t be on your feet.”

He grabbed Clayman by the collar and hoisted him up. “When the big boss pays you to do a job, you do the job. You don’t call him and say you quit. The big boss decides when you’re done working for him. Understand?”

“Yeah.”

Elvis drew back and cracked Clayman with the gun again. “You say ‘yes sir’ when you’re talking to me.”

Clayman howled in pain, blood dripping from his mouth and other cheek. “Yes, sir!”

Gritting his teeth, Elvis put his nose to Clayman’s, whispering. “I’m about three seconds from putting a couple of rounds into your chest and two in the back of your head. So smarten up, little bird dog.” He spaced his next words for emphasis. “You’re . . . not . . . calling . . . the shots.”

With Janet Jackson holding one arm and George Michael holding the other, they crossed the parking lot toward a gray sedan. As they neared it, Elvis dug in his pocket and pulled out a key fob. The car lights flickered and the trunk popped open.

“No!” Clayman kicked and twisted. “No! No!”

Elvis stopped and turned to face the hostage, shaking his head. “Some people just don’t listen.” He gripped his gun and brought the butt down on the back of Clayman’s skull. The hostage sagged in the arms of his escorts.

• • • •

DESHEAR STORMED INTO the conference room, with Harriman following him. Camilla and her assistant were tinkering with the A/V projector. Around the large conference table sat the police lieutenant, the fire marshal, several IRS agents, and representatives from the FBI and the federal marshal service.

“I need to borrow my client for a minute,” DeShear said, walking up to Lanaya and pulling back her chair. She stood, her jaw hanging open.

“Will you quit screwing around?” Camilla said. “The meeting’s about to start!”

A blue image appeared on the left half of the wall screen, displaying the seal of the Vice President of the United States. The right side flashed the words, “connecting,” and then went to an image of several people sitting around a small table, the IRS Directors logo on the wall behind them. A woman’s voice came over the monitor. “Bureau Chief Madison, we now have you connected with Director Fleming. Please hold for the Vice President.”

DeShear and Lanaya headed into the lobby.

“Dash! What are you doing?” Camilla called after them.

The conference door swung shut. DeShear walked briskly, his hand at the middle of Lanaya’s back.

“Hamilton, I do not appreciate being manhandled.” She took his hand and pushed it away. “Please.”

He kept walking. “Stay quiet and get in here.”

Entering Camilla’s office, he pushed the door closed and turned to his client. “I’m going to ask you one time, and then I turn you over to the fire marshal and Harriman. What did you do?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean! My apartment. The fire. No more lies. Out with it.”

“I do not appreciate—”

“Enough!” He pressed his hands against the sides of his head, pacing back and forth in the office. “They have pictures, Lanaya. Images of you walking around my apartment building ten minutes before the whole place went up in flames. The neighbor in the next building identified you. She knows me. She saw you go into my unit right before the fire.”

Lanaya stood rigid. “Whatever the authorities have, I assure you, they do not have pictures of me.”

“What, it’s your evil twin sister? It’s you! You’re wearing the same running shoes.”

“If you check, you will see those are a very popular brand and style. Over three hundred pairs were sold in the greater Tampa Bay area this year.”

“Stop!” His cheeks grew hot. “Just tell me why. They wanna hang this on me. They think I conspired with you. And in a few minutes, when Camilla’s meeting is over, those two guys—the fire marshal and the police lieutenant—they’re gonna talk to Harriman, who will mention the uncanny resemblance you have to their suspect. Then one of us is going to jail. Well, it’s not going to be me,

sister. I didn't burn my place and I sure didn't conspire to have it burned. Everything I had was in there. But you—you probably waited for me to leave, and then—”

“Arson is a very serious matter.” Lanaya’s tone was calm and even. “Frankly, I’m offended you think I’m capable of such a thing. I’m certain they ensured everyone was out of the building first—whoever the arsonist was.”

DeShear shook his head. “You did it, didn’t you?”

“As I said previously, no, I didn’t do it.”

“Okay, so some random woman who just happens to be your height and build and hair color, and with the same facial features and the same running shoes, comes by my place when you just happen to be in town, and she—she just wanders by, and—”

Lanaya looked directly into his eyes. “Would you have believed me?”

“What? Believed what?”

She kept her eyes locked on his, her voice falling to a whisper. “My case. The links between the deaths, the Propofol. Would you have believed me if you hadn’t seen for yourself what these people were capable of?”

“I—I already said yes to meeting you when—”

“You wanted to turn it over to the police, as I recall. You said so several times in our meeting. You humored me for the large fee I offered, but it wasn’t until you saw your own self in danger that you really signed on.”

He shook his head. “That’s not true, and don’t try to turn this around.”

“Turn what? Those were real bullets they shot at us in Atlanta. Did I stage that, too?”

“Atlanta was real, but . . .”

“And the murders. Those were real. Or did I kill Dr. Braunheiser and Emmet Kincaid and Nilla Cunde and a dozen other people? Wake up. This is all real. People are dying. And whoever burned your place, they saved your life.”

“How in the world do you figure that?”

She proceeded to the window that looked into the lobby, toying with the cord that controlled the blinds. “Were they only shooting at me in Atlanta? They shot at you, too. I said we were linked, and we are. Atlanta proved that. If someone burned your place to get you away from it, they did you a favor—whoever it was. And any conscientious person would ensure there were no people remaining in the building first.”

“It’s—Lanaya, this is a big deal. This—that fire marshal is gonna string you up, and me right along with you. They play for keeps.”

“Then let them!” She turned to him. “The killers play for keeps, too. We learned that in Atlanta, when they killed several innocent people simply to get to us. I play for keeps as well. I’m in this thing, and I’m staying in. If someone who looks like me burned down your apartment, let the police and fire marshal do their jobs. They’ll see Lanaya Kim was nowhere near Tampa until her flight came in an hour before our meeting. There wasn’t enough time to get there, do what they propose, and still get to the meeting.”

“Lanaya . . .”

“Hamilton, I will not keep repeating myself. It’s decision time. The cards are dealt.” She pointed to the glass conference room. “Your ex-wife has the Vice President on the phone to send a squad of auditors and armed personnel overseas to deal with a situation that twenty-four hours ago they didn’t even know existed.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked down. “I think this might change things.”

“Does it?” She went to him. “The fire marshal and police are ready to arrest the woman in the picture, and yet they’ve subordinated their interests for the bigger cause—a cause that needs your help. I certainly can’t do this without you. But I’ll respect your decision. You must be true to your own sense of what’s right.”

He stared at her, chewing his lip.

“Hamilton, you might be a private investigator right now, but you weren’t always, and it’s not your true calling. A blind man could see it, but somehow you can’t. You’re destined to be a hero and save lives—through whatever format fate chooses to manifest it—but make no mistake, that is your true calling. It’s your nature to stand up to the bad in the world, and that will always drive you, no matter what your job title is. And that’s who I need with me for this.”

She looked to the window. Camilla’s assistant walked across the lobby toward them. “Now, unless I miss my guess, that nice young woman is coming over here to tell us to return to the conference room. What are you going to do?”

• • • •

ARRIVING AT THE SITE they’d settled on earlier—a small clearing at the end of a long dirt road—Elvis and his associates went about the second part of their interrogation. Janet Jackson opened the trunk and snapped a tube of smelling salts in half, holding it under the nose of their hostage. Clayman’s head jerked, then jerked again as he struggled to avoid inhaling the pungent fumes that brought him back to consciousness.

“Told you,” Janet Jackson said, leaning on the side of the car. “We should have clipped this goofball in the hotel room.”

“When you’re right, you’re right.” Elvis nodded, sighing. “Okay, let’s get to it. We have a conversation to finish.”

Janet and George grabbed Clayman by the arms and hauled him from the trunk. Dragging him around to the front of the car, the headlights would allow for additional illumination until the rising sun cut fully through the thick trees overhead. Clayman’s eyes rolled around for a moment, then he gagged and vomited down the front of his shirt.

Beyond the car, a lone cricket chirped in the chilly swamp.

Elvis grabbed Clayman by the hair and held his face up. “Time to come clean, little bird doggy. Your targets got away. You had a gun. Did you use your weapon?”

“I, uh . . .”

Elvis raised his gun and fired a shot into Clayman’s shoulder. The burst splattered red onto Clayman’s face and neck as he screamed in pain. He grabbed his shoulder and doubled over, pulling free of the grip of the men who held him. He rolled on the swampy ground, wet leaves sticking to his back and face.

“Pay attention,” Elvis said, grabbing his victim and setting him upright. “Are you awake now, bird dog? This is not the time for stalling. It’s a simple question, so you should be able to answer fast and without deliberation. What happened to your weapon?”

“The guy took it from me!” Clayman whimpered, blood spilling from his hand as he gripped his shoulder. “The guy with the scientist.”

“He hit you?”

“He, he . . .”

The second shot went past Clayman’s ear, clipping the lobe. A patch of dirt splattered a few feet behind him when the bullet hit it. Clayman shrieked, slapping a hand over his ear.



“Gotta work on your aim, Elvis.” George chuckled.

Elvis glared at George. “Shut up.” Turning his focus back to Clayman, Elvis grabbed his victim’s hair again and wrenched his head back. “Again, did he hit you?”

“No!”

“How did he get your gun?”

Clayman groaned, blood dropping through his fingers. “He surprised me and took it.”

Cocking the gun, Elvis put it to Clayman’s head. “I’m not hearing the ‘how’ part. How did you, a guy with a gun who was hired to watch the hallway, end up getting disarmed and letting the targets get away—but no shots were fired and there ain’t a mark on you?”

“He—he sucker punched me. Hit me in the gut!”

“Nope.” Elvis shook his head and stepped back, firing a round into Clayman’s thigh. “Wrong answer.”

Clayman rolled over onto the muddy ground again, holding his bleeding leg and crying in agony.

“I think you’re smart enough to know, this night only gets worse for you, little bird dog. See, you let your partner get attacked, but he got a concussion, so I can see why they got his gun. The waiter routine was lame, but whatever. It could have worked if there’d been competent people involved, but it’s done now. The gunman in the hallway, though, that scene doesn’t add up to me. Did the targets pay you off?”

“No.”

“Did they threaten your family?”

“No. I don’t have a family.”

“Good thing. I’d hate to have to break the bad news to them that their stupid, screw up, cowardly son and-or father and-or brother died in a swamp after disgracing himself.” He raised the gun again.

“No!” Clayman raised his hands to stop the bullets, turning his face away. “No! No!”

The two blasts from Elvis’ gun lit up the darkness in the swamp, like flash photography at a wedding reception. Chunks of red and tufts of hair splattered onto the wet oak leaves. Clayman splashed face-first onto the muddy edge of the swamp.

“Toss him in deeper.” Elvis tucked the gun into his belt. “So the gators will find him.”

“There’s no gators eating in weather this cold,” George said.

“Just get him in the water, George,” Elvis growled. “Or they’ll find two bodies.”

George hustled over to the body and dragged it through the muck.

Janet pulled the tarp from the trunk of the car, balling it up and tossing it into the murky swamp. “What now?”

“Now,” Elvis glanced at his watch. “We go tell the big boss at Angelus that we tied up his second loose end from the Peachtree Plaza hotel, discuss a fee to eliminate this scientist lady and her friend, and then get rid of this Greyhound joker.”

George waded out of the swamp, slapping mud from his hands. “By now the scientist is long gone from Georgia. They’re either in Florida or Minnesota.”

“And The Greyhound will be coming after them soon, if he’s not already.” Janet turned to Elvis. “It’s awful cold in Minnesota this time of year.”

“Yeah, it is.” Elvis spun the key ring on his finger as he walked to the car. “So I guess we’ll start in Florida.”





CAMILLA'S ASSISTANT was cordial but firm. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but Ms. Madison requests your presence in the conference room."

"Okay." DeShear sat on the edge of the desk, rubbing his chin. "We'll be there in a second."

"She'd like you to report now." A smile tugged at the young lady's lips. "I believe her exact words were, 'If he resists, I'll have the federal marshals shoot him and drag him to my meeting.'"

"Okay, let's go." DeShear stood. "That crew cut guy would probably do it."

Most of the meeting went faster than DeShear expected. The Vice President was on and off in less than five minutes, asking to be kept up on the situation as things unfolded. The FBI and CIA asked very few questions, as did the federal marshal service. The Director of the IRS seemed to take it all in stride, as though this sort of thing happened every day.

The one person sweating bullets was Camilla—or she would have, if she were the type to sweat. Her poker face was *par excellence*, but keeping her hands under the table while she capped and uncapped her pen, that had been her "tell" going back more than two dozen years.

DeShear was glad he still knew her well enough to catch it. No doubt his pre-meeting antics had caused some of that stress, but it was now a lose-lose proposition to say anything about Lanaya's arsonist activities to anyone.

He studied his client.

*Do I believe her?*

He was still tossing around his options when the person next to him stood and pushed in her chair. Others did the same. The wall screen went dark, and people filed out of the conference room. Cammy stood and gathered her notes.

Only Lanaya and DeShear remained seated, each staring silently across the table at the other. Her gaze appeared hopeful. His, he knew, did not.

"Seems like you two have some unfinished business," Camilla said as she headed toward the door. "You can have the room for a few minutes, but we'll be moving quickly now. Be ready to get in one of our vehicles and head to the airport on my signal."

"Gotcha." DeShear kept his eyes on his client. "I'll be ready."

Lanaya thanked Camilla for the clothing and the hospitality, then turned back to DeShear. She said nothing. The door clicked closed behind Camilla.

DeShear cleared his throat. "I'm not sure what happened at my place . . ."

"You know," Lanaya said. "When I said I had a friend who looked similar enough to me that I could travel using her ID, you didn't question it. Is it not much more likely that the people who are chasing us—who were only chasing me until I came to Tampa—that they found a similar-looking woman to be seen lurking around your apartment?"

"Why not kill me when I was inside, asleep?"

"You weren't the target then," Lanaya said. "I was. But they could definitely send a message once you agreed to meet me. To scare you away from the case. As it happens, you're the type who doesn't back down in the face of a bully. They misjudged you in that. And me."

DeShear shook his head. "I don't know . . ."

"Maybe there were too many people around that night, and the arsonist feared being spotted. Or they couldn't get their lookalike to your apartment until the next morning. Does it matter? We still end

up here, with the IRS getting ready to raid a genetics facility in Indonesia.” She lowered her voice. “And me, wondering what you’re going to do.”

He folded his arms. Across the lobby, Camilla exited her office, shoving an earpiece under her hair and crossing the lobby toward the conference room.

Lanaya leaned forward. “Hamilton—”

“I don’t think you’re the arson type.” He got up from his chair. “You’re too nervous. You’d have been a wreck if you burned my place and then went back with me. And even if I didn’t believe you, if the fire marshal and police can subjugate their concerns for the greater good, who am I to question it?”

Lanaya smiled. “Thank you, Hamilton.”

The conference room door banged open. “They will serve demand letters on Angelus Genetics tonight at 4:55 P. M.” Camilla raised her sleeve to her face, cupping a small microphone in her palm. “Ready all units, we are go. We need to be rolling in ten minutes. Reply with your affirmative and meet me downstairs in the parking lot. The transports are assembling now.”

• • • •

WHEN THE POLICE CRUISER turned south onto Bayshore Boulevard and the convoy of Chevy Suburbans followed, DeShear spoke up. “This isn’t the way to Tampa International Airport.”

“That’s because we are headed to the MacDill Air Force Base airport,” Camilla replied from the front passenger seat. “We’re going to hop on a couple of Cessna Citation X’s, and get our butts to the rally point before anyone even knows we’re gone.”

“We’re flying in Cessnas? Aren’t those a little . . .” He frowned, holding his hands close together.

“Don’t think single engine prop plane.” She held her hands far apart. “Think private jets of the rich and famous—and drug runners. Those babies can reach speeds close to Mach one, and have been refitted to carry twenty passengers.”

The Suburban swerved to pass a slower vehicle, the flashing blue lights of the squad car in front of them leading the way. Cars eased to the right lane as the convoy passed. DeShear grabbed the handle over the window to steady himself when the big vehicle bounced around. “What are the planes refitted from?”

Camilla waved a hand. “We just add seats. Drug dealers like to travel in comfort and style. We can confiscate any asset used in a drug deal, including a forty-million-dollar private jet.”

“And you get to keep them?”

“Yeah.” She adjusted her sunglasses. “The IRS gets to do all kinds of stuff nobody knows about. Flying from MacDill allows fewer eyeballs on us as we depart, too. Hold on.” She lifted the hand mic to her face. “All units, this is Bureau Chief Madison. We have approval to enter the base through the Bayshore Gate. Our escort will meet us there and take us to the airfield. We are cleared for immediate departure.”

“It’s over ten thousand miles to the Indonesia facility,” Lanaya said.

“On these planes, it’ll go by in about ten hours,” Camilla said. “Including pit stops in San Diego and Hawaii. The bulk of the agents and marshals are following in a KC-135, but we’ll have the recon team with us.”

DeShear nodded. “How many people are we bringing?”

“I can’t discuss operational details, but let’s say it’s enough to get the job done. Twice, probably. But it’s a coordinated raid. Everybody storms the Bastille at zero hour, eastern standard time.” Camilla rubbed her hands together. “Those executives will be having heart attacks when they start

getting phone calls about IRS agents busting into every facility they own all over the world.” She reached into the black canvas bag at her feet and pulled out a holstered gun, placing it in her lap. “Man, I love my job.”





THE RELATIVELY SMALL size of the jet, as compared to normal airline jets, belied its prowess. The Cessna Citation X had a sleek exterior and a luxurious interior. Premium leather was in abundance, and the row of bench seats the IRS installed allowed for nearly double the number of passengers the plane originally held.

“I don’t know if it’s worth forty million dollars,” DeShear said as he moved to the rear of the cabin and took a seat. “But it’s impressing the heck out of me right now.”

Lanaya made her way down the aisle, sitting next to DeShear. She spoke loud enough for the other passengers to hear. “I hate to ask, but may I borrow a computer—and does anyone know if this plane gets wifi? It’s been a while since I checked in.”

At the front of the plane, Camilla greeted the FBI and IRS agents as they boarded, handing each an “Indonesian cheat sheet”—simple, common phrases and their translations. “We have secure wifi access,” she said to DeShear, “and I can lend you an IRS laptop. The next meal opportunity is North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego.”

The agents passed back some protein bars. DeShear held up one of the slender green packages. “You guys really come prepared.”

“It’s a ten-hour flight.” Camilla said. “It pays to not have people getting stir crazy in such a small space. Try to learn some Indonesian phrases.”

Sliding down in his seat, DeShear reviewed the cheat sheet. “Is napping allowed?”

“It’s encouraged.” She patted the last agent on the back as he entered the plane, then took a step onto the stairs at the door. “Everybody, strap in. We’ll be wheels up as soon as I go thank the General for the use of his runway.”

DeShear peered through the tiny window. A gray, military-style ATV approached, carrying one large passenger and one skinny driver, both in khaki green uniforms. Camilla shook hands with the large man. After they chatted for a moment, the ATV drove off as quickly as it had appeared. Her business finished, Camilla climbed back on board the little jet.

She clapped the pilot on the back. “Steggy, let’s rock and roll.”

“Roger that, boss.” He flipped a few switches, and the monstrous egg-shaped engine outside DeShear’s window commenced its high-pitched whine.



MISTY WHITE CLOUD SLIVERS zipped past DeShear’s window, barely visible at the jet’s cruising speed.

*Good acoustics and awesome speed. Drug dealers know a good plane when they see one.*

Lanaya typed on the laptop. A metal asset tag reading “Property of Internal Revenue Service” was glued near the left side of the keyboard.

“Paco,” Camilla called from the front of the plane. “Trade seats with me for a sec.”

The agent in front of DeShear got up and moved forward. Camilla took the seat and faced DeShear. “When we get to the facility, we’ll have anywhere from an eight-hour to twenty-hour advantage over anyone not already there. Executives in New York will hop on their corporate jet and hot foot it to wherever the action is, trying to keep us from finding their dirty little secrets. If what

Lanaya says is true, we'll be in the cat bird seat. If she's wrong, or they moved the facility, we'll still be less than ten hours away from anywhere it could be in the world."

"It's there," Lanaya said. "I checked a few days ago. Even Angelus can't move a genetics lab that fast. Not with what they're doing."

"Okay." Camilla nodded. "When we land, you two will be front and center with me. We'll be moving fast, looking for the stuff that's out of place."

DeShear sat up. "Like what?"

"According to your client, the operation is too big to be easily hidden. They have a large group of people, and that means food, water, beds . . . showers and bathrooms, hopefully. The higher the head count, the harder it'll be to hide."

"My reports indicate they disguised it as a grade school," Lanaya said.

"Makes sense. Nobody would question that." Camilla leaned closer. "The real key is in the element of surprise. You start having IRS and FBI agents ask questions to a bunch of scared low-level employees, it's a gold mine."

"What if they request an attorney?" DeShear asked.

"Doesn't matter. Lying to an FBI or IRS agent is a federal crime, and anyone who tries to hold out for an attorney runs the risk of not immediately complying with the demand letter—also a crime. Bottom line, if they don't grant us full access to everything we want, somebody goes to jail."

"Even though we're not on U. S. soil?" Lanaya asked.

"Any American employees that lie or impede the audit will be tossed in the clink the second they set foot back in the good ol' USA. That would include the board of directors, the executives, and any key project managers."

"Wow."

"Don't mess with the IRS." Camilla smiled. "We have FBI agents with us that are experts in human trafficking, and DEA agents who'll dig up the money laundering links. You two will stick by my side and guide the investigators. Not everything will be on site, and Lanaya, you'll know what's missing. All I need is one on-site person in authority to open their mouth about the process, and we're all set."

"Pfft," Lanaya huffed. "Ask them."

Camilla cocked her head. "What?"

"Simply ask them," Lanaya said. "Most of these geneticists are former or future professors. They love to brag about their work, especially to people who don't seem to understand it. With a few of the right questions, they'll kick into condescending lecture mode and tell you all about the place."

DeShear nodded. "Then the right person can ask a few key follow up questions . . ."

"Which," Lanaya said, "having already engaged, they'll be remiss not to answer."

"Not answering will be considered an impediment to the audit." Camilla rubbed her hands together. "A fact that I'll be only too happy to explain. Answering will tip their hand."

"Wow," Lanaya said. "And while they're hesitating, trying to think of what they ought to do or not do, the noose will tighten. Answer, lose your job. Don't answer, go to jail. I like it."

"We'll have this whole place bagged and tagged before the board gets here," Camilla said. "Then we interview the executive committee, and anything that doesn't match what we've already been told, somebody's going to jail. These witnesses will flip to our side and rat on each other like you've never seen."

Lanaya looked out the window. "It's hard to believe we're so close to shutting this whole sordid mess down."



“We’re close. Real close.” Camilla stood, returning to the front of the plane. “Keep it together, though, because things never go exactly as planned.”

Lanaya sat back and re-opened the laptop, entering the three, twelve-digit passwords to access the black screen site.

“Back to work, huh?” DeShear said. “Good for you. I think I’m going to catch a little slee—”

Lanaya gasped.

“What is it?” DeShear sat up. “What’s wrong?”

Her face white, Lanaya turned the computer to him, displaying the only message.

*Your life is in danger. The Greyhound is heading to Indonesia. DO NOT GO to the Angelus site there.*

*-Double Omega*





THE TAIL LIGHTS OF Dr. Hauser's Rolls Royce shut off with the engine, and the heavy driver's door swung open. A foot, clad in an Italian leather loafer, stretched out to the concrete floor of the parking garage, followed by a dark, wooden cane. Eventually the other foot appeared, and the tiny, stoop-shouldered old man himself.

Dr. Hauser's knobby fingers gripped the car door until he was certain his feet would keep him upright, then he let go and shoved his hand into his suitcoat pocket. He took a half step—and abruptly stopped. In the spot next to the one marked “Reserved for the Chairman of the Board, Angelus Genetics,” the van door slid open. Two men and a woman stepped out.

The closest man to the doctor had a dark goatee. He glanced at the old man's cane. “Arthritis?”

Hauser narrowed his eyes, a white puff escaping his lips as he spoke. “Excuse me?”

“The cane,” the man said. “Is it because you have arthritis? Your knees give you problems in cold weather?”

“I'm old.” Dr. Hauser frowned, looking over his expensive but ill-fitting suit. “Everything gives me pain in cold weather. Warm weather, too.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe my news will take some of the sting out of this frosty December morning.”

“So you're not here to rob me, then.”

“No.”

“Good.” The doctor pulled his hand out of his suit coat pocket, holding a .38. “I'd have hated to put a bullet hole through the pocket of this jacket. It's a Brunello Cucinelli. Cashmere and silk.”

The man smiled. “You know, I wondered why a man who drives a Rolls Royce would walk around alone in a parking garage. People who drive a Rolls have things other people want to take from them.”

“I park here because it's my parking spot and I'm a creature of habit. This has been my parking spot at Angelus Genetics for over a decade. But I'm not stupid, either.” He slid the gun back into his pocket. “We live in dangerous times, and they keep getting more dangerous.” Pointing to his car, the doctor sighed. “Did you know the Silver Cloud comes with bulletproof glass and run-flat tires, as standard equipment? No world should need cars like that.”

He raised his chin and peered down his nose at his three companions, his words echoing off the concrete walls of the parking garage. “Well, then, I suppose you've come to talk business. You are recently from Atlanta, I take it?”

“We are, sir.” The man lowered his voice. “And we are here to report a successful set of conclusions regarding the unfortunate incidents that took place in Centennial Park.”

“They're dead, are they? Both of them?”

The man nodded.

“Good. Can't say I'm unhappy about that. I did the best I could to find competent people the first time, but one doesn't simply Google ‘assassins’ and get ten good killers from Angie's List.”

“Angie's Hit List, maybe.”

“So why are you here?” The doctor's voice was gravelly and low, almost a mumble. “I thought payment had been arranged through my attorney.”

“Mr. Jennings saw to it that me and my associates were paid very well. We feel our relationship has advanced to a point where you’d want to retain our services for some additional challenges the company seems to be facing at the moment.”

“The IRS?” The doctor growled, hoisting his cane at his car. “That’s where I’ve just come from, meeting with the lawyers about the *Infernal* Revenue Service. They slapped a demand letter on us and now I have to catch a plane to keep their big noses out of our business in Indonesia. Still, not a good idea to start shooting government types. There are a lot of them, and some carry big rifles and drive tanks.”

“Sir, we have come to believe the geneticist and her friend are on the way to Indonesia.”

“And how,” the doctor cocked his head, “did you come to believe that?”

“We get paid well for our services, and in turn we pay our sources well. Those government types with the big guns? Notoriously underpaid, as are cops and IRS agents. We simply network enough to let people know we can assist them with their financial burdens, and information magically flows to us.” He looked around the garage. “It’s amazing what a teller at a police or military credit union can tell you about folks with top secret clearances who are struggling to make ends meet.”

The doctor nodded. “I’m impressed with your candor—and it takes a lot to impress me. Go on.”

“We’ve also recently learned that a small group of people have been quietly making key employees of Angelus and its subsidiaries disappear. With you and the other board members all rushing to get together to protect your Indonesian asset—the largest asset on the Angelus balance sheet—I think it’s very unlikely these assassins would waste such an opportunity.”

“I don’t like the idea of guns, mister . . .”

“Presley. But please—call me Elvis. And these are my associates, Janet Jackson and George Michael.”

“Hmm. As I say, I don’t care for guns—unless they’re mine, and they’re pointing at people who’d like to kill me. Then I like guns a great deal. In this case, I’d like to place an order for as many guns—and people to use them—as are necessary to ensure I return safely from my overseas business trip, and to subdue any particular element that dislikes the way I run Angelus Genetics. Am I talking to the right party, Mr. Presley?”

Elvis grinned. “You are, sir.”

“Good. And just so we are absolutely crystal clear, you need to be completely successful in this venture, or the first task of your replacement will be making sure you and your colleagues disappear.”

“I’d hoped our work cleaning up the mess in Atlanta would be proof enough.”

“Never hurts to remind the service provider what’s at stake.” The doctor waved a hand, shuffling toward the garage exit. Elvis followed.

“Atlanta was petty cash,” Dr. Hauser said. “If they’re coming for me in Bali, I want a small army to meet them. See Jennings’ people for the money, like last time, and get enough hitters so you can eliminate this threat without breaking a sweat. I want no mistakes this time.”

“Not a problem. Can we expect any help from the Indonesian army?”

“For what I’m paying their prime minister, I certainly hope so. But let’s face it, they’re not exactly the U. S. Marines, are they? Or should I say former Marines?” He glanced at Elvis’ companions. “I’ll arrange for some speedy jets to get you and your first team where you need to go. Obviously, you can’t all fly to Bali with us on our plane, but I’ll accommodate two of you. The others will travel on jets that are just as good and just as fast. How soon can you be ready?”

“I took the liberty of making some arrangements in anticipation of this meeting going well. My people can board a plane within the hour, with a not-so-small army to follow by this time tomorrow

morning.”

“We might not have that long. And what about this Greyhound character? Think he’s already in the air?”

Elvis’ jaw dropped.

“You’re not the only one with contacts, Mr. Presley. Nor are you, Miss Jackson and Mr. Michael. This is serious business, and I do my homework. You go airborne when my plane does, understood?” The old man turned and leaned close to Elvis, his stale coffee breath permeating Presley’s nose. “This situation ends only when a few bullets come to a stop in the back of The Greyhound’s skull. And anyone who worked with him—or even considered working with him—needs to die, too. Slit the throats of their sleeping children and then burn the house down. I want my message delivered in the absolute harshest terms possible, so no one ever tries anything like this again.”

Presley stood, staring at the tiny man, not speaking.

“Too rich for your blood, Elvis?” The doctor wiped a drop of spit from the corner of his mouth.

“No. Just . . . not what I was expecting, sir.”

“Good.” Dr. Hauser’s shaking hand let go. He walked away, his cane pounding the garage floor with each step. “Then The Greyhound won’t expect it, either.”

• • • •

“MY HEAD WON’T STOP pounding.” The Greyhound rolled over and squeezed his eyes shut, pulling a pillow over his eyes to block the light. “What did you give me?”

“Steroids,” Maya said, crossing the hotel suite and coming to the bed. “Among other things. The new mix seems to help the others for extended periods, but it’s a daily routine.”

She took his pulse and temperature. Both were normal for a change.

“Steroids, huh? Well, if that’s what it takes.” He sat up, pushing the sheets aside. “I have to tell you, aside from the headache, I feel great. Like I finally have energy again.”

Maya watched him stretch. “It’s an experimental mix, and it’s expensive, even to a big-time hedge fund manager like you.”

“Former hedge fund manager. Now I do this. How much?”

“Five thousand a dose, and you need several doses a day, but the results are encouraging.”

He stood and walked, flexing the muscles of his half-naked torso. “It’s worth it. If you can get me a version that doesn’t come with the skull splitter, I’ll take a month’s worth.”

Maya picked up an oxygen sensor and blood pressure monitor, carrying them to him. “Sit down so I can get your vitals. I said the drug is new. It doesn’t have a version without a headache side effect yet.”

He sat in the chair by the desk, holding his arm out to her. “I’ll still take a month’s worth.” He drew a deep breath as she wrapped the blood pressure cuff around his arm. “Where’s Dominique? I have some traveling to do.”

“She split for work. Hold still.”

He frowned. “I told her to quit. She knows I have enough money to take care of whatever she needs.”

“She needs to stay connected. Her sources bring in half of our information, so let her.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He looked around the room. “What about Britt? Where’s he?”

“Getting breakfast. We weren’t sure when you’d wake up, and we were hungry.”

The Greyhound stared at her. “How long have I been out?”

She waited until the blood pressure cup had deflated before she replied. “Long enough to make us think you might not wake up again.”

“That’s amazing. I haven’t slept more than three hours at a time in months.” He stood again, pacing around the room like a panther. “I really feel strong. This mix may be the one.”

“You say that every time. It has other side effects, like irritability, but I’m not sure we’d notice that one. Plus the usual anger flashes and rage that come with steroids.” She scribbled some notes on a pad. “But with proper dosages, we can keep you running for a week at a time at this stage, maybe more. That’s what we’re seeing in the tests.”

“A week? Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“You haven’t been around, and it’s a trial drug. I can’t just grab a jug of it and board a plane. I’ve been stealing a dose here and there on the side and having a private lab make more for me in secret. The bill for that has been big. Even you’ll think so.”

He went to the closet and grabbed a suitcase, tossing it on the bed and opening it. “Doesn’t matter. If we own the patent rights, we’ll make it back.” Returning to the closet, he clutched an armful of shirts and pants against his chest, carried them to the suitcase, and dropped them in. “And money won’t matter to me if I die from not having your special cocktails. So get me a month’s worth. I have a plane to catch.”

• • • •

THE CESSNA BOUNCED from turbulence. DeShear grabbed the headrest of the seat in front of him to stabilize himself from the jolts. “I have to admit, I thought I’d like Hawaii more. But the airport looked great out the window. I almost saw a palm tree, I think. Very . . .” He glanced at the cheat sheet. “*Indah.*”

From her seat at the front of the plane, Cammy took a bite of a donut and flipped him off.

“Don’t make jokes.” Lanaya opened the laptop again. “The black screen site has gone dark, and that message is scary to me.”

“I know,” DeShear said. “I’m sorry. Look, you said Double Omega died, so this could be a hoax of some sort—”

“It’d be the first in the history of the site.”

“Okay, well, whoever The Greyhound is, he or she will be running into a lot of armed FBI agents if they try anything.”

She shook her head. “Nobody can access the site unless they know the codes, and those are extremely secure. Greyhound may be a code name for the group behind the murders of the Angelus employees.”

“But what I was getting at is, if your friend is dead, somebody’s posing as her. If it’s not a hoax, it’s either intended to scare you out of coming, or it’s a warning to be very careful if we come. So . . . who has access to the site?”

She leaned back in the seat and stared at the plane ceiling. “At our peak, there were a few dozen users. We asked questions before admitting anyone, and security held up tight. Up until a few months ago, I felt very good about the site.”

“What happened a few months ago?”

“Get ready,” Camilla said. “Seatbelts on. We’re going up again for the next leg. We land in Bali in about two hours.”

Lanaya knitted her hands. “Hamilton, if it’s been breached, then who knows what information has been compromised?”

“Okay, calm down.” He placed a hand over hers. They were trembling. “Let’s go over the facts. It doesn’t matter if The Greyhound is headed for Indonesia. We wanted him there. That helps us. Next, whoever he brings, we never expected him to come alone—and Cammy has a ton of heavily armed people on our side to guard us.”

Lanaya nodded. “I suppose that’s true.”

“So somebody was trying to help you with that message. That’s a good thing. It’s not the dead girl posting messages from beyond the grave, so the question is, who is it really? But as long as we’re in the hands of these fine folks with all the weaponry . . .” He pointed at the others on the plane. “I think we’ll be okay.”

“My brain knows all that, but my heart won’t listen.” She sighed. “It keeps worrying and beating fast. I think the pounding in my chest is so loud, it’s keeping everyone on the plane awake.”

DeShear smiled. “Yeah, well, if you weren’t worried, you wouldn’t be human. Just . . . close your eyes and focus hard on something else. Like your kids. Getting them ready for bed on a school night, making them brush their teeth, fighting with them for five more minutes of TV. Focus on that. See if you accidentally fall asleep. We have a big day ahead of us.”

“My youngest always does that.” She curled up in the seat, resting her head in the leather cushion and facing him. “Every night, it’s ‘Five more minutes, Mom? Pleeeeease?’”

“Typical kid.” DeShear shook his head, chuckling.

“I miss them, Hamilton.”

He put his arm over her shoulder and patted her on the back. “You’ll see them soon, don’t worry.”

“Promise?” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“Promise.”







SHE STARED AT THE PICTURE. It hadn't faded. Neither had the memories.

Sitting in her car, the woman tapped a cigarette out of the teal-colored pack and placed it between her lips. Her trembling fingers dug through her purse and found the butane lighter. With a flick, the little flame appeared. She held it to the tip of the cigarette and inhaled, heat and bitter smoke flowing over her tongue and down her throat, filling the insides of her lungs.

She still wasn't used to it. Never would be, probably.

*Smoking can kill you.* She'd heard that how many times over the years? She'd said it, too. Didn't matter. It was a habit of necessity, and had been for quite some time. One does what one must.

She breathed out, the smoke cascading across the steering wheel of the Mercedes and into the windshield, rolling slowly outward over the dash board.

Her father used to lower the driver's window a little when he smoked. That was when she was a child, and doctors in TV ads actually recommended certain brands of cigarettes over others. "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette," the black and white ads proudly boasted. Men in white jackets sat at desks puffing away; elegant ladies wearing strapless gowns and pearls blew streams of white past their lipstick, then smiled at the camera.

Dad always cracked his window so the cigarette fumes would escape as he drove. The smoke obeyed, too, curling upwards from the glowing tip of the cigarette and dancing in the sunlight before getting sucked out near the side view mirror. But the smell lingered anyway, and the children all got plenty of second-hand smoke during the long drives. When they jumped into the pool at the Holiday Inn that night, their young faces would turn up and frown as the water unlocked the smoke smell from their hair and ran it down their cheeks.

She wore her hair down to her butt back then, so hers smelled the most. But they were kids. They didn't know any better. Children don't know about the dangers of the world, and they aren't supposed to.

Children.

She stared at the picture. "Children are a precious gift—of constant worry," a friend had joked a few weeks after her oldest was born. "Welcome to parenthood."

Sleepless nights filled with feedings, or diaper interruptions in the middle of dinner, those were nothing compared to worrying if the baby's reflux was preventing her medicines from fully being digested, or waking up every hour to see if her fever had subsided. After the divorce—she married too young, to her high school sweetheart—it was just the two of them, a young mother and her daughter, and the bond between them grew, but the concerns multiplied. Worrying if she was growing fast enough, learning to ice skate as well as the other kids in her class, worrying about good grades and making friends at school and talking to boys. When life dealt her a good turn and she was able to go back to school, she still worried about her baby. About teaching her to drive and calling before curfew and applying to colleges and getting a good job out of school.

A gift of constant worry? It wasn't so. The worry ends.

She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. A few more minutes.

She took another puff, the tip of the cigarette glowing. Closing her eyes, she eased her head into the soft leather seat and blew the smoke out, letting it fill the car.

The face from the picture smiled in her mind, growing from toddler to adult in the blink of an eye, but she used to play and laugh with her two young brothers. The three children were close, as siblings should be. Loving.

The picture was the last one taken with all three together. Her babies. She couldn't bear to look at the more recent pictures that displayed only two of her children. That wasn't fair, she knew, but the pain was still too much. Too intense. Too raw. Pain like that never goes away. A parent learns to live with it, but it's always there, raising its volume occasionally to stab at the heart and break it all over again.

The other two said they understood, and they did. They shared the loss. But they didn't really. Not as fully as she did. They couldn't, at their age.

Another look at the clock. How much time should she let pass? She allowed herself fifteen minutes for smoke breaks, at mid-morning, to establish the pattern. But today she sat in the car past the allotted time. The cold weather seemed too refreshing to pass on, so she stubbed out her cigarette and cracked the window, allowing the icy breeze to float through the car.

She hated smoking. But habits are habits.

As she slid the picture back into her wallet, the voice of Dr. Hauser came to her. She hadn't noticed him pull in; normally Marcus would have been there hours ago. In the corner of the garage, he and another man spoke, with a man and a woman nearby, watching.

Their conversation was quiet from that distance, but the words carried through the concrete garage. They were too far away to hear everything, but she could hear enough.

All she saw was the face of her daughter, the oldest, smiling from the photo. The last photo she had of her family together.

She slid down in her seat and listened as the men spoke.

Killing a child is a terrible thing. Threatening to kill the other two surviving children will get most parents to agree to anything.

For a while.

Then the hands of fate work their magic. Fighters gotta fight, and she was a fighter. If she hadn't been one before, she became a fighter after her daughter's murder.

The death of a child will do that, too. Especially when you got the kid a job at your company.

The conversation ended. The old man limped across the parking garage, pounding the concrete with his cane. The noise echoed through the cold, still morning like shots being fired at a gun range.

When he was gone, she sat for a while, staring at the clock and wondering how long to wait before she entered the Angelus Genetics headquarters building. Five minutes more, maybe ten. Or possibly she'd run an errand to pretend she hadn't been sitting in the parking lot at all.

Ten minutes might not even be enough, but Dr. Marcus Hauser was a very important, very busy man. He wouldn't be sitting in the lobby watching for her, and she wouldn't mention where she'd taken her break. No one would ask, but if they did, maybe she could say she walked around outside for a few minutes. She'd done that before on cold days. No one would question it.

Ten minutes, then, and a short walk after. That should do it.

It took an eternity for the ten minutes to pass, but when they did, she got out of her car and exited the far side of the garage, away from the spot with the sign that said "Reserved for the Chairman of the Board, Angelus Genetics."

She circled around to approach the front doors from the other side, as if she'd been walking. Simple and effective.

The wind picked up, tossing her hair, her heels clicking and clacking over the hard sidewalk. Drawing a deep breath, she approached the big glass doors and checked her reflection. Normal, and yet nothing of the sort. Not anymore. Not for a long time now—Hauser had seen to that. But she was functional, performing her job as before to all eyes who cared to watch, and that's what mattered.

Pretending to be a smoker so she could escape the corporate walls and covertly pass information along to others about the illegal side of Angelus Genetics, that was simply a habit created of necessity, and had been for quite some time.

One does what one must.

She pulled the heavy door open and stepped inside, smiling at the receptionist. The young man in the headset smiled back, then punched a button on the phone console and waved at her.

“You have a call on line three, Dr. Carrera.”





THE JET HAD BARELY touched down at the Ngurah Rai airport before the agents were up and moving. The man seated in front of DeShear stood and stretched. “Time to put on our party dresses for the big dance.”

The door opened and the humidity of the island swept into the plane, like entering a bathroom during someone else’s shower. A United States Marine Lieutenant in khaki green camo gear boarded the jet. He matched the image on his phone to the woman standing in front of him. “Welcome to Bali, Bureau Chief Madison. I don’t know how much local interaction you and your people will have, but the fine people of Indonesia primarily speak Indonesian—although many speak decent English. Be advised, fair skin and American accents will stick out. Enjoy your lunch, and good luck.”

The Lieutenant left the plane, followed by the agents. DeShear and Lanaya exited last, with Camilla.

“You two stay with the team.” Camilla put on her sunglasses. “The other agents will be landing in a moment. I need to rendezvous with a representative of the Indonesian government.”

DeShear squinted in the bright light, holding a hand up to shield his eyes. On the shadeless airfield, the sun was hotter than a summer swamp. “You meeting anybody I’d have heard of?”

Camilla scrolled through pages of maps on her phone. “Dina Wulan, special assistant to the prime minister.”

“Nope. Never heard of him.”

“Her.”

A Mercedes limo approached, flying the red and white flag of Indonesia from the side of its hood. A Marine waved to Camilla as he led several people toward the vehicle.

“Looks like this might be her now,” Camilla said. “I’ll see you two back at the hangar.”

DeShear followed the agents from his plane across the scorching tarmac to the Delta hangar as another Cessna jet pulled up. A small jet landed on the runway behind them.

“Hamilton,” Lanaya hurried her pace to stay next to him, looking around the airfield. “Are you the least bit nervous?”

“I’m definitely a little out of my element.” He spoke loudly, to be heard over the whine of the jet engines. “But that’s not unusual in my line of work. How are you holding up?”

“Oh, very nervous.” She rubbed her arms like she was chilly. “Death threats tend to do that to me.”

He stopped and put a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll be okay while we’re with these guys.” He pointed to the group of agents assembling in the hangar. “Focus on what Camilla told us. When we get to the lab, it’ll be our job to notice what’s out of place.”

“She said that was my job.”

“I get to help you.” He smiled, patting her shoulder. “We’re a team.”

The hangar was hot and stuffy, but it offered a way to get out of the blazing sun. DeShear wiped his brow, glancing around. Dust blew in from every hole and crack in the aging airplane garage. Across the runways, the trees of the thick jungle swayed in the breeze.

Folding tables and chairs had been set up to allow the team members to eat. DeShear approached a table where a Marine laid out small bags. “Are these any good?”

“Best chow in the world, sir.”

“Really?”

“Yes sir. Much better than dog chow or cat chow—but it’s still chow.”

“People chow, huh? Great.” He took two of the rectangular bags from the young man. The next table offered unchilled bottles of water. He grabbed two and took a seat next to Lanaya, handing her a bottle and an MRE. “Lunch is served.”

A woman in camouflage approached them. “Ms. Kim?”

“Yes,” Lanaya said.

“These are for you.” She handed Lanaya an large manila envelope. “From Bureau Chief Madison.”

“Thank you.” Lanaya opened the envelope and pulled out a set of blueprints. “It’s the plans for the Angelus Genetics lab here, dated from before they left Arizona. I bet they didn’t stick to these.”

“Maybe not,” DeShear said. “But we can get some current satellite images and see what’s changed. Let’s have a look at your laptop.”

A Marine captain in green fatigues called out from the front of the hangar. “Listen up. The buses for Bureau Chief Madison and her teams will report in five. Be ready to move.”

DeShear waved at him. “Captain, we need wifi.”

“Hot spot in the rear office, sir. But we still leave in five.”

“Got it.” DeShear stood, turning to Lanaya. “Let’s see if we can get an overview image of the facility and take screen shots to review it on the bus. Maybe load it into my phone if we get a chance, too.”

The IRS agents remained seated, studying spreadsheets on their laptops, while a crowd of FBI people gathered near the hangar exit.

“Come on.” Lanaya stood. “We’d better hurry up and find that hot spot.”

• • • •

THE MERCEDES STRETCH limo cruised around the perimeter of the airport. Inside, a small woman in a dark gray business suit extended her hand to Camilla. “Ms. Madison. It is very nice to meet you. I trust our accommodations have been satisfactory so far.”

“Yes, madam assistant director.” Camilla shook hands and settled back into her seat. “The IRS is very grateful for the cooperation of your government, and the Vice President sends his regards.”

“Ah, yes.” The assistant nodded. “A good golfer, your Vice President. It must have been very difficult to lose to the Prime Minister, without appearing to do so, the last time they played.”

“Well,” Camilla said. “Our Vice President was once a diplomat, ma’am.”

“I see.” She folded her petite hands in her lap. “Can you tell me what your plans are for your stay? I understand you brought many people with guns. The country of Indonesia does not want trouble with our friend the United States.”

“Of course not. We are only here to conduct an audit.”

“Does an audit require so many people and weapons? Our friends to the north are nervous about so many jets landing. It almost appears to be an advance team before an invasion.”

Camilla took a deep breath. “Those concerns are understandable. In this case, we need to move fast, but we fear the subject of the audit, a U. S. company, may object to our presence and offer some resistance. We intend to make an impression with a show of strength to them, nothing more.” She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, I was told your government was informed of all this.”

“Sometimes things have a way of changing. In my position, it’s best to keep informed. You are planning quite a show, as you say.”

The car stopped. The uniformed driver got out and opened Camilla's door.

"I will relay your words to our Prime Minister," the assistant said. "Do your best to see that the show of strength remains a show only. Indonesia does not want a war."







AS HIS ESCORT VEHICLE bounced its way along the road to the genetics lab, Dr. Hauser's phone rang. He checked the screen but didn't answer, scowling at the driver instead. "Can you find any more potholes to hit? Don't you people know how to pave a road?"

Wiping his brow with a handkerchief, Dr. Hauser pressed a button on the phone and held it to his ear. "Dina, how are you?"

"Welcome again to Indonesia, my friend. All of Bali welcomes you. Was your flight enjoyable?"

"I'm afraid not. These old bones don't travel as well as they used to."

"A pity," Dina said. "Perhaps a visit to one of our many waterfalls will renew you, Doctor. Some are said to contain the powers of magical healing. Remember, the one in Nungnung is not far from your facility."

"You tell me every time I come. The pictures look beautiful—a giant river that takes a long, steep drop into a vast pool, surrounded by lush tropical foliage. Very pretty."

"And magical. People write their problem on a piece of wood from the *pala* tree and throw it in the river, because whatever goes over the falls is never seen again."

"But it's still located in the hills at the end of a long footpath, right?" He stared at his cane. "And ever since I've taken to needing a walking stick, places like that will remain a longer jaunt than I care for. Maybe you can arrange a tour of it for one of my next trips. We can ride in one of those military helicopters my company convinced Uncle Sam to give you."

"Excellent suggestion, Doctor."

A low-hanging palm tree branch slapped the side of the car as it passed. "I understand you've had some other American visitors arrive today, Dina. What of our friends?"

"A Miss Madison of the IRS has landed. She brings many agents from FBI and ATF. Many small jets, with big jets coming. We are, of course, concerned. We value our relationship with all of our friends—the American government, and of course our generous business friends who bring jobs to this country."

Hauser frowned, raising his voice. "The IRS is trying to embarrass me and my executives to our shareholders. Well, I have a small army arriving at ten A. M. tomorrow." He jabbed the car seat with his index finger. "Then we'll see this Miss Madison and her little band of bookworms tuck their tails between their legs and run home."

"Please choose your pejoratives carefully, Doctor. Words such as 'army' are very distressing for the people I report to. Indonesia does not want a war."

"Figure of speech." The doctor leaned back, tugging his linen *guayabera* shirt to send puffs of air across his chest. "I simply mean I have a business to run, and I don't need distractions like this. I'm sure your boss understands."

"My superior reads words in American newspapers like the New York Times, that tell the world Indonesia is still a semi-dictatorship, and that your company is engaged in illegal activities here. Of course, we both know neither of these things are true, and that your IRS will not find anything at your facility to the contrary."

"You have my word. News reports are merely a pack of lies and gossip, written by morons hoping to get a Pulitzer prize. Whoever can embarrass the biggest fish, wins. We should do it like you, with more government control of the press. Then nothing would get out that we don't want out."

“Of course, Indonesia has a free press now, Doctor.”

“Uh huh. But either way, tomorrow morning, my ar—my set of *auditors*—will land. And shortly after that, a speedy resolution of these unpleasanties will occur.”

“Do you expect Miss Madison’s people to wait? We were told—”

“I don’t care what they do.” Hauser dabbed his upper lip with the handkerchief. “I’ll stall them with presentations about our operation and its vast importance to the world of science, but a bunch of number crunchers won’t have the technical expertise to begin to understand the intricacies of the genetic selection process. Following the presentation is a fancy reception and dinner at the Viceroy. I want to appear friendly and cooperative, but perhaps you could arrange for the power at their hotel to go out, so there’s no air conditioning and they can’t sleep. Cranky auditors tend to want to go home quickly.” He chuckled. “But either way, their report will end up saying whatever we want.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Oh, we have plenty of friends in Washington, as we do here. We can get an IRS report slow-walked to the point that a snail would look speedy by comparison. Maybe even bog it down until a new administration gets elected. One that’s more open-minded about our operations.”

“As always, you have thought of everything, Dr. Hauser.”

“Glad I could offer you and the people of Indonesia a lesson in strategic planning, Dina. Feel free to come to the dinner tonight. It should be quite elaborate by third world dictatorship standards.”

“I’m afraid I’ll be working late tonight, sir. Our friends to the north and elsewhere have expressed concerns about all of this. Indonesia does not want a war.”

The car came to a stop in front of a set of tall, iron gates. Men with machine guns blocked the entrance. Behind them, a series of huge warehouses spanned over acres of cleared jungle.

“I understand. Go hold their hands. Tell them, sometimes you simply have to do what needs to be done—and often the best choice is clear, but unpleasant.”

An attendant looked at the driver’s credentials, and the gates opened.

“And don’t worry, I’ll take care of things at my lab.”

• • • •

THE BLUEPRINTS WERE unfolded over a filing cabinet in the hangar’s small office. DeShear stared at the pages, rubbing his chin. “On paper, the genetics facility doesn’t look as big as I thought. I’m not sure what I expected, but not this. A building or two? Seems kinda small.”

From her seat at a nearby desk, Lanaya glanced up from her computer. “I didn’t think they’d match, but I didn’t expect them to be this different, either.” She pointed to the overhead images on her screen. “I count twenty buildings, all over a hundred feet long. That’s a far bigger campus than any research facility I’ve ever seen.”

“How big was the one in Arizona?”

“Two buildings that size, with an annex. A lot like the blueprints.”

“So they used the same format to get a toe in the door, and then expanded.” He shrugged. “I guess that makes sense. The labor’s cheaper here.”

“Hamilton, with that many buildings, they could house every genetics lab in the world. What we want is in those buildings, I’m certain of it. But they’re so big, and there’s so many . . . And I’m sure there’s security.”

A Marine opened the office door. “Time to go, folks. Your ride has arrived.”

“Thanks, private.” He nodded to Lanaya. “Grab a screen shot.”

She frowned and tapped the keyboard. "I'm not sure what good it'll do. Who knows how often the Indonesian government allows these satellite images to be updated."

"It's a start. We'll learn a lot more once we're able to get on site and start looking around. 'Improvise, adapt and overcome,' right, private?"

The young Marine smiled. "Oohrah, sir."

• • • •

THE ESCORT VEHICLE carrying Dominique Carerra and some other Angelus board members pulled up to the Viceroy hotel. Its expansive, elegant white façade and columns were a sharp contrast to the jungle nearby.

A uniformed attendant opened her door. "Welcome to the Viceroy Bali, Miss Carerra."

"It's Doctor Carerra," she said, sliding out of the car.

"How clumsy of me. My apologies, madam." The man bowed and greeted the other board members by name. "Bali welcomes you all. Please, follow me. Your suites have been prepared, and our staff will attend to your baggage."

A red helicopter approached, with an "Air Bali" logo painted on its side. It swooped in and landed on the helicopter pad across the drive. The attendant waved to the pilot before returning his attention to his guests. "This way, please."

The lobby of the grand hotel was lavish. Its dark bamboo ceiling stretched upwards three stories in an elegant cone shape, towering over the white marble floor below. Each suite was equally impressive. The massive beds looked out onto stone balconies and the lush landscape beyond.

A young bellman followed Dr. Carerra into her suite, her suitcase riding on his shiny brass cart. "Shall I unpack for you, madam?"

"Thank you, no. I can manage." She inspected the room. It had one phone on the nightstand, and a large stone ashtray on the coffee table. "But I'd like a pack of cigarettes. Salem lights, if you can find them."

"That will be no problem, madam."

"And then I'd like to walk the grounds and stretch my legs. Can you recommend a running trail?"

"I shall have the concierge call your room, if it pleases madam." The boy said. "She will know the best path to recommend."

"Very good." She tucked a bill into his hand. "Thank you."

"Thank you, madam." He bowed, his eyes widening upon seeing the denomination of the bill. "I am Rafi, and I am assigned to this floor. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to call."

"Thank you, Rafi." She strolled to the balcony. "I shall need some things from time to time during my stay. And please have the concierge call me about a trail."

The young man bowed again, backing toward the door. "Right away, madam."

When the door closed behind him, she opened her laptop and scanned the Viceroy's many scenic hiking paths, to locate the one that ran closest to the nearby Kamandalu Ubud hotel. She made a mental note, shut the computer down, and powered off her cell phone. Crossing to the bed, she reached behind the nightstand and unplugged the room phone.

She grabbed a pair of sneakers and some running clothes from her bag and entered the marble bathroom to change.

• • • •

"DR. CARERRA!" A BOARD member waved at her from the bar. "Will you join us for a drink before we head over to the facility?"

A rotund man passed her in the lobby, answering for her. “Dressed like that, I’m guessing the answer is no, Patel. But Dominique, isn’t this weather too hot for a run?”

Rafi appeared, carrying a teal-green pack of cigarettes in a clear plastic bag marked Viceroy Bali. “Madam, as you requested.”

“Thank you.” She took the cigarettes and slipped them into the hip pocket of her sweat pants. “And thank you, gentlemen, but I’m going to try to exercise my way out of jet lag. A nice, long trail through the hills sounds good.”

Patel strolled into the lobby from the bar, smiling. “That’s a strange combination, Doctor Carerra. Cigarettes and running?”

“A good habit to cover a bad one.” She patted the enormous stomach of the man next to her. “We all have our vices, don’t we Dr. Bruner?”

The men chuckled.

“Yes,” Patel said. “I was about to treat myself to some carrot juice in the bar. I take your point, Doctor.”

“Enjoy your run, Dominique.” Bruner waved a hand, ambling toward the bar. “See you at dinner.”

The bellman walked to the bell stand.

“Rafi,” Dr. Carerra said.

The boy whipped around, snapping to attention. “Yes, madam?”

“The concierge never called me.” She walked toward the front door. “Let’s see about a running trail.”





DESHEAR'S PHONE VIBRATED in his pocket. As the bus rumbled along the broken asphalt, he slid it out and checked the screen.

Text message.

Pressing the icon, the app opened. The sender information said Name Unknown, with no number displaying, but their message was short and clear.

*Check black screen site.*

He sat back, raising his eyebrows. Not a lot of people knew about the site, and even fewer knew he had knowledge of it. Could be a trap.

Next to him, Lanaya sat with her hands in her lap, one massaging the other, a distant look on her face. The last message hadn't been a threat, so maybe this one wasn't.

He chewed his lip and looked at the phone screen again. The message was gone.

Bolting forward, he clicked the app again. There were no messages.

The jungle rolled past as the bus rocked back and forth, sending dust clouds out in its wake. DeShear had never seen a message disappear that way. Not a regular text message. Not without manually deleting it himself.

Its quick disappearance meant whoever sent it didn't want anyone else to see it. How they made it happen, he didn't know.

*It's a move of fear, though. Not strength.*

He nodded to himself. "Lanaya, can you get a signal here? For your computer?"

She lifted her eyes, blinking as if to remove a fog. "What?"

"Can you access your black screen site right now?"

"No, I don't think so." She glanced at the computer. "I thought they said there'd be no access on the bus."

Swaying and jolting with every pothole, he faced the front of the bus, holding the seat in front of him as he stood. "Cammy. Any way to get wifi out here?"

Camilla turned in her seat and looked at him over her shoulder. "I can let you access my hot spot, but out here it'll be slow. They might have wifi at the lab."

He went down the aisle, holding the seat tops with each bumpy step. When he reached Camilla, he brought his face close to her ear. "I'm not sure we can wait until we get to the lab."

"What have you got?"

"Not sure yet. Can you link us in?"

Camilla rose and followed him to the rear of the bus. Opening her phone, she found the laptop signal and watched for it to connect. "All set. It's a weak signal, but it's there."

DeShear faced Lanaya. "Check your black screen site."

"Why?"

"Just check it."

She tapped on the keyboard, bringing up a series of password pages. Each required a code before allowing the user to move on to the next. When she finished, a new window opened and a tiny message icon appeared on the screen. Next to it was a gray box with a blinking cursor, and next to that were three white boxes. The rest of the screen was black.

“Man, you’re making me feel old.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t know what to do on a website like this.”

“That’s entirely the point,” Lanaya looked up from the screen. “It’s only to be accessed by people who know how. For example, normally, you’d type a password or command where the waiting prompt is, right?”

“Sure,” DeShear said.

“If you do, it’ll lock you out, shut down the site for a few hours, and permanently ban this computer’s IP address. The ban keeps hackers from autosearching web addresses. Nobody can afford a sextillion new IP addresses merely to see what’s happening on this little site.” She pointed to the three white boxes. That tells me my hidden password dock is in the third quadrant.”

She slid her finger over the mouse pad until the cursor arrow was in the lower left corner of the screen. It flashed a top hat like the guy in monopoly wore, then disappeared.

“I now have five seconds to enter a code.”

Her hands hovered over the keyboard.

“Uh.” DeShear shifted in his seat. “You’d better hurry.”

She didn’t move, her face blank.

“Lanaya . . .” He leaned forward.

She dropped her fingers onto the keys and typed rapidly. None of the letters or numbers were visible. When she finished, a blue window opened.

“You don’t really have five seconds. You can’t start typing before three seconds have elapsed.”

“Good grief,” DeShear said. “This site’s gonna give me a heart attack and I’m not even using it.”

“That’s also the point. It has many hidden features to keep secrets private. The message won’t appear for thirty seconds. That’s so anyone who accessed this screen would think there was nothing there, or they’d hit a glitch. If they type any key stroke in that time, it locks them out. By shutting the site, it lets every valid user know a breach was attempted. Traffic usually slows down for a day or two after that. But . . .” She shrugged. “There are so many people quitting the site lately, it doesn’t matter. They’re so paranoid it’s been accessed by Angelus, it’s nearly a ghost town, and fewer users means those that remain have a greater chance of being spotted. I’ll probably have to quit soon.” She set her hands in her lap. “Here’s the message.”

*Kamandalu Ubud hotel, room 502*

*- Double Omega*

Camilla looked at DeShear. “What do you think?”

“I think somebody calling themselves Double Omega warned us not to go to Indonesia.” His gaze went to Lanaya. “Now they know we’re here, they’d like to chat.”

“Don’t go,” Camilla said. “If they’re using the name Double Omega, it’s obviously somebody from Angelus.”

“A team leader or project manager, I’m sure.” Lanaya knitted her hands again. “If they know the name Double Omega, they know everything.”

“Hold on,” DeShear said. “It could be an outsider she told things to before she died. Even if it *is* someone from Angelus, we’re still alive, so they might be a friend. There’s no other reason to reach out. I think the first message was trying to help, too.”

Camilla shook her head. “Dash . . .”

“Look, these people killed executives and high-ranking people. They’d never make murdering us a priority over knocking off the board members. And they could just wait until we were in our hotel rooms tonight and whack us then. There’s no reason for the killers to schedule a meeting and leave

that kind of trail.” He peeked at the driver, then looked back to Camilla. “Can we detour this bus to the Kamandalu Ubud hotel?”

“It’s not exactly on the way, but yes, we can take you.”

“Just get us within a half mile,” DeShear said. “We’ll walk the rest. I trust your agents, but I don’t know about a local driver. Who knows what his annual income is. A tipoff about us to someone at Angelus could go a long way to improve his finances.”

Lanaya typed on the laptop. “About seven thousand dollars.”

“What?” DeShear said.

“In Indonesia,” Lanaya pointed at the screen. “The average annual income is about seven thousand dollars.”

Camilla shook her head. “No wonder Angelus moved their lab.”

“Well, then,” DeShear said. “A little cash will go a long way here, and Angelus has a mountain of cash.”

“Dash, listen. You and Lanaya have set me up with a nice sting operation to expose a multinational corporation and their fraudulent business practices. Money laundering, tax fraud—that’s all good for me. What’s your goal in all this now? It’s not to make the IRS look good.”

“I want to stay alive.” Lanaya closed the laptop, her hands shaking. “Angelus employees are dying at the hands of someone who wants vengeance, and my name is on that list. My life has become a mess of hiding and running, and I’ve endangered my family. By coming here, we thought we’d have a chance to expose what Angelus is up to but also draw the killers out.” She glanced at DeShear, lowering her voice. “That they’d come for the Angelus board.”

“They will.” He nodded. “They’ll come. It’s too tempting for them not to. Either at the hotel or somewhere at the lab, the killers will try to make a move—and soon. If they know anything about what’s going on, they’re expecting a bunch of IRS accountants to be here. Cammy, all you have to do is ask the FBI to keep their eyes open, and as soon as the killers try to strike at the board, have the feds grab them. They aren’t expecting that. Then we’ll go to the press and expose Angelus Genetics and all of their illegal operations.”

“Okay,” Camilla said. “So how does going to the Kamandalu Ubud hotel help any of that?”

“I don’t know.” DeShear pounded his fist into his other hand. “But if this message is from an employee at Angelus, they’re risking their neck to send it to us. It might be a good idea to find out what they think is so important.”

• • • •

THE LONG DRIVEWAY OF the Kamandalu Ubud was smooth and even, as was the public road it connected to, but the scorching heat from the jungle had already worked on DeShear and Lanaya as they walked the half mile to the hotel. By the time they were near the front entrance, his shirt was clinging to his chest.

“Next time I tell somebody to drop us a half mile from a hotel in Indonesia and we’ll walk the rest of the way,” DeShear panted, “you smack me.”

Lanaya dabbed her forehead and neck with a handkerchief. “Do you suppose we march right in and knock on the door to room 502?”

“If we’re not supposed to, I’m sure our new friend has figured out some way to let us know that.” DeShear wiped the sweat from his face with his shoulder. “Ready?”

“No!”



Smiling, DeShear put his hand on the hotel's front door. "Just act natural, like we're staying here. Hotel elevators are usually on the far side of the lobby, past the front desk. Walk with determination and act tired."

"I am tired."

"Then it won't be difficult to act that way."

The Kamandalu Ubud was a beautiful hotel, with an extravagant air. The lobby was large and spacious; the service staff friendly. Each greeted the couple as they walked by. DeShear returned their hellos; Lanaya stiffened more and more with each one.

At the elevator, she exhaled sharply.

"What?" he said. "Were you holding your breath?"

She shook out her hands like she was flinging water from them. "My breath, my nerves, my heartbeat. Who knows what we're walking into, Hamilton?"

He folded his hands in front of him, eyeing the row of lighted numbers above the elevator. "We'll be fine." The doors opened. He stepped in and pressed the "five" button on the service panel.

As the lights glowed with each passing floor, Lanaya's hands rubbed faster. The doors opened and DeShear led the way down the hall. At room 502, he stopped, glancing at Lanaya. She rolled her shoulders and took a few short breaths, then wiped her trembling hands on her thighs.

"Okay." She nodded. "Go ahead and knock."

DeShear raised his hand to knock on the door. The latch went down with a sharp mechanical ratchet, and the big door swung open. Standing in the entry was a woman with dark, curly hair, dressed in a sports bra and sweat pants.

Lanaya gasped, turning white.

"What?" DeShear took a sideways step from the door. "What is it?"

"She—she's on the Angelus board." Lanaya backed away. "They've got us."

"I recognize you, too, Dara." The woman stepped forward. "Please come in."

Lanaya held her hands up, shaking her head. She stumbled backwards, bumping into the hallway wall.

"I think you knew my daughter," the woman said. "On the black screen site, she went by the name Double Omega."

Lanaya pressed herself into the wall, sliding to the floor. Her breath came in short spurts.

The woman looked up and down the hallway. "I'm not here to hurt you. Is that what you think?"

"What . . ." Lanaya shrugged. "What . . ."

"Come inside before someone sees us." She held her hand out to Lanaya.

DeShear stood by, watching, unsure what to do. He swallowed hard. "I think it's okay. If she had wanted us dead, we'd be dead by now."

The woman kneeled by Lanaya, whispering. "I want what you want, Dara—the end of Angelus Genetics and its horrendous activities. But people are coming here to kill you, and if you don't listen to me, the only thing that will be ended is you two. Now hurry. There isn't much time."

DeShear helped Lanaya from the floor and onto the couch in the room.

"Mr. DeShear, I'm Dominique Carerra. Lanaya is right, I'm on the board of directors at Angelus Genetics."

DeShear cocked his head. "You called her Dara."

"I know several of her aliases, and I know why you're here. I've been following you through the black screen site." Dominique bit her fingernail. "But now things have gotten . . . out of control. If you're trying to expose Dr. Hauser with an audit, it won't work." She threw her hands out. "Did you

think he wouldn't protect his investment? This laboratory facility is the single most valuable asset Angelus Genetics owns. It's worth hundreds of billions of dollars. This IRS situation you created has caused him to arrange for hundreds of armed killers to be here tomorrow. They'll defend the laboratory and stall any inspections. You don't know him. He's not going to allow anything to jeopardize his work. My daughter and my husband were both lost because of his insidious vision, so I have to be careful while I protect what's left of my family, but I can still help you bring him down."

Dominique stared at them, both of them staring back.

"Hauser has grown rich and arrogant. He thought a few guns at the front gate of the facility here would be enough to keep its secrets safe—and for the most part, he's been correct up until now. He's only been untouchable because he seemed too powerful to oppose. Once that dynamic changes . . ." She shook her head, then peered at DeShear. "Do you still have your phone?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then take pictures. Bring them back to me and I will get them to the media. The drone rooms are the key. I would do it myself, but Hauser will be watching me. I got you these." She dug into her hip pocket and handed them two green plastic cards with a gold-colored chip imbedded in each, and a green Angelus Genetics ID card. "Security will take your picture when you enter the lab. They'll issue you a red temporary ID card for the duration of the IRS audit, which they think you're with. A green ID is executive level access."

DeShear took the ID. His driver's license picture from the Florida DMV had been used for the image.

"These can't get you into every building, but it's the best I could do. The drone rooms require a yellow ID, a top security clearance. For that, use this." She pulled up the leg of her sweat pants and unstrapped a long, thin, black metal case. She placed it on the coffee table.

DeShear picked it up. The case was about the size of two watch boxes laid end to end, and heavier than he expected. Velcro straps had been fitted to it.

"Inside is a strong electromagnet that will deactivate the locks on the far buildings—there, you'll find the drone rooms. Wear it on your leg, Mr. DeShear, as I did. I don't think they're going to be frisking people on the IRS accounting team."

She went to the door. "Wait here a few minutes after I leave, so we aren't seen together. Remember, get the pictures, and get them to me. I will get them to the press."

Holding the heavy case, DeShear looked at her. "I had a hard time believing all this, and I've been in the middle of it. Will the press take your word for it?"

Dominique's face fell as she turned to him. "I'm on the board of directors for what's about to become the most despised company in the history of the world. Trust me, if you bring back pictures of the drone rooms, every news agency on the planet will believe every word I say."

"And the drone rooms?" he asked. "Is that where . . ."

"The drone rooms," Dominique sighed. "Are where you will see the worst depravity the human mind is capable of creating."





DESHEAR WALKED TO THE cabs at the end of the long Kamandalu Ubud driveway. The first two were Toyota Camrys; the next was a Mercedes. “Hello.” He waved at a small cluster of men smoking under a *pala* tree, then pointed to the Mercedes. “Whose cab is this one?”

The closest driver stamped out his cigarette. “Please to go in order, sir.”

“Sorry.” DeShear shook his head. “I’d like this one. I’ll give the cars ahead of it ten American dollars to let the Mercedes go first.” He waved the bills at them. “Deal?”

Two of the men rushed forward to take the money. A third hurried to the Mercedes.

“Thank you.” DeShear clasped his hands together at his chest, bowing. “*Terima kasih.*”

He crouched down in the back seat as the Mercedes neared the front of the hotel. Lanaya walked out the front door and went quickly to the curb, gripping her hands in front of her. “Stop right here,” DeShear said to the cab driver. “Let this lady in, but don’t get out to open the door.”

She climbed into the back of the cab, rigid and shaking, staring straight ahead. The driver pulled the car around the curved driveway and back to the main road.

“Okay,” DeShear sat up. “When we get to the laboratory, Cammy’s group will have already gone in. Hopefully, the Mercedes will help us look a little important, and we’ll proceed as though we’re supposed to be arriving later than the others did. I’m sure someone will take us to them.”

Lanaya leaned to DeShear, whispering in his ear. “Should we talk openly in front of the driver?”

“They can’t all be spies for—” He stopped himself. “Well, they can’t all be spies.”

When the cab arrived at the gate, a short, thin man in a beige uniform approached. The driver rolled down his window, and the steamy jungle heat rolled in. A bronze plaque on the tall limestone columns bore the name Angelus Genetics.

Getting inside was the key to everything else. DeShear pretended to busy himself with his phone, watching carefully while trying not to appear to be watching at all. Next to him, Lanaya sat rigid, knitting her hands.

The attendant had a long, oval face, with narrow slits for eyes and a jaundiced complexion—not at all like the locals. He glanced at the Americans and nodded to the guards at the gate, saying nothing. Two men walked to the center of the entrance in silence and pulled the iron gates open.

As they passed, DeShear looked at them. The gate area was open to the sun, yet they seemed unfazed by the heat. They bore the same yellowish complexion as the attendant, but with rounder faces and an obvious underbite. Their jaws stuck out, not like a boxer getting ready to take on his opponent, but like a child pretending to be a chimpanzee. It gave them a dull, unthinking expression.

“They’re undernourished,” Lanaya whispered, as the cab passed through the gate. “Not well fed, by the look of them, and certainly not eating a balanced diet.”

That hadn’t been the case with most of the people they’d seen in the airport and hotels. Indonesians were noticeably skinnier than an average American, but these men would look gaunt compared to anyone DeShear had met in the country so far.

The cab bumped along a dirt road that was lined with banana trees. They swayed in the breeze as the Mercedes stirred up a dust cloud to greet them. Prior traffic had settled so much tan silt on the leaves, the roadway looked like a black and white movie of itself. Dark shadows cutting between dirt-coated palms were the only colors.

At the end of the road, the laboratory rose up out of the jungle—a giant, windowless blue steel rectangle rising thirty feet into the air. A hundred feet long, it stood like a castle wall, imposing itself on the foliage and daring anything to try to pass. In the center, a large white sphere jutted upwards, an eye staring at the heavens.

The cab pulled in front of a pair of black doors. The sign mounted next to them was painted in red: “All visitors must pass through security.” Above the doors, a black sign contained the word “Security.”

From the front, the entire building appeared to have no other doors or windows. Behind it stood dozens of identical buildings. They spanned four across, and at least ten deep, separated by the wide ribbon of the dirt road. No weeds, not a single blade of grass, grew alongside the structures.

DeShear glanced at the meter and counted out some money. He handed the cash to the driver as Lanaya got out of the car.

As DeShear exited, the driver clasped his hands together at the chest, nodding. “*Berhati-hatilah,*” the man said. “Be safe, my friends.”

It was a friendly gesture, but it made the hairs on the back of DeShear’s neck stand up. He shut the door and the cab sped away, disappearing in a cloud of dust as the jungle swallowed it up. Facing the glass doors, an emptiness crept into DeShear’s stomach.

*The worst depravity the human mind is capable of creating.*

He stood next to Lanaya, staring at the entrance, not at all sure he wanted to see what waited inside.

A blast of cool air rushed over his face as he opened the door. The lobby inside was white and spotless, four gleaming walls and not much else. A stainless steel counter bearing several computers occupied one corner of the space, with a black glass door behind it. To the left was a camera on a tripod, with a series of colored screens next to it.

DeShear took a few steps into the cold room, his footsteps echoing off the empty walls. Across the room, stationed midway between the camera and the counter, was a large, black metal door marked, “Authorized personnel only.” In the door was a thin rectangular window with criss-cross wire mesh inside it.

Other than that, the room was empty—and completely silent.

The uneasy feeling intensified its grip on DeShear’s gut. He took a deep breath and tried to shrug it off. If he let himself appear bothered by the situation, Lanaya would get even more worked up. He looked at her and shrugged. “It’s security. Gotta be a security guy around here somewh—”

An overhead speaker announced a message in a woman’s voice. “*Tunggu disini.*” Her tone was calm and pleasant. “One moment.”

The speaker repeated the twin messages after about ten seconds. As it started a third time, the glass door behind the counter slid open, and the message stopped mid-sentence. A small, black-haired man entered the room and pointed to the camera. “*Kamu berdiri di sana.*”

A large Caucasian man with square shoulders and a square jaw appeared behind him. “Are you with the audit?” His accent was American.

“Yes, thank you,” DeShear said, approaching the counter.

The big man narrowed his eyes. “You’re late.”

“We had other business to attend to first. For the audit.”

“Like what?” The man glared at DeShear, not moving.

DeShear held his breath for a moment, searching for the way to deliver his words. He did not want a confrontation, but he didn’t want to explain further, either. “IRS business.” He said it flat and

even, as though he was telling the man what the date was. Information, nothing more.

The man's eyes went from DeShear to Lanaya, then back again. With a grunt, he nodded to his associate. The smaller man walked to the camera.

"Stand with your back against the red screen," the American said.

DeShear nodded at Lanaya. She swallowed hard, massaging her hands as she followed the instructions.

"That's good," the big man said. The camera clicked twice. "Okay. Next."

DeShear replaced Lanaya in front of the camera. Two clicks later, the small man returned to the counter. The glass door slid open and he went inside.

"Wait here," the American said, going into the back room. The glass door quietly closed behind him.

The uneasiness tightened its grip on his gut. DeShear shoved his hands into his pockets and checked around the room. The low hum of the fluorescent lights was the only sound. Strolling to the large metal door on the far wall, he peeked through its tiny window.

DeShear jumped back, his heart in his throat.

On the other side of the glass was a large machine gun, held by a huge man in camouflage fatigues. The man held the gun to his chest, his eyes blank and cold, staring right at DeShear.

The security officer reappeared, carrying two red plastic IDs. He slinked a lanyard through each and tossed them onto the gleaming countertop. "Put these on. Step to the door."

DeShear and Lanaya slipped the lanyards over their heads.

"Where do we find the others?" DeShear asked.

"Wait for the buzzer," the security officer said. He called out over his shoulder. "*Buka kunci pintu.*"

A buzzer sounded from inside the metal door, and the lock opened. DeShear put his hand on the pull bar, ready to see the huge machine gun and the hard face of its owner on the other side. He took a breath and yanked the heavy door open.

Inside, the small, black-haired man from the security counter was alone in the room.

The windowless space was about twenty feet by twenty feet square, like a two-car garage, with opaque white walls—but without the intimidating man and his machine gun.

*Odd.*

The far side held another black steel door. Beside it, a silver-colored ball protruded from the wall.

The small man scowled and pointed at it. "*Tunggu di sana.*"

DeShear stared at him.

"*Di sana.*" He repeated sharply.

Lanaya crept toward the door. DeShear followed. A rectangle was etched on the metal ball, with the silhouette of a head and shoulders in the upper right corner. He lifted his ID card, keeping his eyes on the black-haired man.

"*Iya nih, iya nih,*" he growled. "*Baik.*"

DeShear slid his ID card across the ball. The lock tumblers in the second door clicked. He turned and pulled the second heavy metal door open, revealing a long, white hall with black flooring. As he walked through the doorway, Lanaya swiped her card over the reader and was right back on his heels.

The faint, sterile smell of cleaning solvents filled the hallway, the way they do in a doctor's office. Halfway down the hallway, he stopped at a door and tried the knob. It was locked.

"What do we do?" Lanaya asked.

“They’re here somewhere, behind one of these doors.” He swallowed hard and walked another thirty or so feet to the next door, trying it.

Locked.

“What if they’re not here?” Lanaya whispered. “They could already be—”

“They’re here.”

As he approached the next room, a tall man in a white lab coat stepped out. He said nothing as he held the door open.

When DeShear reached the entry, he peeked inside. Camilla’s audit team was seated on folding chairs watching a presentation by a gray-haired woman in a lab jacket. At the back of the room, Camilla stood with her arms folded.

“Ah, there is the rest of the team,” the lecturer said. “Let us continue.” The lights dimmed as the screen behind her illuminated with the words *Angelus Genetics* in blue.

“As I explained earlier, the compound consists of a mere eight buildings, each connected to an airlock and each with its own security passcode. Our workers are put into sterile cleanroom suits, similar to hospital scrubs. They wear shirts, pants, masks, boots—like a surgical team, as will all of you. Our sites operate at 99.97 percent decontamination, the highest in the industry. Next question, please.”

An agent raised her hand. The woman pointed at her. “Yes?”

“We saw at least four more buildings when we arrived. What are the others?”

The lecturer smiled. “Dr. Hauser has generously leased some of the buildings on the site to a school for underprivileged children, an orphanage, a shelter for the homeless, and an animal rescue facility. Of course, these are done at no charge in order to assist the people of Indonesia in the greatest way possible.”

DeShear walked to Camila.

“Welcome back,” she whispered, keeping her eyes forward. “You missed over an hour of the most thrilling, paint-drying lectures I’ve ever had the displeasure to sit through—and I work for the IRS. Did you get what you were looking for?”

“Slight change in plans,” DeShear said.

“Do I want to know what?”

“We’re splitting from your team to get pictures. I think it’s better if you don’t know more at this point.”

A few rows in front of them, another agent raised his hand. “Do you work with living genetic tissue?”

“That’s a common misconception,” the lecturer said. “Our procedures are largely done with computer models.” A slide appeared on the screen—a young man with his face to the lens of a huge electron microscope. “We utilize a minimal amount of genetic material, as allowed to us by the World Health Organization, whose embryonic protocols were agreed to in Geneva in 1999 by . . .”

DeShear leaned to Camilla. “Did they count heads on the way in?”

“They don’t have to.” She held up her red plastic identification card. “We swiped these IDs through readers at the doors.”

“Okay.” He handed Camilla the cards they’d received a moment ago. “Take these and scan them for us on the way out.”

Camilla slipped them into her pocket. “How will you be able to get out, then?”

DeShear chewed his lip. “I don’t want to get into details and jeopardize what you’re up to. You have a legitimate function here, so the closer you stick to that, the better—but make sure those cards

get scanned on the way out. We don't want anyone to come looking for us. Are the FBI agents present?"

"Front row and back row."

"Good. We'll meet you at the reception tonight."

"Listen, Dash—"

"We'll be fine." He winked. "You know me."

Camilla grumbled. "That's what worries me."

An image of a laboratory appeared on the screen as the lecturer continued. "Workers pass through the first two rooms in this hallway for their decontamination process, and then they enter the labs in their cleanroom suits, through sealed airlocks. You will be permitted full access to the site, wearing the same protective gear and accompanied by members of our security team, as well as one of our geneticists who can answer any of your questions."

She slid her hands into her lab coat pockets and smiled as the Angelus Genetics logo reappeared on the screen. "As we said earlier, we wish to comply with all of your requests, and conclude your audit quickly and to the satisfaction of all."







THE SHORT, ROUND MAN stopped his golf cart with a screech, jumping out and rushing to the open door of the large jet. “Welcome back, sir! All of Jakarta welcomes you!” The scorching heat lifted from the tarmac, casting mirage-like reflections over the runway and sending up heat ripples that distorted the view of anything further than fifty feet away. Behind him, a private team of baggage handlers pulled open the plane’s cargo hatch and unloaded suitcases.

A brown-haired woman in ripped blue jeans stepped off the jet first. Standing in the shadow of the jet, she clutched a bottle of water and twisted back and forth, stretching. Next came a tall, muscular man, wearing a blue blazer and sunglasses.

The tall man smiled and shook hands with his friend. “Thank you, *temanku*. Was it any trouble arranging for us to come in this plane?”

“Oh yes.” The little man winced. “The Concorde has been banned here for many years. Much trouble has been caused by your loud arrival.” He put his hands over his ears and made a face. “Sonic booms over Jakarta are not popular.”

“This isn’t a Concord.” The American patted the side of the big plane. “It’s better—a prototype from a company based out of Denver, and it flies at Mach 2.2. Knowing an investment banker or two has its privileges. They had one of these in New York, and four and a half hours later, here we are. Not too bad.”

“Yes, but very loud.”

“Well, our friends had a head start and I needed to catch up. How much money will it take to make anyone’s issues about the noise go away? One hundred thousand American dollars?” He walked to the baggage cart and pulled off a blue suitcase. One of the baggage handlers rushed forward, but he waved them away. “Thank you, it’s all right. I’ve got it.”

His friend shrugged, massaging his hands. “That much money will most certainly take care of our friends in the government, but—”

He looked away, scowling. “Two hundred thousand, then.”

The man clasped his hands in front of his chest, bowing. “As you wish, sir.”

As the other suitcases were loaded onto the baggage tram, the little man and the American seated themselves in the golf cart. The woman took a seat behind them.

“Where is the helicopter?” the American asked.

“Right this way, my friend.” He set the cart in motion, with the baggage tram following. They drove past several terminals and out toward the tree-lined edge of the airport property. Behind a chain link fence, a half dozen red Air Jakarta helicopters sat inside painted circles. Next to those stood another half dozen, in various colors. The golf cart came to a stop in front of a black six-seater. The pilot gave them a thumbs up, setting aside his clip board and moving his hands over the console. The whine of the shiny black turbojet quickly overwhelmed any other sounds nearby, as the big overhead blade crept into motion.

The American leaned forward, shouting to his little round friend. “*Teman*, I have something for you.” He stepped out of the golf cart. The little man followed. Hefting the blue suitcase, the American placed it at the feet of his *teman*.

“By dawn, I will need the helicopter refueled in Bali,” he shouted. “And this jet needs to be ready and waiting to leave again.”

“It will be done. And I have something for you as well.” The little man walked to the golf cart and pulled out a small, polished wooden case, the size of a box that would contain expensive silverware. “As you instructed, a high intensity air pistol—extremely lethal at close range. From China, but high-quality, and very reliable. But . . .” He shook his head. “My friend, I’m afraid a second noise infraction so soon may take more than another two hundred thousand dollars to correct.”

The American lifted the suitcase and shoved it into his friend’s chest, scowling. “There’s a million dollars in cash inside that. Make it happen!”

“This is a mistake,” the woman said. “You’re throwing too much money around.”

He grabbed the wooden case, glaring at her. “Get on the helicopter.”

She climbed on board and sat in one of the plush blue seats, buckling herself in. The American threw the rest of the bags onto the floor in front of her, then grabbed the side rail and hauled himself into the cabin.

“It’s my money.” He sat, heaving the door shut. “I’ll do what I want with it.”

“It’s going to raise eyebrows. You’re putting the operation at risk like you did with that stunt in Canada.”

He whipped around to face her, his eyes narrowing. “Maya, you disappoint me.” Heat rose in his cheeks. “First, you hold out about a new medicine by saying you can’t contact me. Then you get insubordinate with me in public and embarrass me in front of my friend.”

“I’m just saying—”

“That is enough!” he shouted, his face growing redder with each breath. The veins throbbed in his neck. “One more outburst and I swear, I’ll . . .” His hands trembled.

She backed away, pressing herself to the helicopter door, but also remaining defiant. “Stop it. You need me.”

“Do I?”

“The medicines. You—”

“You told me you stole them and you had them made by private laboratories. It’s fair to say when I check the receipts for the many, *many* things you’ve purchased, I’ll get the names of those labs. Was there something else?”

“You—you’re tired.” She spoke in a soothing tone. “From your trip. We both are. You don’t mean it.” She placed her hands at her sides. “It’s the new drugs. I—I told you, they contain steroids, but some of the new components are like steroids amplified—one of the side effects is being short tempered and irritable. They’ll come and go, but—”

“I’ve never felt better.” He glared at her. “But I don’t kid myself, either. There’s not much time left. Your drugs are going to give me a week, maybe more, but I know what waits for me after that. This work needs to get finished, and if I have to spend a little bit of money to make it happen, I don’t want to hear about it from the likes of you. Do we understand each other?”

“Excuse me,” the pilot said. “We are ready to depart for Bali. Please put on your headsets and make sure your seat belts are fastened.”

The American took one of the headsets from the overhead clip, thrusting a second set at his companion. “Maya, I asked you a question,” he growled. “Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, Tristan.”

“See, that’s been part of our problem all along.” He gritted his teeth. “We’re too informal, too relaxed. We’re getting sloppy. *Tristan?* This isn’t a friendly tea party, this is business—so maybe we need to start acting like employer and employee. Now, I’ll ask you again. Do we have an understanding?”

She spoke softly, not taking her eyes off him. “Yes, Mr. Carrera.”





CAMILLA LOOKED AT HERSELF in the mirror as the other female agents changed. Clad in a white jumpsuit from head to foot, including sewn-in booties, and a hood that surrounded all but her eyes, she brushed a damp strand of hair off her forehead. “I should have opted for the three-piece set.”

“It’s not better,” one of her agents said rising from the locker room bench. Wearing the white scrub pants and shirt, similar booties, and a hood, she held out her arms and walked stiff-legged toward the mirror. “I look like a snowman.”

“Well, Frosty.” Camilla stuffed her clothes into a locker. “It’s all for a good cause. Let’s go. I hear the next room is even more fun.” They passed several others coming from the showers.

“Make sure you’re not entering the cleanroom with any cosmetics, lotions or sprays of any sort on your person,” the lecturer told them for the second time.

Camilla and the agent walked around the corner to the locker room entry, a glass door with a large rectangular button next to it. Each entry they passed had a box of white latex gloves mounted on the wall, with hand sanitizer nearby. After they put on the gloves, they tucked them under their sleeves as they had been shown. Camilla elbowed the button to open the door. A whoosh of air blasted her head as they entered the small airlock. They waited for the door to shut behind them, then opened the second door. Another whoosh of air. On the other side, they passed a large bin labeled “Disposal for Gloves.” As long as they hadn’t touched anything in the airlock, they didn’t need to replace their gloves, but the bins were everywhere. As the second door shut, the airlock made a sucking sound.

The gray-haired woman from the lecture stood at the front of the room. “You may sit anywhere. This room is completely sterilized every four hours.” She strolled in front of a row of chairs, moving toward the podium. “I apologize for these inconveniences, but we must preserve the integrity of the sterile laboratory environment.”

Camilla stared at her white-gloved hands. “I’m sure you get used to it after a while.”

“Indeed,” the woman said. “Only the front entry of every building contains the airlock, so all personnel must pass through the front entry to gain access to any building. Our workers joke that after they get home, they walk through the front door and reach for gloves they are not wearing, to throw them in the bin.” She picked up some papers from the podium and tapped the edges, lining them up. To her left, a row of windows gave a view of a long hallway. Beyond them, another set of windows allowed a look at the outside. The large blue buildings of the strange campus stood, one after the other, spotless and clean, next to the dirt road that separated them. Each had a red sign out front, “Cleanroom Suit Required For Entry.”

“When the others join us, we will begin our tour,” the lecturer said. “And then you can return to your hotel to prepare for tonight’s reception.”

“Actually, I’d just as soon miss the gala and shorten this tour.” Camilla approached the front of the room. “We have a lot of work to do, and we haven’t been provided the on-site financials yet. We can split my group into teams and have some of them do the tour while the rest of us—”

The woman held up a hand. “The numbers will only make sense when you understand the facility and its many intricate functions. It’s best that you—” She glanced at the window to the hallway. “Oh, we have a special treat.”

An old man in a business suit stood next to several people wearing cleanroom attire. The gray-haired woman walked to an intercom unit mounted by an emergency exit, and pressed the button.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Hauser.”

“Good afternoon.” He pointed his cane at the auditors passing through the airlock. “Are you treating our guests well?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Fine, fine.” His eyes passed across the men and women next to Camilla. “Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you—and I welcome the opportunity to share the monumental scientific achievements we perform here on a daily basis. Angelus Genetics is truly changing the world. Enjoy the tour. I look forward to seeing you all tonight at the reception.”

Camilla waved a hand. “Dr. Hauser—”

He leaned on his cane with both hands, shaking his head, his eyes on the intercom. “Please. I’ll be happy to entertain any questions you have at the reception. Until then, you are in good hands. Thank you.”

The intercom made a popping noise as he turned away, hobbling down the hallway.

Camilla leaned toward the agent next to her. “Make a note. The lecturer specifically said cleanroom suits have to be worn everywhere in this building, no exceptions, and in all buildings marked with the red sign out front. Why does everyone else have to wear these moon suits when he doesn’t?”

“Hmm,” the agent said. “So much for the integrity of the sterile environment.”

“It’s just a hallway, but no exceptions means no exceptions. My trainer at the IRS once said, when people are doing what’s supposed to be their routine, pay attention to what varies. The things they don’t remember to do every time are being done as a show for you.”

“Why would he not wear the cleanroom suit?” the agent asked. “Where’s he going, if this audit is allegedly the biggest thing in his life right now?”

Camilla folded her arms.

*He’s going to check on whatever actually is the biggest thing.*

She sauntered to the glass, peering through the two sets of windows. The old man exited the building and climbed into a black golf cart. The others, still dressed from head to toe in white, joined him, and they drove away. In the distance, a few people dressed in full cleanroom attire entered the side door of another building with the red sign out front.

*They aren’t using the airlocks.*

She whispered to the agent, “Without drawing attention, get a male agent to bring DeShear over here. You go get Ms. Kim. They’re probably still in the locker rooms.”

*Let’s find out where Dr. Hauser goes.*

• • • •

THE DESK CLERK AT THE Viceroy Bali smiled at The Greyhound. “Welcome back, Mr. Huntley. How was your flight?”

“Fine.” He smiled back, stepping to the counter. “I’ve brought a guest.” He glanced at Maya, who sat on one of the overstuffed couches, her phone to her cheek. “I hope you’ll be able to accommodate her with her own room. Adjoining mine, if possible.”

“Of course, sir.” The young man leaned over his computer keyboard. “We have a suite reserved for you, but if I may move sir to another floor, I can most certainly have your guest be next door.”

The smile left The Greyhound’s lips. “We’re very tired, so I suppose that’ll have to do for now.”

“Very good, sir.” The clerk typed for a moment, then placed the key cards on the counter. The Greyhound waved at Maya, who pushed herself up from the couch and walked over.

“Here are the keys,” he said to her. “Go get settled in. I’ll be up in a moment.”

She took the plastic cards as a bellman approached with their bags.

The Greyhound turned back to the desk clerk. “And now I’d like to speak with the manager.”

The clerk’s face fell. “Sir, I’m happy to—”

“The manager. Now.”

“Of course, sir.” The clerk nodded.

Maya’s jaw dropped. “Tristan—”

“It’s fine.” He turned to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Really, I’m not upset at all.” He lowered his voice, smiling. “Go upstairs and relax. Please. This will only take a few minutes.”

She watched his face for a moment. “Okay.” Walking across the marble lobby with the bellman in tow, she pressed the elevator call button.

An older man appeared at the counter. “Mr. Huntley, how good to see you again. I understand there is a problem. How may I be of assistance?”

“Mister . . .” he read the manager’s nametag. “. . . Rahmat, is it? Do you have an office where we can speak in private?”

“Of course, sir. Right this way.”

The manager led The Greyhound down a hallway, past a door that opened into the service area. Huge carts of towels awaited the laundry machines, and a man in blue coveralls folded cardboard boxes, stacking them near the dumpsters.

“Here we are.” The manager stood beside an office door, holding his hand out.

The Greyhound stepped inside and scanned the room, his hands going to his suitcoat pockets. A sturdy wooden desk and two chairs filled most of the space, along with several filing cabinets and a potted plant. There were no security cameras, and there hadn’t been any in the hallway, either.

“Please sit.” The manager eased the door shut. “I’m sure whatever the issue, we can—”

The Greyhound was upon him, handkerchief in his fist, thrusting it over the manager’s nose and mouth. The man pushed back, but was unable to break The Greyhound’s iron grip. Struggling until he needed a breath, the manager reluctantly inhaled the ether. His eyes rolled back in his head as his arms sagged; then his body went limp and he collapsed to the floor.

The Greyhound held the cloth on the manager’s face until he was sure the man was unconscious, then rifled through the man’s pockets. Attached on a retracting belt lanyard, with a dozen metal keys attached, was a plastic card—the manager’s master room key.

The Greyhound unclipped the lanyard from the belt, slipping it into his pocket.

He stood, wiping his brow as he stared at the man on the floor. The Greyhound had no perspiration. A steady heartbeat. He stared at his hands—no trembling fingers.

*Stay in control.*

He nodded, taking a deep breath. The new version of the drugs had side effects, but now that he was aware of them, he could maintain his composure.

He opened the door a crack and peered down the hallway. Nothing. The service area was vacant, too. Stooping to grab the manager under the shoulders, he dragged him to an empty laundry cart and dumped him in. After enough towels from another cart had covered the unconscious Mr. Rahmat, The Greyhound administered the Propofol.

In six or eight hours when the manager woke up, he’d remember nothing.

The Greyhound returned to the office, locked it from the inside, and pulled the door shut from the hallway. Straightening himself up, he smoothed out his jacket and walked through the service area and into the big lobby, heading for the elevators.





“CAMMY,” DESHEAR WHISPERED, his cleanroom suit covering everything but his eyes. “What’s up?”

“The chairman of Angelus Genetics just went for a ride in a black golf cart,” Camilla said. “If you hurry, he’ll still be at whatever building he went into. I think you might use it as a starting point for your little side venture.”

Lanaya peeked out the window, massaging her hands.

“Any idea how we can get around outside without being stopped?” DeShear asked.

“Have a look.” Camilla peeked over her shoulder, keeping her voice low. “Others are walking around out there, dressed the same as us, and nobody seems to care. The security bit may be a ruse, but either way, if you move quickly and stay hidden between the buildings, you can probably go wherever you need to go.”

He stared out the window. “I’ll be darned.”

“Wait for the tour to start, and as soon as we move from one building to another, just stay behind somewhere until the coast is clear. Maybe in an airlock, or duck behind an AC unit or something. Best I can think of at the moment.”

“It’ll be fine.” DeShear said. “If there are other people out there wearing these moon suits, who’ll know the difference? All that’s visible is our eyes.”

“Okay then.” Camilla looked at him. “And if you get caught . . .”

“Don’t worry.” He took a step backwards, toward the rear of the room. “You knew nothing about it.”



DR. HAUSER WAITED WHILE one of the members of his party opened the door for him.

“I’m a bit concerned, sir,” the man said, entering the warm, dim room. Ventilating fans turned overhead, while circulation pumps hummed below. “All these strangers, poking their noses around the facility. It’s not a good idea.”

Hauser waved the cane at him, hobbling down the shadowy center aisle. The stainless steel shelving was thirty inches wide and forty feet long, reaching thirty feet into the air. Each was spaced exactly thirty inches apart, for maximum capacity in each building.

“We’ll keep them busy with the tour until it’s time to go to the reception,” the old man said. “Tomorrow morning, this audit nonsense comes to an abrupt end.” Hauser squinted at the rows and rows of high shelves, his eyes adjusting to the low light. “By the time they’re done showering and suiting up again, I’ll have my own private army here to meet them.” He walked up to a shelf, inspecting one of the thousands of fluid-filled containers housed on each. Reaching past the long lines of surgical tubes running in and out through the container lids, he tapped the glass, staring at what floated within. “My people arrive at ten A. M. Then we’ll see what happens with this little audit.”





“PLEASE REMEMBER, STAY with your guide.” The gray-haired woman walked between the agents, her back stiff and her nose in the air, as she handed out white clipboards. “Use the airlock entrance at the front of every building. A new cleanroom suit will be provided to you as needed during the tour. Any—”

“Agents.” Camilla addressed her group, looking right past the lecturer. “This is an inspection. It is part of an official audit. If you have questions that are not answered, direct them to me immediately.”

“As I was about to say,” the lecturer scowled at Camilla, “any questions will be handled by the guide assigned to your individual group.”

Camilla raised her voice. “Any area of this property that you are not immediately granted access to, detach from your tour at once and report to me.”

The lecturer’s voice raised to a shrill pitch. “All visitors must remain with their group!”

Camilla glared at the woman. “Then you’d better grant immediate access to anything my people want to see.”

A hush fell over the room. The agents watched the standoff in silence, their bureau chief’s words hanging in the air.

A smile forced its way across the gray-haired woman’s lips. “I shall see to it that all requests are handled in accordance with Dr. Hauser’s generous instructions to us that you be accommodated fully.”

One of the guides in a cleanroom suit ambled forward, reading from his clipboard. “The first eight agents, please step this way. We will be exiting through the airlock.” A cluster of agents dressed in white moved forward. “This way, please.”

Camilla lagged behind. The lecturer addressed her. “Which group will you be with, Ms. Madison?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Do you have a suggestion?”

“The septic facility is that way.” The old woman turned to walk away.

*I’ll look for your office there.* Camilla offered her most professional tone. “If you’ll excuse me, I have an investigation to conduct—and if attitudes don’t improve around here, I’ll be requesting additional time for a much more thorough and cooperative examination.”

“Request what you like.” The woman continued walking. “Your work here will come to a speedy conclusion soon enough.”

“I’m in charge of the audit here.” Camilla squared her shoulders. “It’ll go on as long as I see fit.”

The lecturer wheeled around, her eyes ablaze. “It will go on,” she yelled, her voice echoing off the white walls. Catching herself, she lowered her voice. “It will go on for exactly as long as Dr. Hauser decides.” She smiled again. “And not a moment longer.”

An agent put her hand on Camilla’s shoulder. “Boss . . .” He held a clipboard with a site plan in front of her. She straightened her spine and took it, flipping pages and staring at them until the lecturer exited.

The first group of agents filed out of the room. DeShear walked up to Camilla. “What was all that?”

“That,” she winked, “was me making sure all eyes are on me and not on you. I’ll go with the next group. You go with the one after that. First time they go around a corner, split off.”

“Got it.” He returned to Lanaya. “How are we holding up over here?”

She sat on a side bench, her fingers trembling as she held her clipboard. Squatting in front of her, DeShear took one of her hands and held it between his. "I think you're getting calluses from all the massaging you've been doing to these."

"I should think that's a far sight better than an ulcer or heart attack." She swallowed hard. "But I'll be all right."

He patted her hand. "I know you will."

DeShear debated about whether or not to tell Lanaya more about the sketchy plan. Additional information might help her calm down, or it might give her another thing to stress about. He opted for the "less is more" option and said nothing, taking a seat next to her on the bench.

Camilla's group moved forward with their guide.

DeShear stood. "Let's stand a little closer to them as they leave." He tapped an agent on the shoulder, whispering. "Get the group to come forward so it's not as easy to eyeball who's with what guide."

The agent nodded, rising. A moment later, the two groups were next to each other at the airlock. DeShear stood behind Camilla's group first, then slowly moved back to his. As the door opened and her team entered, he stepped aside at the last minute. The door shut in front of him, and he slid between the others on his team.

Their guide came forward, staring at a clipboard with a map of the facility on it. "As soon as they are out, we'll go." He raised the clipboard, pointing to a blue square at the front of the facility. "Our first stop is in records. I understand you folks like numbers. We have a lot of them there."

A chuckle went up from the team members.

The guide walked to the airlock door. "This way, please."

DeShear's group crowded into the space. The rear door shut and the door to the hallway opened, complete with the windy re-pressurization. The guide led them toward the exit. "Stay together, please."

DeShear put his hand on Lanaya's shoulder, holding her back and letting the others pass. The hallway had no security cameras.

*Strange, for a facility that's supposed to be so security-oriented.*

He clutched his white clipboard and peered out the windows, inspecting the other buildings. There were no visible cameras where they'd normally be—over doorways and on the corners of the buildings.

"Lanaya, did you see any mention of security cameras on the blue prints?"

"No, but that's not unusual." She clutched her clipboard to her chest. "Things like that are often added later. Why?"

"I don't see any." DeShear rubbed his chin. "They could be hidden, but part of the effectiveness of security cameras is letting some be visible so people know you have them."

They stepped outside, the heat mugging them in their cleanroom suits.

"This way," the guide said. "Stay together, please."

The prior group had gone to the right and were already a hundred feet away, waiting to enter the next building through its airlock. The guide for DeShear's group walked straight ahead, raising his clipboard and pointing to a blue square two buildings down and to the left.

As they walked, they passed utility fixtures. Large pumps, high-volume air handling units, and massive electrical boxes lined the blue exterior walls.

*Plenty of space to duck behind.*

The group neared the end of the first building. “As you can see, we have a first-rate facility,” the guide said. “All construction was done using the highest possible standards . . .”

DeShear tapped the nearest agent on the shoulder. “Be sure this tour is the last one to finish today. And I mean, late-to-the-reception last.”

The agent nodded.

When his group turned the corner, DeShear took Lanaya’s arm and kept walking straight ahead. She blinked rapidly, her spine frozen as he drew her to an electrical closet, pressing both of them to its side.

“What now?” she whispered, plastering herself against the building.

DeShear pointed. “We move as fast as possible to that next building and take a spot in the exact same place. Got it?”

Her eyes went wide. “Do I run?”

“Walk fast.” He peeked out from the electrical box, looking up and down the path. “Act like you’re inspecting the roof. If someone sees us running, that’ll attract attention.” He gave her a nudge. “Go!”

Lanaya jumped out onto the dirt path, walking briskly. DeShear followed, gazing at anything upwards as he covered the ground between the buildings.

*No visible cameras, but they still might have them.*

Reaching the tall metal closet at the next building, the pair slid around next to it.

“Can we hide in these things?” she asked.

“It’s high voltage stuff. I’d rather stay out here.” DeShear glanced around. “Actually, I think it’s time we got inside a building. Any thoughts on that? Do any of these big blue boxes look interesting to you?”

She shook her head. “On the blueprints, they had generic labels—but I’m sure those have changed since construction ended.” She brushed the dust off a pipeline with her finger and inspected the label. “This is potable water. That one’s ‘gray’ water—people have showered with it, or something similar.” She looked up to where the pipes disappeared into the wall. “Doesn’t look like anything interesting goes on in this one. I’d say the newer buildings, in the back, would be where the good stuff is.”

The sound of a diesel motor echoed down the alleyway.

“Stay back,” DeShear said, pressing himself to the wall.

She squeezed her eyes shut. The engine noise grew louder, the ground under their feet vibrating. A huge white tanker truck rolled by, sending up a cloud of dust.

Lanaya fanned her face. “So much for our cleanroom suits staying clean.” She stuck her head out and looked at the back of the truck. “Well, now. That’s interesting.”

“What?” DeShear said, leaning forward. The dust trail obscured his view of the truck, except for the top of its big white tank.

Lanaya tucked her clipboard under her arm. “Let’s follow that.”

“Okay, but why?”

“That’s a refrigerated dairy truck, Hamilton.” She crept out onto the dirt road, putting a hand on her hip. “I can’t think of a genetics lab in the world that uses milk in its protocols.”

• • • •

HOLDING HIS BREATH, The Greyhound held the big pellet gun next to his cheek, his hands trembling as he slid the manager’s key card across the door lock. The latch for Dr. Bruner’s room

disengaged, and the door opened easily. The Greyhound tiptoed inside, ready to assault the obese board member.

Easing the door shut with latex glove-covered hands, he studied the scene. The shade curtains had been drawn, making the room dim. The aroma of food reached him from the room service cart by the desk. Empty plates and an empty bottle of wine littered the surface. On the bed, a thin brown-skinned girl stirred, curling away from the hairy back of the enormous fat man snoring next to her.

The Greyhound crept toward them, grabbing her dress from the floor. He tapped her shoulder. The young girl mumbled something incoherent and rolled over. As her eyes fluttered open, she recoiled with a gasp. Her tiny jaw dropped open as she stared at The Greyhound in his ski mask.

He lifted a finger to his lips, handing her the dress and pointing to the door. Her eyes went to his gun. "Go." He whispered. "*Pergi*. Now."

The girl nodded, taking the dress and wrapping it around her as she slid from the mattress. She bolted across the grand room, stooping to pluck a small purse from under the chair, then flung open the door and raced down the hallway.

The sound of the heavy door slamming shut awakened the fat man. He grunted, patting behind him without looking. When he didn't find his companion, he sat upright.

A long, slow wheeze escaped Dr. Bruner's lips as he stared down the barrel of The Greyhound's gun.

"Where is your phone?" The Greyhound asked. "Don't speak, just point."

The man swallowed hard, gesturing to the desk with a shaking hand.

"Thank you." The Greyhound went to the desk and picked up the phone. He tossed it onto the bed. "Open it."

Bruner's pasty complexion turned whiter as he stared at the phone.

"Open it, or I'll shoot you in the head and hold your dead finger to it, and open it anyway."

He grabbed for the phone, fumbling as he picked it up.

"Press the texting icon."

Dr. Bruner panted, pressing a button. The screen came to life.

"Put it on the bed and slide it to me."

The doctor complied, his large torso rocking forward to shove the device a few inches closer to the intruder.

"Thank you." The Greyhound picked it up, leaning back on the edge of the desk as he thumbed through the texts. "Ah, here we are. 'I am taken sick. Will miss reception dinner, but will be back in action tomorrow morning.' Hmm." The Greyhound pressed the top of the text message to see its recipients. "This went out to the other board members."

Bruner nodded, his mouth hanging open.

The Greyhound raised his gun, aiming at the doctor's forehead. "You've saved me the trouble of worrying about who might come looking for you if you missed dinner." He stood up, stepping closer to his cowering victim. "And you're sick all right, judging from the age of the escort you hired."

The fat man stammered, his mouth unable to form words.

The Greyhound pulled off the ski mask, staring into the eyes of his victim. "You thought you'd gotten away with it. You and the other Angelus board members. The executives, the project managers—you all thought you could hide your secrets in the jungle, but you can't. Some secrets refuse to remain hidden."

He fired. The large air gun bucked in his hand, making a sharp *pfff* noise as the pellet burst forth. The doctor jerked backwards into the pillows. His arms and legs flailed as he struggled to get his

bearings.

“These are as lethal as a gun, and every bit as fast. Two to the side of the head will kill you. That’s what I came to do.” The Greyhound leaned over the man. “Now that we’ve met in person and I’ve seen your recreational pursuits, I’m even more convinced of my decision.”

Bruner gurgled, grabbing aimlessly, his head swaying back and forth until he sagged into the mattress.

“Good thing for you I’m in a rush. I have several other appointments this evening, with colleagues of yours.” The Greyhound tossed the phone back onto the bed, putting the barrel of the gun against the fat man’s temple. “I hope they’re less distasteful than this one’s been.”

• • • •

THE TANKER TRUCK DROVE to the far end of the complex, a straight line down the path Lanaya and DeShear were on, then turned left.

“I think we should move a little faster through here.” Lanaya’s words huffed as she walked. “We don’t want to lose that truck.”

“Agreed. And . . .” DeShear took her clipboard and stacked it with his, reaching up to slide both onto the top of the next electrical closet they passed. “I think the IRS auditors are the only ones carrying those.”

At the end of the building, they peeked around the corner and scurried across the gap. Lanaya shook her head. “I’ve been in a lot of genetics labs in my day, Hamilton. I don’t think this place has much in the way of security.”

“Maybe not in the traditional sense.” The image of the big man with the machine gun flashed in his mind. Again, he decided less information was better for his client. “But let’s not guess wrong.”

When they reached the end of the row of blue buildings, DeShear stood next to one of the electrical boxes and looked back over his shoulder, counting the buildings. Twenty. Much more than were visible at the front. The road was wider here, too, and paved with asphalt. By setting each building a few feet further away from the dirt road than the next, it was impossible to see them all from the front of the complex.

*An error in construction, or an easy way to allow visitors to only see what you wanted them to see?*

He answered his own question when they rounded the next corner.







THE GREYHOUND SLID his personal key card across the hotel lock and thrust open the door to his room. The interior door to the adjoining suite was open. He tossed the air gun onto the bed and unbuttoned his shirt, yanking its tails from his beltline. “Maya, when is my next dosage due?”

“Depends.” Dr. Carrera stepped into the doorway between the two rooms. “When was your last one?” Leaning on the door frame, one of her hands dangled at her side while the other rested on her hip.

“Dominique,” he whispered, rushing to her. He pulled her close and buried his face into her shoulder, his hands sliding along her back. The long, dark curls of her hair brushed past his face. “Oh, I’ve missed you,” he said.

She slid her hands inside his shirt, wrapping them around him, squeezing him as if she never wanted to let go. A soft moan escaped her lips.

Leaning back, he took her face in his hands and crushed his mouth to hers, devouring her warm, full lips. He kissed her again and again, tears coming to his eyes. Pressing his cheek to her face, he rocked back and forth in the doorway, his hot breath rushing over her neck. “You left New York without saying goodbye.”

She stroked the back of his head, running her fingers through his hair. “I had to maintain appearances in front of the others. I’ve missed you, my love. I can’t stand being away from you.” She closed her eyes and kissed the back of his neck. “Especially not now. Maya said you were having mood swings. Anger and rage.”

“I’m handling it.” He drew a deep sigh, pulling away from her. “And the work is almost done. Soon—”

“Okay. Shh.” She pressed a finger to his lips, shaking her head. Her voice fell to a soft whisper. “Not now. Let’s talk of other things. There’s plenty of time to discuss all that later.”

“I wish you were right.” He stepped away to face the window. The Bali skyline glimmered in the afternoon heat. “Doing . . . this, these things—” he turned to her. “It’s not how I envisioned spending my last remaining days.”

She closed her eyes, leaning her head back. A tear ran down her cheek. “I . . .” she sniffled, staring at the ceiling. “I wish I could do more for you.”

“Don’t say that. You did what you could. Everyone has. The latest version of the meds have made me feel better than I’ve felt in months. That can’t be a bad thing.”

“No.” She shook her head, mascara streaming over her cheeks. “It’s not.”

“Be strong.” He went to her, taking her in his arms. “We need you strong, this team we’ve assembled. And later . . . I mean, after . . .” He gazed into her eyes. “Our boys will need you to be strong. You’ll be all they have left soon.”

“But one in five survive. We have to think about that. You could—”

“Don’t believe the stats from the cretins that created this nightmare. Don’t pin your hopes on a lie.”

“The numbers . . .”

“Numbers don’t bleed.” He walked to the window, leaning on the frame. “They don’t cough all night until their ribs ache and their throats are on fire. They don’t vomit blood and pass out in the shower from the hammering pain of a migraine. They don’t cry as child after child parades by in a

nonstop blur of hospital visits that only end at the morgue. Numbers . . .” he shrugged. “They give the wrong people false hope. And any numbers from Angelus are lies.”

She crossed the room to him, stroking his back. “You said you were feeling better.”

“It takes bigger and bigger doses and more each time.” He lowered his head. “That’s the fine print. Three injections a day become six, become nine. Pretty soon I’ll be shooting up every fifteen minutes just to stay awake.”

Wrapping her arms around his naked torso, she pressed her cheek to the warm skin of his shoulder. “They’re working on the longevity.”

“I’m working on longevity, too. It’s all I have left. That, and you—and a little more work. Then I can go. I’ll know I did what I could, regardless of the personal costs.”

She lifted her chin to rest on his shoulder. He leaned his head against hers, both of them staring out the window. A gentle breeze swept across the landscape, making the palm trees dance and sway. “Do you remember how we used to be?” she asked. “Before we started our life together? When we first met?”

“I think about it all the time.” He put his hand on hers. “The pretty young intern who got invited into the big prospectus meeting.”

“I was there to take notes. Not even notes—I was the backup to the note taker.”

“I remember blue eyes and long dark hair. A pink glow on tan cheeks, from a weekend at the beach. And a smile that lit up the room.”

“I remember a tall, confident hedge fund manager, holding court over all the big, powerful people at the company. And they all listened. You owned the room.”

“You wore a green silk blouse.” The tip of his finger traced the curves of her French nails. “Green, with little white flowers on the bottom of it. I barely made it through my presentation.” He turned to face her, chuckling as he leaned back against the window frame. “I couldn’t keep my eyes off you. Then or now. You showed me how to love again. After I lost Megan, I never thought I’d care for another woman that way, or want a family. You gave all that back to me.”

She rested her head on his smooth, firm chest. “I still have that blouse. I take it out of the box in the hall closet sometimes and daydream about how things used to be.”

“Tell me.”

“I think about things I wish I’d done differently. Like not getting Sadie the job at Angelus, or not even going to med school. Not saying yes to Keenan when he proposed after high school. Lots of what ifs.”

He pulled his head back so he could see her face. “I think sometimes if we took out the bad things in life, it might take away the good things that came after. Our paths led each of us to the other. For better or for worse.”

“Mostly better.” She snuggled against him. “Hug me.”

He put his cheek to her hair, closing his eyes and pulling her closer.

“Tighter,” she whispered. “One day soon, I might not be able to do this, and I want to remember.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Remember me how I was before this started, not who I’ve become. The me from a few years ago.”

“I’ll take you now and then, and with mood swings and ‘roid rage, with any negative side effects and any other changes.” She sniffled, looking into his eyes. “I’ll stand by you, as you take vengeance on people who did unspeakable things to you and others, and I’ll keep working night and day to find a cure.” Tears welled in her eyes again. She swallowed hard. “I’ll take any of it over a long, slow, irreversible, slide toward death—but only if you will, too. If you’ll fight with me—for you.”

He lowered his chin, easing his forehead to rest against hers. “The drugs may keep me on my feet, but I fight every day because you give me the strength.”

• • • •

DESHEAR STARED AT THE wall of bamboo trees. The wind crashed their tall, thin trunks together, sending knocking sounds down to earth, like musical sticks or hollow blocks hidden somewhere high up in the long green leaves.

But through the noise of the wind and the trees, the distant sound of children reached his ears.

He caught glimpses as he walked. Running, laughing, singing, sitting, the sun shining bright on their t-shirts. There were hundreds, maybe more. Bits of color flashed through the foliage. Red, white, green, blue—clothing of every color, every shape, every size; some faded, some new—all adorning the mobs of children in the big field.

To his left, the road cut a hole through the barrier trees. He walked to it, his eyes on the distant children. It was a pleasant sound, a soothing one—and a nice difference from the undertone of the rest of the campus.

A cluster of girls made a circle and danced. Another group played jump rope. Beyond them, soccer and ring toss. Tumblers and jumpers and mad-dashers playing tag, he stared in disbelief at the throngs of children at play.

It had been many years since he’d paid attention to that sound, or cared to remember it, and it warmed him inside. “This must be the orphanage, or the school,” he whispered, mostly to himself. “Or both.”

Lanaya stood next to him, her jaw hanging open. “There are so many.”

“*Halo.*”

DeShear turned to see a wrinkled old woman approaching from the blue buildings. The tanker was parked next to the building behind her. She waved at DeShear, donning a dark colored head scarf and a semi-toothless grin. “*Halo, teman-teman saya.*”

“I’m sorry,” DeShear said. “I’m new to speaking Indonesian. I speak very little.” He put a finger to his chest. “*Saya . . . tidak berbicara.*”

“Ah.” She held her arms out at her sides as she walked, her long, dark dress frayed at the hem. “*Parlez-vous français?*”

He shrugged. “Sorry. American.”

The old woman took his hand, patting it. She looked up at him with brown eyes that were fading to a milky white, gently pulling him toward the playground. “Come. You can see.” She pulled again, and he followed. “Come.”

Her steps were short and hobbled, but she moved quickly. She swept her free hand outward at the field full of children. “*Indah. Beautiful, yes?*”

Still holding the old woman’s hand, DeShear nodded. “Where did they all come from?”

Lanaya walked behind them, saying nothing.

The field was even bigger than he’d thought. Easily a few hundred yards away still, it spanned close to a half mile in each direction, a strange, green playground chopped out of the jungle. A thick line of bamboo bordered it on all sides.

*It’s not a fence. Where would they go—and why would they leave? It’s a visual barrier. This area isn’t meant to be seen from the ground.*

DeShear’s host stopped but still held his hand. She smiled as she viewed the children. “*Semua ciptaan alam itu indah.*”

He caught “beautiful” again, but that was all. “Do you work in the school, ma’am?”

“I am *saudara*,” the old woman said. “Sister.”

“Sister? Like a nun?”

She pulled him along, walking along the bamboo wall. “Come. You can see.”

“Where is the orphanage?” DeShear said. “The buildings for the school? This way?”

The old woman hobbled over the grass. “Come.”

DeShear followed, towed at a quick pace by his elderly host, nearing the hundreds of children. It was as if an entire grade school had been released at one time. Kids of all ages were scattered everywhere. He passed by a tall metal pole with speakers on top.

*That must be how they call them in from recess.*

As he got closer, the groups were easier to see. Not all of the children played. Many sat watching, or sat on the sidelines *not* watching, as others played.

Lanaya stayed on the road as DeShear dropped the sister’s hand and walked toward the children. Clad in the cleanroom suit from head to toe, his taller white frame stood out in sharp contrast against the green of the field.

An errant kick launched a soccer ball in his direction. A small, barefoot boy galloped after it, running in a lopsided way. “Bola, bola.”

The ball rolled close to DeShear. He walked forward to retrieve it, but the boy was faster.

“Bola.” Panting, the child called after the ball, plodding along with his hands outstretched. “Bola.”

DeShear’s stomach lurched at the sight of the child. The boy had the same jaundiced color as the guards at the gate. The same half-open jaw. He was shoeless, with messy hair, and his dirty clothes fit poorly and had holes in them. His curved spine forced his right side down onto his hip. He didn’t run lopsided because he had no shoes; he ran that way because that was the only way he could run. His head was too large for his body, giving the appearance at a distance of being younger than he was. The face of the child was thirteen, maybe older; the body, maybe five or six.

The boy picked up the ball and ran back to the game, moving in his unbalanced lope. “Bola . . . bola.”

A sick feeling rising in his gut, DeShear inched closer to the hordes of children.

The sickly look was present on many faces. Some were missing legs or arms. Boys playing soccer without shirts displayed massive surgery scars on their backs. Children with shirts had blood stains seeping through around rectangular bandages.

He stumbled forward, his heart in his throat, taking it in, unable to stop himself from seeing what the field presented.

A girl with no arms smiled at him, her dress a tattered rag. Next to her, another girl sat on the ground, her eye sockets shriveled and empty.

“What’s happened?” DeShear said, his voice trembling. “What’s happened to all of you?”

The girl with no eyes turned her face to him. Her words flowed slowly from her hanging jaw. “*Apakah kamu punya permen?*”

“What?” DeShear swallowed hard, his voice breaking. With tears welling in his eyes, he took a step toward her and extended his hand.

“*Permen?*” Another girl echoed. “*Permen.*”

The children swarmed in on him, hands out, clamoring at his cleanroom suit. “*Permen?*”

DeShear’s jaw hung open, his breath coming in short gasps. They were all deformed in different ways. Misshapen heads, missing teeth, missing limbs. Some sat on the grass, staring off at nothing.

Others limped forward, fresh bandages on their backs or abdomens.

He didn't want to breathe. He didn't want to see. But it was everywhere, all around him. Every child he saw had a different malady.

They were too thin, too dirty, too short, too ragged. They were undernourished, with sickly yellow skin. Their faces looked at him, but few had much glimmer of awareness in their eyes. They were less like children and more like . . . newborns. Alive and functioning, doing human things, but not engaging in the recognition and intelligence that even a one-year old displayed. They were slow and disengaged, not really seeing, not really hearing.

Dozens crawled toward him over the grass, dragging their legs behind them, not a wheelchair in sight.

*"Permen. . . permen."*

They mobbed him, gently pawing him, idly chanting.

*"Permen. . . permen."*

"Sister!" DeShear turned to the old woman, the force of the mob of children pushing him this way and that. "What is it? What do they want?"

Lanaya stood with her hands over her mouth, tears welling in her eyes.

*"Permen."* The old woman held a wrinkled hand up to her brown, weathered face, pinching her bony fingers closed and pointing them at her mouth. "They ask, 'Do you have candy?'"

*Candy.* DeShear gasped, his words no longer leaving his mouth, his knees wobbling. Dozens more children pushed forward from all areas of the field.

The old sister clapped her hands three times. The children stopped, the field going silent. All eyes were upon her, each child standing completely still. A strigidae owl screeched in the distance.

*"Biarkan dia dating,"* the old woman said. The children near DeShear stepped and bumped, moving backwards to clear a path for him, back to where the sister stood on the road.

He waited, unmoving, not yet ready. His heart pounded as he yanked the hood of his cleansuit down past his face, staring at the old woman and choking on his words. "What's happened to them?"

"Paroseseen." She turned and pointed a brown, wrinkled finger. The bamboo wall came to a corner and turned, exposing more blue buildings.

Above the doors, a sign said "Processing."



• • • •

“MS. MADISON?” THE YOUNG agent asked. “They’re calling for us to go back to the main building and depart for the hotel.”

Camilla glanced at her watch. “Thanks. I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The young woman turned to go.

“Hastings,” Camilla said.

The agent stopped. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Any word on DeShear or Ms. Kim? Have any of our people seen them at all?”

“No ma’am. Not since we started the tour.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Camilla stared down the dirt road, the sun hanging low in the sky, as the agent joined the others. Camilla took one last view of the many large buildings before heading toward the rest of her group, a long line of white-suited agents in front of them.

“Excuse me.” Camilla trotted to their guide. “I need to arrange for a hired car.”

The man kept walking, not looking at her. “We have orders to take everyone to the hotel.”

Camilla stopped, putting her hands to her hips. “Orders?”

“I mean,” the guide stopped, facing her. “Our orders—our instructions—were to see that you are all safely returned to your hotel.” He worked a smile onto his face. “So you may have enough time to prepare for this evening’s reception.”

“Uh huh. Well, I have another meeting first, so I need a cab. Have one sent to the front of the security building. Now. And I’ll be taking several of my staff with me.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the guide said. “But—”

Camilla narrowed her eyes. “Do you want me to miss a video conference with the Vice President of the United States? Do you think that’s good business for your employer?”

The man’s jaw dropped. “No.”

“Then call me a cab, and do it quickly.” Camilla pointed. “I want it at the front door before I get there. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The guide walked away quickly, then broke into a run.

The young agent leaned close to Camilla. “We have a meeting with the Vice President?”

Camilla turned to her. “I asked if he wanted me to miss a meeting with the Vice President.” Camilla grinned. “I didn’t say I had one. Grab some other agents and have them mill around my cab as everyone boards the buses, so it’s not obvious whether DeShear and Lanaya went with me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay.” Camilla said. “If you get asked, they did.”

• • • •

“HOW IS SECURITY?” MAYA asked, sliding a needle into The Greyhound’s arm.

“There isn’t any.” He looked away from the syringe, focusing on the tube taped to his other arm.

Dominique picked through a series of bottles in a padded suitcase. “That’s not entirely true. My good friend Dr. Hauser arranged for security, but apparently only for himself. A few of the men with him are soldiers from the Indonesian Army, dressed as civilians.” She stood, walking to the bed. “I suppose the rest of us are on our own—although he made it clear during the conference call with the board that wouldn’t be the case.”

Maya administered another injection and inspected the IV drip. “What about your strength? How are you holding up?”

“Good.” The Greyhound stared at the tubes carrying drugs into his arm. “And so is my attitude. If I didn’t lose it on that pervert Bruner, I’m not going to.”

“Did you want to?” Dominique looked into his eyes. “Was there any inclination toward rage?”

“Are you analyzing me, Doctor? I was focused on the job. I already knew—”

“It’s important to understand.” Maya stood, crossing the room to the bag of bottles. “As these treatments get more frequent, the inclination to react harshly will increase.”

“I can keep it together.”

“Tristan,” Dominique leaned forward. “She’s trying to say you might not realize you’re going too far. These drugs affect your emotions and reactions.”

He chewed his lip. “I . . . I was dispassionate. I knew what I was there to do, and how I was going to do it. I knew Bruner wasn’t going to suffer much, so when I saw the girl, I wanted to get her out of there and get it over with.”

“No feelings of rage?” Dominique asked.

“No.”

“Any feelings at all?”

“Not like before.” Behind him, the sun touched the tops of tall buildings in the distance. “Look, I know what you’re thinking. You’re worried I’m getting de-sensitized to it, to the killing. Well, I am. And I think I need to be. If I thought too long about what my task is at any given moment, I’d hesitate—and then I might make a mistake. That could cost all of us. But if you want to know how I sleep at night, well . . . not very good.” His eyes went to Dominique. “And not all the vomiting is from the sequence breaking me down, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Maya pulled the IV tape from his arm and removed the needle, pressing a ball of cotton to the injection site. She tore a short piece of white tape and pressed it over the cotton.

“Tonight, I can get several of them here in the Viceroy. The rest, I’ll get tomorrow at the facility. I’ll wear one of their moon suits, and whenever any of them separate from the group, I’ll be ready.”

• • • •

“COME. YOU CAN SEE.” The little woman hobbled toward the second set of buildings—the ones marked Processing. “Come. I will show.”

“Hamilton.” Lanaya grabbed his arm, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I heard rumors about this—I read about it on the black screen site. But . . .” She swallowed hard, looking out over the masses of children. “I—I don’t think I really ever conceived that they’d . . .”

He took her hand, squeezing it gently. “I understand.”

“They’re . . . they’re children.” Her words caught in her throat. “Little children. Babies. And they’re chopping them up.”

“And we’re going to stop it. All of it.” He leaned forward, frowning. “We’re going to make this madness end.”

She nodded, drying her eyes.

DeShear handed her his phone. “Can you take pictures? And maybe some video? Let’s focus on finding things that will get the newspapers to help us end all this.”

She took the phone and stared at it, her voice a whisper. “Yes.”

DeShear glanced at the old woman.



“Come.” She walked toward the processing building. “I will show.”

An eighteen-wheeler truck was parked at the rear of the second facility. Behind it, in the distance, stood a bulldozer and a back hoe.

*Breaking ground on their latest building.*

The nearest side of the building was lined with oval tanks. Pipes ran from them and into the building. Red warning signs had been mounted on the front of each one.

DeShear pointed. “What do you think those are for?”

“It’s a surgery facility,” Lanaya sniffled. “Those will be gases for operations and medical functions. Oxygen, nitrous oxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen. That sort of thing.” She lowered her voice. “Why do you think she’s showing us all this?”

He lifted the ID card from the lanyard around his neck. “It’s an executive level pass. She probably does this all the time for the big wigs.” DeShear trudged along, glancing over his shoulder. “Probably figured that’s what we were doing all the way down here. To her, we’re VIPs.”

The processing facility had no airlock. They opened the doors and went right in.

Cool air swept over his face. A few overhead lights were on in the massive building, illuminating the glass rooms below. Each was about twenty feet square, and maybe twenty feet high, with an operating table in the center and a rack of lights over it. Several tray tables were nearby, and a long row of gurneys lined the corridor.

DeShear walked up to one of the operating rooms, his footsteps echoing through the empty facility. Beside him, the old woman smiled. “It is here. Very good, they take bad parts out of the children.”

“I—I can’t believe it,” DeShear’s shoulders slumped, his breath fogging the glass. “They tell them they’re sick, and then . . . they chop them up and sell off the pieces.”

The faces of the children, asking for candy, clouded his vision. Their scars and deformities blocked his view of the surgical machinery in front of him. “That’s why they look jaundiced.” He turned to Lanaya. “They’re not underfed. They can’t process the nutrients.”

She stared at the operating room, her eyes unfocused and vacant. “You take out a liver, or a section of intestine, or some knee cartilage . . . I’m not sure the recipient asks where it comes from. They’re told cadavers, for some of it. Recent car crashes and the like.” She inched closer, placing her hand on the glass. “They . . . they have no idea.”

“How many organs can a—” DeShear exhaled sharply.

*The back hoe.*

His heart raced as rage welled inside him. “Where’s the back exit?” he shouted, running down the aisle. “How do I get out of this place?”

He sprinted past room after room of operating tables, fear growing in his gut, his eyes scanning the walls. When he found the exit sign, he didn’t slow down. He threw both hands into the door’s crossbar and slammed it open. Racing across the short span of asphalt, he hurled past the truck and up a small hill. When he reached the top, the bulldozer and back hoe were visible again.

The ground was churned and uneven, like a recently plowed field. The wind shifted, bringing the smell to him, assaulting his nose and making him choke—but he forced himself to keep going.

At the bulldozer, he stopped, panting as he gazed over the big hole. To his right, the back hoe rested silently, its shovel posed in midair, ready to continue its work the next day.

Below it, the tiny faces.

Gasping, DeShear sank to his knees, almost unable to speak, the breath going out of him. “No. Please, no.”

Row after row of small bodies lined the hole, dusted with lime to kill the smell and speed decomposition.

Blank eyes stared up at him. Their young faces were empty and gray. Some had been wrapped with a loose sheet; others were nude, their play clothes probably saved for another child.

He stood on the edge of the hole, shaking his head, unable to fathom the minds that could do such things. There were so many bodies stacked in the rows, they seemed not to be real.

But the smell made it real. The stink of rotting meat, and the buzz of the flies. The half-buried bodies, some with dirt resting on their open eyes and mouths, next to the feet and hands of their little playmates, that was all too real.

“Hamilton!” Lanaya made her way up the small hill. “What is it?”

“No.” He jumped up, the soft brown dirt sinking under his feet. He fell to his knees. “Stay there. You don’t need to see this.”

“I have to take pictures.”

He got up and ran to her. “Don’t. I’ll do it.” He took the phone. “Go. Go now.”

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded, backing away.

He faced the hole in the distance, then looked at the mud under his feet. This, too, had been recently filled. He was standing on the graves of other children.

He winced, stumbling backwards, looking for an unturned patch of ground, not wishing to further desecrate the burial site.

For hundreds of yards in all directions, there was none.





DESHEAR PACED BACK and forth in front of the tanker truck as the old woman looked on. “How can you be a part of this, smiling and walking around like it’s not happening? What is wrong with you?”

She shook her head. “Not to understand.”

He gritted his teeth, pointing at the play field. “Those children are being slaughtered. Killed. Don’t you care?”

“Killed?”

“Yes. Those kids, right there. Aren’t they your responsibility?”

“They die, you say. I make them alive.” Her tone was calm and even, her hands held in front of her. A teacher, teaching. “When I come here, they not play. They not sing. They sit, like dog, in rooms. I make this.”

DeShear shook his head. “You . . . you . . .”

“Everyone die. You, me. I cannot stop the bad. But I can make better, this.” She waved her hand toward the playground, a thin smile on her lips. “For some good, for them. Do you understand? I help them come from baby to now, and know some joy of the world.”

“Babies? Where do you have babies?”

“We have. Come. You can see.”

She led them back to a building near where the milk truck had been.

“I don’t know if I want to see anymore.” Lanaya shuddered.

“Well, you have to.” DeShear scowled. “And so do I. We’re in this thing. With the pictures I just took, we have enough to bring this whole place down, but the people at the top have a plan for that. They’ll deny, they’ll obfuscate. They’ll say some low-level person in charge went rogue. I want proof that they knew all along, so there’s no escape for the freaking monsters who did all this.”

The sister hobbled past the sign demanding everyone wear cleanroom suits to enter, pushing open the door. She held it for them. “Come. Here is.”

DeShear checked the battery on his phone. More than fifty percent. Hopefully, more than enough.

The room beyond the open door was dark. He looked at the old woman. “The babies are in here?”

“Yes. Come.” She brushed past him into the dim room. “You can see.”

DeShear took a few steps into what appeared to be a library or warehouse, pausing as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. It was almost as hot inside as it was outside. That hadn’t been the case in the operating building. Lanaya entered the room and let the door close, shutting out most of the light.

Rows of shelves were visible, but not much else. A steady, low hum filled the air. He scanned the ceiling, where large circulation fans turned slowly, their massive blades black against the fading light of the sunset sky. A gear engaged somewhere in the back, with the whir of an electrical motor, and the concrete floor under his feet vibrated.

*Pumps. Fans.*

He walked down the center aisle, between the shelves, and opened his mouth to ask the sister where the babies could be in such a place. It was sterile and dark, but warm.

A fine bead of sweat formed on his lip. As he went to wipe his shoulder across it, Lanaya turned on the flashlight from his phone, shining it downward to light the floor.

The glint off the glass was the first evidence he had that anything was even in the room but the shelves. Clear, rectangular containers rested end to end, with hoses running across the tops, each diving down to the shadow floating inside.

He stepped forward, his mouth open and his guts in a knot, as he reached out to touch the container and convince himself that what he saw was really there.

Inside the glass, attached with surgical tubes, was a human baby. They floated, not fully formed, looking part human, part fish, with large, round heads and curled, translucent bodies, floating in a silent pool. Their eyes, formed but not seeing. Tiny organs were visible through the undeveloped skin. Hands with fingers reached outward at him. Tiny feet pulled close, as if to offer protection from whatever might come in the darkness.

He panted hard, his hands shaking as he moved to the next container. It held another fetus, as did the next. They were like aquariums, spanning as far as he could see. The shelves went to the ceiling, and from front to back in the room, with just enough space to step in between them and maneuver.

He shook his head, his gaze going down the row as far as the light from the phone allowed, shimmering off dozens and dozens of containers.

*Babies. They're growing fetuses here.*

He looked at Lanaya. She stood by the first row, staring at the glass. They were larger there. Farther along, maybe by a few months. The ones by DeShear were smaller. He walked down the aisle in silence, peering at the smaller and smaller residents of the containers.

*Pictures.*

"Lanaya," he said.

"I'm on it." She wiped away a tear and held up the phone, hitting the video record button. The front light came on as the phone started recording. She gasped, quickly aiming the beam at the floor. "What about the brightness of this light? Will it hurt their eyes?"

"I don't know," DeShear said, swallowing hard. "I think it might. You figure, these would normally be inside some layers of skin and muscle."

He leaned back, scanning the ceiling, forcing himself to concentrate. There might be special lighting. He didn't want to gather evidence and blind thousands of victims in the process.

*Thousands.*

*They grow them here until they're big enough, then take them to processing and start carving them up.*

Nausea gripped him. He shook it off and counted the shelves he could see. There were more than a dozen and a half on each side of the aisle, reaching to the ceiling. Each had an occupant, as far as he could tell. There'd be no reason to have hoses going into a container if there wasn't. There had to be tens of thousands of fetuses, possibly more. Maybe a hundred thousand.

"Sister, are there any lights in here? One that won't hurt the eyes of the babies?"

"Light, yes. Here. I will show." She walked past him in the nearly-dark room. DeShear followed, with Lanaya behind him, cupping her hand over the phone. Only part of the light went past her fingers, but it was enough to act like a small flashlight.

At the back wall, the old woman turned. About ten feet down the aisle, a panel of knobs and switches was mounted on the wall. "Here is light."

Lanaya raised the beam, still covering it, allowing the reflected light to illuminate their way. Her hand glowed red, showing the bones within, like the skin of the fetuses.

DeShear studied the panel.

The front door opened, and the room was bathed in orange light from the setting sun.

“This way, gentlemen.” A gravelly man’s voice boomed forth into the room, accompanied by a sharp, intermittent *clack* of hard wood hitting concrete.

DeShear crouched, grabbing Lanaya’s arm and pulling her downward. He put a finger to his lips and nodded at the camera. She held it to her chest and shut off the light, snapping the side button down to “mute.”

The old woman watched with an expressionless face, not moving from the panel. She curled a wrinkled finger at her two guests, tiptoeing further down the row to the corner.

Several men could be heard in the room. DeShear took Lanaya’s hand and slinked toward the old sister. She rounded the corner and stepped into a small wooden closet—mostly empty, but big enough to house all three of them, and unable to be seen from the front of the room.

“Haskins, get the lights.” The gravelly-voiced man said. “My friends, here is where the real magic of our facility resides.”

Footsteps came down the aisle, toward them. DeShear held his breath, hoping the man found the light panel and nothing else. Next to him, the sister stood, unwavering.

A figure rounded the corner. DeShear eased his head back, balling his fist as the silhouette neared. The man stopped halfway down the row and snapped some switches. A dim, pink glow washed over the room as the assistant went back to the others.

The man with the gravelly voice spoke again. “The room will get slightly brighter over the next few minutes, but your eyes will quickly adjust. We also have still images we can show you of any specimens, and I can bring infrared and ultrasound equipment in if you should so require.”

DeShear crouched, inching out from the wooden closet and peeking at the group that had entered the room. There were six total, three facing him and three facing away.

Two of the men appeared to be Asian, with black hair and dark eyes. A third man was tall and blonde. Of the people facing away from him, two wore cleanroom suits. The other had gray hair and was hunched over, dressed in a dark business suit. He gestured with a cane as he spoke.

“We call this the Fetal Development, Retention and Obstetric Nutrition Enclosure,” the old man said, his gravelly voice rumbling over the glass containers. “Its nickname is the drone room, because it resembles a beehive—and we have been so very busy. Each human embryo here has been developed from our stock, genetically selected to be free of almost every form of human suffering, and housed in our proprietary synthetic amniotic fluid, much like that of a real human womb. We have four such buildings on site, and each contains over a million live specimens in various stages of growth. As your eyes adjust to the special lighting, feel free to look around.”

“That’s Dr. Hauser,” Lanaya whispered. “The one with the cane.”

“There are concerning rumors,” one of the short, black haired man said. His accent was decidedly Asian, possibly of Chinese descent. “I have heard they die early.”

A man in a cleanroom suit waved a hand. “All developmental sciences have challenges—”

Hauser stepped in. “Any of these specimens not developing adequately are terminated. Fetuses determined to be inadequate for any reason can be selected for terminus prior to introduction into the synthetic utero habitat you see here, while others are terminated in infancy. We have very strict standards. By age five, we will have completely purged these lines of any deficiencies. We are, of course, working on those challenges, but my understanding was you required stock that was already beyond childhood.”

“No, we hear *adult* have short life span.”

“Ah.” Hauser said. “You may be referring to some nasty rumors about an earlier series we developed decades ago. The group was about seventy-three percent male, and they typically lived

almost to age sixty. Fine specimens, the Gammas. Very smart, very strong. Athletic. But we no longer . . . that line is no longer produced.”

“I see. At present, we have no use for that,” the short man said.

“Of course not.” Hauser swept his cane at the rows of containers. “But what you want is here, for every client you have, whatever their needs. We can grow and harvest any internal organ, for you to ship worldwide. We can provide your customers a subservient work force or any type of worker you desire. And in a year or two, we can open a facility in your country.”

“We would be grateful. Cambodia is a poor country with many needs.”

Hauser nodded. “High tech jobs, with laboratories and shipping. The construction of a large campus, like you’ve seen here. These are all good for Cambodia.”

“Our current interest is in females.” He held up a handful of pictures. “Where can we inspect these?”

The man in the cleanroom suit checked his clipboard. “I believe what you want is at recess now, on the playground, or we can take you to the school when recess is over.”

“Yes, we pass on the way here.” The short man shook his head. “But no school. My employers have no need for them to be educated. No reading or writing.”

“Not a school to educate, my friend,” Hauser said. “Simply a way to ensure a child remains obedient. Training.”

“Obedience training?”

“Yes, of a sort.”

The door opened again, and another group of people entered.

“Dr. Hauser,” a security guard said, stepping forward. “These are the Norwegian representatives you wanted to see. They’ve just arrived.”

“Ah, excellent.” Hauser extended his hand. “Please, join us.”

The security guard stepped back, allowing Dr. Hauser to shake hands with the Norwegians. “Sir, this is Ms. Pederson,” the guard said. “And her associate Dr. Karlsdotter. He had a question about longevity, and I was unable to properly answer.”

“We were just discussing that,” Hauser said. “The Gamma sequence. It’s merely an unfortunate circumstance, really, in a line of embryos we developed years ago.”

The woman nodded, making notes as Hauser talked. “Why does it happen?”

“We don’t completely know. In the same way pre-birth babies develop organs for nine months, hormones and DNA coding says ‘stop’ at birth. Yes, they still develop, but not like before. They move from creating organs and systems to growing and maturing them. Upon a genetic marker, similar to ones that cause gray hair, the organs in the Gammas stop regenerating. Since it’s all organs, blood, et cetera, it manifests itself as massive and virtually simultaneous organ failure. Like cancer, its cause isn’t completely known. And also like cancer, its cure isn’t yet known. It’s as though their bodies do a pre-birth for nine months and then a pre-death for nine months.”

He walked along the aisle, leaning on his cane with each step, deep in lecture mode as he passed rows and rows of the containers. “Modern science doesn’t actually know why people die of old age, except to say their bodies wear out. We simply view this as an accelerated version of that. Like a tire that is said to last fifty-thousand miles, for some cars that would be ten years, but on other cars it might only be five. With the Gammas, we don’t know where the extra mileage is happening, we simply see that it does. It could be partially explained by the faster metabolism genes that were brought forward in that line.”

He turned, punctuating the air with his cane for emphasis. “Life begins with rapid growth, and then slows. We don’t ask why. Puberty happens at roughly the same age all around the world, based on nothing other than a predetermined DNA time stamp that says it’s time to stop being a child and start becoming an adult that is able to reproduce. Menopause also occurs at a predetermined time, within a few standard deviations, because the DNA time stamp says it’s time to no longer have children.”

The doctor limped back toward the group. “In the Gamma individuals, death occurs at roughly age fifty-five for a similar reason.” He shrugged. “A predetermined DNA switch in them simply said stop. But as I say, it’s no longer an issue.”

The Norwegian woman looked up from her notes. “I believe that alleviates any concerns we had, Doctor.”

Her associate nodded. “We are ready to place our order.”

“Fine. Right this way.” Hauser headed for the door, his cane popping fast as he moved across the concrete floor. “The paperwork will only take a moment. And then, if you’ll excuse me, I have a reception I must attend.”

“I believe we are ready, too, Doctor,” the Asian man said. “Subject to a satisfactory inspection of the stock.”

“Excellent!” Hauser chuckled. “I may have to open a bottle of champagne.”

The others laughed, following him to the door.

“But to be clear . . .” The Norwegian woman held the door for her elderly host. “After the Gammas, you were able to detect the flaw in subsequent lines, and remove it?”

“Gammas are not produced anymore.” Dr. Hauser lumbered outside into the fading light. “And none exist today. You have my word on it.”







THE GREYHOUND STOOD shirtless at the edge of the bed, studying the clothing laid out there. “Quite a selection.”

“Best I could do.” Wearing a fluffy white robe, Dominique sauntered from the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel. “One maintenance uniform, and one from the dining room staff. What else do you think you’ll need?”

He sighed, going to the dresser and taking out a pressed, folded dress shirt. “A fast car, a reliable gun—a reliable machine gun would be nice, or even two—some good timing, good luck, and good strength.” Opening the top drawer, he sifted through the silk neckties. “Did I say good luck?”

“The best luck is being prepared.” Dominique came up behind her husband and slid her arms around his waist, kissing the back of his shoulder. “And you are certainly that.”

“Tristan?” Maya knocked on the partition door. The Greyhound turned around and kissed his wife, then went over to the door and opened it. Maya held a notepad in one hand, a cell phone in the other, examining the screen. “I have some good news. The lab says the half-life for this latest batch of meds is testing better than previous ones. Initial field tests show as much as twenty percent better endurance.”

The Greyhound slipped his shirt on. “I feel it. We talked about that in New York, remember?” He lifted his chin, inspecting himself in the mirror as he pushed a gold cufflink through a stiff white cuff. “I’d say it’s more potent, with a longer range, and less of a downslide after.”

“If we can flatten the peaks and valleys,” Maya said, “so there’s no crash between cycles, we’ll really have something.”

“That’s great news, Maya.” Dominique sat on the bed and folded her hands in her lap, her voice low. “Thank you.”

Tristan finished buttoning his shirt, tucking it into his pants, his tone equally somber. “You’re a great chemist, and a good friend, Maya. If I haven’t told you that before, I should have.” He glanced at Maya as he picked up the shoulder holster, sliding it over one arm and then the other, the strap running across his back. “You’ve saved my life more than once, both of you.” Taking the air gun from its polished wooden case, he slid it into the holster and smoothed the wrinkles from his shirt.

From the bed, his wife gazed at him, her face drawn.

“I . . . should probably go.” Maya took a backwards step toward her room. “You two have preparations to make. Good luck tonight, Tristan.”

He forced a grin. “I’ll see you in New York very soon.”

He didn’t fully believe the words he said, and neither did anyone else. It was more of a wish than anything. All three knew there was a very real possibility they’d never see each other again. The expression on Dominique’s face said it all—a wife sending her husband off to war, possibly never to return.

In a few hours, it would all be over, one way or the other. Hauser and the board would be dead, or The Greyhound would be.

He put on a windbreaker to cover the gun and the fancy shirt.

“Do you have a plan for Hauser?” Dominique asked.

“I’ll get into the reception, and an opportunity will present itself. He’ll go to the bathroom or he’ll step into the hallway to take a phone call. Then I’ll take him down and make him disappear. I’ll

ambush the others in their rooms tonight.”

“The phone call.” She nodded. “Hauser’s always doing that—stepping out so no one can overhear him. But he’ll have bodyguards with him.”

“Leave that to me.” He shoved a handkerchief and the ether bottle into his pocket, along with the Propofol and a few syringes. The last item was a small container of pepper spray. “As for the rest, the less you know, the better. For your protection.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t act cold. Not now.”

A sad smile crossed his face. “My love, I said goodbye an hour ago—unrushed, unworried, a perfect moment—because I knew there wouldn’t be a chance to say goodbye properly when I had to leave.” He chose his words carefully, making sure his voice didn’t waver. “If that’s the last time I hold you, I’ll remember it forever. And if we see each other again—”

“Stop.” She lowered her head, wiping her cheek with the sleeve of the robe.

He went to the bed and sat, taking her hand in his and looking into her teary eyes. “If we should see each other again, we’ll cherish that goodbye, and share another one at a different time.” He swallowed hard. “I hope that’s the case.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she pressed her face to his chest.

He held her, enjoying her warmth through the soft robe, brushing his hand up and down over her back as he inhaled the aromas from her shampoos and bath soaps.

On the dresser, a series of chimes played on his phone.

He kissed the top of his wife’s head. “It’s time.”

She hugged him a moment longer, then let her hands fall to the bed. The Greyhound stood and stuffed a few garments into a canvas bag, picked up his phone, and headed to the door.

• • • •

DESHEAR AND LANAYA reached the security station after the sun had set, but its interior lights were still on. Sweaty and tired in their cleanroom suits, they approached the building. At the back door, DeShear pressed the intercom button.

The voice of the security guard came over the speaker. “You’re late.”

“Yep.” DeShear said, leaning on the button. “You gonna buzz us in?”

“The others went through a long time ago. You were supposed to stay with your group.”

He glared at the intercom. “Clearly, we did not.”

It remained silent.

Lanaya huffed. “Does he expect us to spend the night out here?”

“He might.”

She frowned and pressed the button. “See here, young man. Who do you think you’re talking to? We are board members of Angelis Genetics, with executive level passes. If we wish to stray from our group, we shall—and with not a word of admonition from a security guard in the process! Do I make myself clear? Now open this door before we’re late to the reception.”

The door buzzed. As they opened it, the tall square-jawed American guard ran toward them. “I’m so sorry, ma’am! I thought you were with the audit team.” He opened the next door for them. “I really apologize. It’s been a long day, and—”

Lanaya stormed past him, with DeShear following.

“My good man,” she said, “it’s one thing to have a long day. It’s quite another to be rude.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stopped, putting her hands on her hips. "I shall keep this between us this time, but remember, you are a representative of Angelus Genetics. I'll expect better from you in the future. Now if you'd be so kind as to call a cab for us."

"There's one waiting, ma'am. The IRS woman insisted. But . . ." The guard folded his arms.

"Yes?" Lanaya stared at him.

"Ma'am, I'll need to collect your ID cards." He eyed the lanyard with the security pass.

DeShear held his breath. If the guard inspected cards every day, he would know DeShear's was doctored.

The guard stared at Lanaya.

She narrowed her eyes, holding up her ID badge. "We'll be keeping these."

He let out a loud sigh and reached behind the counter. The door buzzed. "Yes, ma'am. Enjoy your evening."

Lanaya marched through the front door and headed for the taxi, climbing in with DeShear on her heels.

"Nice work." He chuckled.

"Thank you." She fanned her face. "I nearly wet myself."

The cab bumped along the dirt drive, heading from the lab campus to the hotel. DeShear pressed his phone to his head, holding his other ear shut so he could hear over the road noise. "We got him, Cammy. We caught Hauser talking about committing euthanasia, and we have pictures of a mass grave site on his property, filled with the bodies of children."

"What?" Camilla said. "I can't hear you, Dash. You're breaking up."

DeShear raised his voice. "I said—"

His phone cut out. He looked at the screen. There was no signal and only three percent battery life.

"Crap!"

A moment later, the screen flashed with an incoming call from Camilla, but it immediately dropped and lit up with the message "call lost."

"Is there any juice left in your phone?" he asked Lanaya.

She shook her head. "What do we do?"

"Driver, do you have a cell phone?"

The man shrugged, peering at DeShear in the rearview mirror. "No English, sir. I am only speak Indonesian."

DeShear held up his phone, pointing to it. "A power cord? Anything?"

The driver shook his head. "No phone, sorry. I take to hotel, yes?"

"Yes." DeShear slumped back in his seat, pulling his cleanroom suit hood off. "Hotel."

• • • •

THE GREYHOUND WAITED in coveralls behind the dumpster until a truck pulled up to the Viceroy loading dock. A man with a rifle stood at the back of the hotel; another at the side. Both were dressed the same as The Greyhound. As the service crew came out to unload the vehicle, he joined them. Hefting a box onto his shoulder, he lowered his head and carried it inside.

He followed the man in front of him to the kitchen and set his box on a stainless steel counter, lingering as the others returned to the truck. When they were gone, he walked in the opposite direction and ducked into the restroom. He unzipped his coveralls and balled them up, slipping them into the trash can in the corner, then smoothed his hair.

The wait staff jacket and dark pants would work well enough inside the reception.

• • • •

NEAR THE CHRISTMAS tree in the Viceroy hotel ballroom, Camilla sipped ice water, tapping her hand against her thigh. There had been no word from DeShear yet. Something may have happened. If it did, what then?

She distracted herself by watching one of the hotel staff plug a cell phone into a projector cable. Slides about Angelus Genetics appeared on screens lining the walls. After a second cord was attached, holiday music came over the ballroom sound system.

Her phone pinged. Pulling it from her purse, she read a text from DeShear.

*On our way.*

She strolled around the room, trying to focus on mingling with her agents as they awaited their host, telling herself if DeShear and Lanaya were on their way, they were probably okay.

• • • •

DOMINIQUE TOOK ONE last look in the mirror, pressing her hand to her stomach to ease the butterflies. She slipped her key card into a small handbag, adjusted the strap on her shoulder, and headed to the door.

When she opened it, Dr. Hauser was smiling at her from the hallway.

Her stomach lurched. She fought the urge to slam the door in his face and throw herself against it.

“Hello, Dominique.” Hauser brushed past his two bodyguards. “May I escort you to this evening’s reception?”

She swallowed hard. “Uh, of course, Marcus.” Then, a smile. “It would be my pleasure.”

“Excellent.” He extended his arm. “This way.” They walked down the hallway together, his cane setting the pace. At the elevator, one of the body guards pressed the button. The doors opened, and the foursome stepped inside.

As the doors closed, Hauser leaned his cane against the wall and pressed the button to the lobby. “You know, my dear Dominique, you disappoint me.”

Her heart pounded. Would the body guards attack her now that she was out of sight in the elevator? Why hadn’t she brought a weapon?

She fought to keep her breathing steady, staring straight ahead.

“You are an amazing creature. So smart.” He patted her arm. “But I knew you only did my bidding out of fear, and that can only take things so far.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and gazed at it. “How are your children—the boys? Are they behaving while you’re away? Not giving your mother any trouble, I hope.”

Her hands shook, her voice wavering. “They’re fine.”

“Ah. Good.” The paper crackled as he unfolded it. “They have school in the morning, tomorrow, and baseball practice after.” He looked up. “Baseball, in December?”

She said nothing, holding her breath, unable to stop her heart from racing.

“And you will call them at your mother’s, on their tablet, after baseball—as you do every time you travel.” He folded the paper and put it away. “I’d like that to continue. I’d like for you to call them tomorrow. I’d like for them to answer and speak with their mother. I’m sure they’d be disappointed if that didn’t happen. Of course, I’m sure you’d be heartbroken if you called and *they* didn’t answer. If your mother said they weren’t there, and she didn’t know where they were.”

A shudder ran through her. “Please don’t.”

“Why, I admire the effort you make to call them every day. In fact, I want you to call them tomorrow, and the day after that, and greet them with loving arms upon your safe return.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Please . . .”

He squeezed her arm, his gravelly voice growing stern. “It would be terrible if anything were to happen to your young sons while you are out of town, so I’ve asked a friend to keep an eye on your children during our stay here. A friend of these gentlemen.”

“Marcus, y-you know me. I would never—”

“I’ve been watching the entire time, my dear. I know everything. You leaked confidential information on our company through a black screen site. You’re working with a psychopath called The Greyhound. You may even be responsible for this IRS debacle.” He gritted his teeth. “It infuriates me that I took you in as a lowly intern, and helped you soar to great heights, and—I’ve given you so much! I helped you become a doctor, put you on the board of Angelus. I had great hopes for you. But . . .” He lowered his voice. “I don’t pretend I haven’t taken much from you as well. Your daughter leaked information, and she paid a high price—but you paid it as well. I don’t deny that, and it turned you against me. Among other things you disagreed with.” He looked her in the eye, his gaze growing cold. “But just as you’ve taken from me, with the lying and sharing secrets, more can always be taken from you. So let’s both hope nothing happens while I’m here in Indonesia. Because if something were to happen to me, something most assuredly will happen to your lovely children.”

The bell rang. The elevator doors opened to the lobby. A large, lighted Santa greeted them from the far side of the room.

Hauser dropped her hand and leaned on his cane, hobbling across the shiny marble lobby.

“Dina!” Hauser shouted, waving his hand at the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. “You made it. How good of you to come. You’re in time for my speech.”

The woman smiled and clasped Dr. Hauser’s hand.

Inside the elevator, Dominique fell against the wall, shaking and clutching her stomach, barely able to keep from sliding to the ground.





THE WOMAN FROM THE lecture walked briskly across the ballroom, passing a long table of dignitaries. Various board members from Angelus Genetics were seated next to representatives of the Indonesian government, the slide show of Angelus Genetics PR images projected onto screens behind them. In the center of the long table, a microphone awaited.

The lecturer leaned forward onto the lectern. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming.” She tapped her note cards, looking out over the gathering. “Angelus Genetics would like to welcome our guests from the United States Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, and the Federal Marshal Service, as well as representatives of our host nation. This reception is being held in the hopes that we can get to know each other better and come to some understandings about our business here in Indonesia. To that end, I have a slide presentation prepared . . .”

Camilla groaned to herself. A few of her agents groaned quietly nearby.

“But first, we have a special treat for you. The chairman of Angelus Genetics would like to welcome you. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Dr. Marcus Hauser.”

She stepped away from the microphone, clapping. A polite applause went up from the assembled agents and others in the room. In the back corner of the ballroom, far from the doors, a man in a wait staff jacket carried a tray of hors d’oeuvres. As Hauser lumbered toward the lectern, the server set the tray on one of the many round tables in the room, and walked quickly toward the rear exit.



DESHEAR AND LANAYA pushed the front ballroom doors open and rushed inside. Hauser’s gravelly old voice boomed over the speakers as DeShear walked through the crowd of agents.

“Happy holidays, everyone. Thank you all for coming.” The old man cleared his throat. “I can’t say I’m happy you’re here, but I look forward to addressing your concerns and putting this awkward audit behind us. I hope you’ll all be home for Christmas.”

“Dash.” Camilla’s voice came from behind DeShear. “What happened to you?”

“Cammy, you won’t believe what we found.” He glanced over both shoulders and lowered his voice. “I tried to tell you this earlier, but the call dropped. We heard Hauser talking about conducting human trafficking and euthanasia, and I saw a mass grave site on the far side of the campus where there’s supposed to be a school. He’s in it up to his eyeballs.”

Camilla’s jaw dropped. She put her hand on his shoulder, directing him to the back of the ballroom. “You saw mass graves?”

“Mass graves, organ harvesting facilities,” DeShear said. “I was in a field where there had to be thousands of children buried. They’re using a freaking bulldozer to cover the bodies. And Hauser knows all about it. We overheard him when he was pitching some clients.”

“That’s incredible.” Camilla put her hand to her forehead, glaring at Hauser as he spoke.

“Get some lights and I’ll take you there right now.” DeShear said. “It’s all just sitting there, a whole second campus.”

“Ms. Madison, if I may.” Lanaya leaned in close. “I want this company stopped, believe me, but it may be best to move quietly. Dr. Hauser is very smart and very well protected by the Indonesian government. The Prime Minister would be hugely embarrassed by word getting out about mass graves and human trafficking. An IRS audit of an American-owned company? That, they can weather.



Euthanasia, organ trafficking—those things are another matter entirely. If the Prime Minister is in on any of this, I fear they may try to hush it up. They could even hold us as spies or some such thing while they move the evidence.”

Camilla waved to a few of her agents. As they approached, she put a hand on Lanaya’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. With proof of a mass burial site, I can call the Vice President and get the U. N. here in about twenty-four hours. Nobody can move a mass burial site that fast.”

The two agents stood by Camilla. “Get word to the team leaders that I need to see them, but they need to move quietly.” The agents departed. Camilla turned back to Lanaya and DeShear. “When I get the U. N. here, the press will follow. That spells the end for Angelus Genetics. We can seize everything they have, and they won’t be able to say a word about it.”

DeShear pounded a fist into his hand. “Good. Hauser needs to go down.”

“Hold on,” Camilla said. “It’s not that fast. Lanaya is right. Hauser’s being protected, and the Indonesian prime minister won’t want that being exposed on his watch. We need to move carefully, and if we tip our hand, Hauser might walk.”

“How does he walk from something like this?” DeShear’s face grew hot. “He’s in too deep. We saw him talking about it. Go arrest him right now, in the middle of his stupid speech.”

Camilla put her hands out. “For me to do anything, we need direct proof that he violated U. S. laws. Otherwise Hauser will say he didn’t know anything about it. He’ll blame it on a rogue manager, climb onto a jet, and ride it all out somewhere else. That’s how these multinational corporate big wigs play the game.”

Lanaya groaned, putting her hands to her face. “He could open up shop in a new country and be right back in business.”

Camilla nodded. “We need direct evidence that shows he knew about the killings and human trafficking. It won’t be in the company ledgers, but if we find evidence of money laundering, we can squeeze some lower level players and work our way up to Hauser. That’ll take weeks, and if he even thinks we’re getting close, he’ll bolt.”

“But he talked about euthanasia.” DeShear shook his head. “We both heard him.”

Camilla shrugged. “Right now, it’s your word against his.”

Lanaya shot upright. “No, we—”

Camilla held up a finger. “We need to do it right, so he can’t weasel out of anything. Let me call this in. That lady at the table is the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. She’s here to show Hauser is connected. We’ll need hard proof that he—”

“We have it!” Lanaya whispered, holding up a phone. “Where’s a power cord?”

At the front of the room, Hauser dug in his pocket with one hand and waved at the group with the other. “Now if you’ll excuse me, duty calls. So, Merry Christmas, and enjoy the party.” He stepped away from the microphone, holding his phone to his ear. As he headed for an exit, two large men followed him.

• • • •

THE GREYHOUND WAS WAITING for them.

Hauser left the ballroom, speaking quietly into his phone. “The Cambodians closed on an order for three hundred today, and signed a deal for a thousand more as soon as we can get them ready.” He looked around. “Hold on, I need to move to where there’s more privacy.” He walked toward the men’s restroom, pointing at one of his bodyguards. “You make sure no one comes in.” He nodded at the other. “You, come with me.”

The bodyguard opened the restroom door. Hauser went inside to continue his conversation, the other large man following him.

On the other side of a bushy potted plant, The Greyhound pulled out the ether, splashing some onto his handkerchief. He palmed it in his left hand and walked toward the restroom, his right hand around the container of pepper spray in his pants pocket.

“Sir,” he said to the bodyguard. “You’re with the reception. May I get you anything from the bar?”

As the man opened his mouth to reply, The Greyhound yanked the pepper spray from his pocket and released it into the bodyguard’s eyes. His hands shot to his face as he shook his head, backing up into the wall. Before he could call out, The Greyhound was on him, shoving the wet handkerchief into the man’s face. The bodyguard twisted away, but The Greyhound held fast, keeping one hand crushed to his target’s face and wrapping the other one around his throat. The man launched himself backward, slamming into the wall to crush his assailant. The Greyhound winced, the air going out of him as sharp pains exploded through his rib cage.

The handkerchief was his only chance. He gritted his teeth and forced the cloth harder into the man’s face, tightening his grip on the bodyguard’s throat. The lingering pepper spray burned The Greyhound’s eyes as he fought to keep the handkerchief in place.

Inches from him, the men’s room door flung open. The other bodyguard stepped out, his gun drawn. The Greyhound leaned his shoulder into the wall and shot a foot out, catching the gunman in the jaw. The man’s head snapped back, and he sprawled onto the carpet.

The bodyguard’s thick arms came at The Greyhound again, swatting at his ears and eyes, as the man tried to get a grip on his attacker. The bodyguard groaned and clawed, then heaved himself into the wall again. Blind and struggling for air, he caught his attacker’s collar. The Greyhound kept his grip, struggling to hold the ether over the man’s face. The bodyguard grunted into the cloth, flinging his head. He let go of The Greyhound’s collar and put both hands on the arm that choked him. He grunted, bending over and falling to his knees, twisting and turning, but unable to shake loose his attacker. His hands slipped off, but he grabbed again—slower. The Greyhound stood behind his target, sweating as he forced the cloth to stay in place. The bodyguard groaned and swayed, his movements growing clumsy. The thick fingers finally went slack and slid off The Greyhound’s arm.

The bodyguard’s hands dropped to his sides, and he slid to the floor.

The Greyhound stood over him, panting. His eyes watering, he blinked hard and glanced up and down the hallway. No one had come around the corner in the melee. He grabbed the big man by the arms and dragged him into the ladies’ room, returning a moment later for the other bodyguard.

As the restroom door shut, The Greyhound opened the bigger man’s jacket and relieved him of his gun. It was a military-style weapon, probably from the Indonesian army. He tucked it into the back of his belt and moved to the second man. Same style gun. He tossed the weapon into the trash.

He moved quickly, sweat dripping off the tip of his nose. Hauser wouldn’t stay in the men’s room too long without his bodyguards, and he may have already phoned for help.

Standing, The Greyhound peeled off the wait staff jacket and unholstered his air gun, laying it on the sink. His own jacket and shoulder holster went into the trash; the air gun went into his hand. His eyes still burning from the spray, The Greyhound pulled out his shirt tails to hide the weapon tucked in his belt and stepped into the hallway. He took a deep breath, readying himself to enter the men’s room.

He looked almost like any other guest at the hotel now, and a man walking into a men’s restroom wouldn’t normally raise any concerns—except to the old man inside.

He pressed the air gun against his thigh so it wouldn't be immediately visible to a casual onlooker. He stared at the restroom door. Hauser might be armed, too.

The Greyhound chewed his lip, his pulse racing. If he could act casual for a few seconds when he stepped inside, like he was a normal guest entering the restroom, that might be all he needed. He placed a hand on the restroom door.

A two or three second advantage.

That was all he required for the air gun to quickly and quietly do its job.



• • • •

LANAYA LOOKED AROUND. “Is there a plug? Anything?”

“Up there.” Camilla pointed to the lectern. “The audio and video for the ballroom are coming from a cell phone. Use that.”

Clutching the phone to her chest, Lanaya viewed the nearest screen. Holiday music accompanied slides of the Angelus propaganda. Her eyes wide, she faced Camilla. “Are you sure?”

Camilla gritted her teeth and pointed at the phone. “Is the proof on there or not?”

“It is.”

“Then let’s go.” Camilla headed for the lectern. “Jingle Bells can wait.”

• • • •

THE GREYHOUND HELD his air gun tight as he stood by the restroom door, his thoughts racing.

*Hauser is in here. He might be hiding in a stall, or he might have a gun—and start shooting the second this door opens.*

*I can’t just kick open the door and use the bodyguard’s weapon to open fire, because the noise will draw attention. Hauser can make all the noise he wants, though. Whoever comes will protect him.*

*Right now, he’s probably on the phone calling for help—and that help will be here in minutes, or even less time.*

So . . .

He leaned close to the heavy door, ready to give it a hard push.

*It’s time to go in.*

He shoved the door open and leaped inside, his gun raised at arm’s length. As the door crashed into the inside wall, The Greyhound scanned the room, peering down the barrel of his weapon.

*Tile. Sinks. Stalls. Urinals.*

The room appeared empty.

*He has to be in one of the stalls.*

The Greyhound lowered himself to one knee. The bottoms of the toilets were visible under the short stall walls, their shadows falling on the tile floor. In the far stall, the shadow was larger than the others. He kept his gaze on the shadow as he crept into the room.

The shadow moved.

The Greyhound leveled the air gun at the stall door. “You can come out, or I can shoot holes in the door until you come out.”

“You can’t shoot.” The old man’s gravelly voiced wavered, echoing off the tile walls. “There are five dozen FBI agents across the hall. The noise from a gun will have them here in—”

The Greyhound squeezed the trigger, sending a pellet blasting through the stall door and into the tile wall. A golf ball-sized hole appeared in each, a cloud of splinters and plaster falling to the floor.

“Okay,” Hauser said, his voice wavering. “I’m coming out.”

The latch on the stall door *clacked* as it unlocked, and the door inched outward. The tip of the cane touched the floor, followed by one foot, then the other, as the old man stepped off his toilet seat perch. “I’m unarmed.” Hauser’s voice trembled. He stuck a hand out of the stall, waving it.

“I’ll need to see both hands, doctor. Now come on out.”

“My cane. I can’t walk without it.”

*Then how did you climb up onto—*

Hauser leaned out the door and fired a gun. The deafening blast echoed off the tile as a white and yellow flash burst from the barrel. The Greyhound slammed backwards like he’d been hit by a linebacker. Red exploded from his shoulder, a searing crash of pain surging through his arm and chest.

He fell into the wall, gasping and trying to raise his gun. The muscles wouldn’t respond. His weapon clattered to the floor. Blood gushed from his wound.

• • • •

“THAT’S GUNFIRE!” CAMILLA shouted. She bolted from behind the lectern. “FBI, let’s check that out. My people, secure the room. Get the civilians and dignitaries to the far wall, away from any windows and doors.”

A group of FBI agents headed for the door, followed by several Indonesian soldiers, splitting into two teams. The commander barked orders to secure the perimeter. Guns drawn, the agents pressed themselves against the walls as their leader threw the door open and leaped into the hallway. “We’re clear! Move, move.”

The agents funneled through the door, splitting left and right into the hallway.

DeShear turned to Lanaya. “That could be our killer. You got this?”

She fumbled with the projector’s connectors. “I think so.”

“Okay.” DeShear bolted for the door.

“Dash, don’t!” Camilla shouted.

It was too late. He was gone.

• • • •

BLOOD STREAMED FROM The Greyhound’s shoulder. With his other hand, he reached behind his back for the pistol.

“I wouldn’t.” Hauser’s cane fell to the floor as he limped forward, keeping his gun pointed at The Greyhound. “I’m not a killer, but I’ll make an exception if you pull out a gun.”

“You’re worse than a killer.” The Greyhound winced, fighting the pain. “You’re a mass murderer.”

“And you’re not?” Hauser smiled, inching closer. “How many people have you killed? Twenty? More?” He took another step, balancing carefully. “But you justify it because you disagree with them. You don’t like their ideas. Well, I disagree with you and your ideas.”

The Greyhound gritted his teeth, gasping as the pain pounded his shoulder.

“It’s over.” The old man took another step toward him, putting the tip of his gun to The Greyhound’s head. “You lost, and I won, because I always win.”

• • • •

A LARGE WOMAN IN AN evening dress stood in the hallway, trembling. DeShear shouted at her. “Where’s the shooter?”

She pointed with shaking hands. “M—men’s room.”

The FBI commander squatted in the hallway, his gun trained on the men’s room door. “Team one, go.” As two agents raced to the bathroom door, the commander called down the hallway. “Team two, check the lobby for additional threats.”

DeShear took a position behind him, leaning in close. “Have somebody find an interpreter in case the shooter doesn’t speak English.”

“Carson,” the commander shouted. “Grab one of the hotel staff that speaks English.” He glanced at DeShear. “Are you armed, sir?”

“Not yet.”

“And Carson—get a weapon for the bureau chief’s friend.”

• • • •

THE GUN SHOOK IN THE old man’s hand.

The Greyhound winced as the pain from his shoulder throbbed. Sweat formed on his brow. “Not so easy, close up—is it? You prefer your victims small and helpless.”

The doctor shrugged. “The trembling is a byproduct of an adrenaline surge—from when you shot at me—and nothing more. If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead right now.”

A bead of sweat trickled down The Greyhound’s cheek.

“It’s easy to kill a man,” Hauser said. “Killing his ideas takes time and effort. I know you have others working with you. Seeing you humiliated in public as your efforts are disgraced, that’s how you kill a movement.”

• • • •

THE AGENTS TOOK POSITIONS on each side of the men’s room entrance. “You! In the restroom! Throw down your weapon and come out.”

“I went into the ladies’ room.” The woman backed down the hallway, a hand over her mouth and her eyes wide. “There are two bodies in there!”

“Watkins!” The commander shouted. “We have an unidentified threat in the ladies’ room.”

Another agent raced forward, two others on his heels. “On it.”

A gravelly voice came through the restroom. “I’m Dr. Hauser. I’ve been attacked.”

“Doctor Hauser.” The commander shouted, moving to the men’s room. “Where is the gunman?”

“I shot him. He’s on the floor.”

The commander frowned, facing DeShear. “There’s a lot of bodies piling up in this hotel. How big a threat is the old man?”

“Small,” DeShear said. “Unless you’re a kid.”

The commander nodded. “Doctor, we’re coming in. Lower your weapon.”

He pressed his hand to the door and opened it. Inside, an old man with a gun stood over a younger man with blood seeping from his shoulder. “I got him,” Hauser said. “I got The Greyhound.”

An agent rushed past the commander and relieved Hauser of his gun. Two others took The Greyhound’s weapons and lifted him to his feet.

“Get an ambulance and get something to restrain that guy,” the commander said, pointing to The Greyhound. “See if any of the soldiers have handcuffs. If not, get some zip ties from the kitchen. Anything to hold him until the local police arrive.”

The men dragged The Greyhound out of the restroom and toward the lobby, leaving a dotted trail of blood along the floor. DeShear stepped to the wall so they could pass.

*This was the big killer. The one we were all afraid of.*

The Greyhound hung his head, staggering as the agents helped him walk.

*Doesn’t look like such a threat now.*

“Doctor.” An agent took Hauser by the shoulders. “Are you all right?”

Before he could answer, his own voice boomed from the speakers in the ballroom. A conversation between Hauser and another man filled the air.

*“Any of these specimens not developing adequately are terminated . . .”*

“Let’s get you to a hospital, sir,” the agent said, taking the doctor by the arm. “We’d like to get you checked out and make sure you’re okay.”

Hauser shook the man off, limping toward the ballroom. As if in a trance, he moved forward, frowning, his mouth agape.

*“ . . . others are terminated in infancy.”*

“What is that?” Hauser shouted, throwing open the ballroom door.

Lanaya stood at the lectern, all the screens filled with a video—a distant image, shot between shelves and over the tops of surgical tubing and glass containers—of Dr. Hauser and the Cambodian man.

*“By age five, we will have completely purged these lines of any deficiencies.”*

“Stop it!” The doctor’s face turned red as he yelled at the screen. “Turn it off!”

The lecturer watched, her mouth open, as the doctor continued into the ballroom. Two FBI agents held her, keeping her from going to him.

*“ . . . my understanding was you required stock that was already beyond childhood.”*

Hauser’s eyes darted to every screen, his arms flailing. “No! Stop it! Turn it off.” He glanced wildly around the room, his gaze falling on the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. “Dina! I can explain!”

She reached into her purse and took out her phone, holding it to her ear—and turning away from Hauser.

“Dina!”

Hauser limped to the center of the ballroom, viewing every screen, his image plastered on all of them. He leaned on the back of a chair, his head sagging.

The men onscreen continued their negotiation.

*“Our current interest is in females. Where can we inspect these?”*

*“I believe what you want is at recess now, on the playground . . .”*

Panting, Hauser stood upright and smoothed his shirt. “Madam Assistant, I . . . I am an important person in this country. The—the Prime Minister, he instructed you . . . to show me every courtesy.”

Dina lowered her phone and looked at the doctor.

Hauser swallowed hard. “I wish to leave Indonesia. Tonight. Right now. Earlier, you offered me a helicopter. I’d like you to take me to it.”

“What!” Lanaya shouted. She turned to Camilla. “You’re in charge. Don’t let him walk away.”

Camilla stepped forward. “I’m sorry, Dr. Hauser, but the FBI has the authority to ask you as many questions as they want, and the IRS will insist on getting those answers before you leave.”

“No, no, no.” He shook his head, waving his hands. “Forget all that. I am not on U. S. soil, so you have exactly zero authority. I was willing to sit still for this ridiculous audit, but my patience has run out. By ten o’clock tomorrow morning, I’ll have my people here to put an end to your little witch hunt. Then we’ll see who has authority.” He pounded the table, pointing a finger at Camilla and narrowing his eyes. “Tomorrow morning, your so-called audit ends, Ms. Madison. And then you go back to the United States with your tail between your legs!”

Camilla folded her arms. “They’re not coming.”

“What?”

“That big army you hired to swoop in and stop us,” Camilla said. “I got a phone call from somebody who overheard a conversation in a parking garage, where you hired a bunch of killers to come here and disrupt a federal investigation. Your army of thugs got stopped at the airport in Tampa. It seems the ATF and FBI had an issue with so many people and weapons being moved illegally out



of the country, so they're all discussing it." She shrugged. "Well, the agents are. Your mercenaries are behind bars. And so is your lawyer—who hired killers at your direction. So, nobody's going to be riding in like the cavalry to save the day."

"What—who?" Hauser's face turned white. "That's a lie. I never told anyone—"

"Yes, you did." Dr. Carerra stood up. "I heard it all in the parking garage, Marcus. I called the FBI, and they were kind enough to put my children in federal protective custody while I came here to watch you sweat."

"Dominique!" Hauser gasped. "I'll—I'll sue! I'll destroy you. I'll take everything you own, and then I'll burn it to the ground!"

"I don't think you will." Camilla smiled. "A lawsuit would require you to set foot back in the United States—where I have a lot of subpoenas waiting for you."

"It's over, Doctor." Dominique made her way around the dignitaries' table. "Your company is over, and your power is over." She walked past him, heading to the exit. "You're over."

His jaw hung open as she passed.

"But my audit isn't." Camilla strolled to the lectern, picking up the cell phone. Its cables swayed as she held it over the projector. "I have an agent out front hiring every cab on the hotel property, and we're going to have them turn on their high beams and drive me to the land behind your second campus." She set the phone down and glared at him. "I think pictures of what's buried there accompany this little video of you and your Cambodian client."

Hauser got to his feet. "I don't know what you're talking about. I have no idea what's buried out there, and I'll deny I ever knew. You don't decide when things are over, I do. That's the benefit of dual citizenship. I'll find another Third World dictatorship to park my laboratory in, and Angelus Genetics will keep going. Nothing's going to change. In fact, I think I'd prefer living in Paris or Stockholm, or perhaps somewhere in China."

He backed away from the table, looking at his friend Dina. "A facility in Cambodia could be open within six months, Madam Assistant." He snapped his fingers. "But, as a friend of the Prime Minister, I'd prefer we stay here. I'll simply have to consider my options."

She shifted on her feet.

"Now what about that helicopter, Dina? I'd like to leave. Now."

She put the phone back to her ear and stood for a moment, whispering. A few seconds later, she nodded and slipped the phone into her purse, looking at Camilla. "It is the wish of the Prime Minister that his very special friend, Dr. Hauser, be allowed to leave immediately." She turned to Hauser. "My car and driver are out front. You will be escorted to the airport, where the Prime Minister's helicopter will be standing by to take you to his private jet. You may take it anywhere in the world you wish to go."

"No!" Lanaya screamed. "He can't be allowed to just leave!"

"I'm sorry." Dina's face was firm, displaying no emotion. "Indonesia wishes no trouble, but my orders are that he be allowed to depart immediately."

Hauser smiled, lifting his chin. "The Prime Minister's private jet." He limped to the door. "I think a quick trip to Switzerland may be in order."

Lanaya turned to Camilla, tears in her eyes. "That's it? He gets to walk away?"

"What's buried out there isn't going to go away," Camilla said.

Hauser stopped, peering down his nose at her. "Of course it is. The fact is, Ms. Madison, aside from a few people in New York and Washington DC, nobody will care this audit ever happened. In a few years, most Americans won't remember what all the fuss was about. But." He wagged a finger at

her. “Right now, millions of shareholders of Angelus Genetics have lost a lot of money—most are little people, who will feel it in their retirement accounts.” A smile stretched across his thin lips. “The Wall Street Journal has been begging for an interview. I think I’ll give them one—and I’ll make sure they know who caused all those people to lose so much money.” He turned, hobbling toward the exit. “Life has different lessons to teach us all. You learned that you are ineffective, and I learned that dual citizenship is worth several billion dollars.”

He chuckled as he passed through the door, not looking back. “Good evening.”





DESHEAR FOLLOWED DR. Hauser down the hallway and across the ornate lobby of the Viceroy hotel. He stood by a Christmas tree at the entrance as the vehicle for the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister rolled up. The young driver hopped out and opened the car door for his “very special” passenger. The old man entered the vehicle, the door shut, and the car drove slowly down the long driveway. The moonlight illuminated the *pala* trees there in a silvery glow, as the car turned left and disappeared down the main road.

DeShear stood inside the hotel doors, gritting his teeth.

It was no longer his battle. He’d done what he could, from protecting Lanaya to bringing down a killer. Angelus Genetics had suffered. The Greyhound was in custody.

But it was a hollow victory. He’d learned too much in the past few days to be satisfied with these results.

Across the lobby, The Greyhound sat in a chair under a large wreath, an attendant bandaging his bloody arm while two FBI agents looked on. One pointed to a set of handcuffs being held by a nearby Indonesian army officer. “Hey, shooter—these pretty bracelets go on your wrists when he’s finished wrapping your arm.”

The Greyhound said nothing, slumping forward in the chair, his head hanging.

Siren blaring, an ambulance sped to the front door and screeched to a stop. The agents put their hands under The Greyhound’s arms and pulled him to his feet. He winced in pain.

“Serves you right,” the agent said. “I heard they found another body upstairs, a big fat guy. And the manager went missing after he met with you.” He shoved The Greyhound forward toward the ambulance. “Is that more of your handiwork?”

“Nick,” the other agent said. “Take it easy.”

“No, screw this guy, Jake.”

Nick shoved The Greyhound again. He banged into the side of the ambulance, groaning and sliding downward. He turned and leaned his back on the vehicle, his eyes closed and his head sagging.

“Hey!” Jake jumped in front of Nick, blocking him from assaulting their prisoner again. “I said take it easy. We don’t get extra points for killing the—”

The Greyhound sprung up and raised his hands high over his head, crashing them down on the back of Jake’s neck. Swaying sideways, Jake slumped to the ground.

The other agent pulled his gun. The Greyhound swung his leg in a roundhouse kick, crashing it into the agent’s forearm and sending him sprawling onto the sidewalk.

From his vantage point in the lobby, DeShear bolted toward them. “Hey!” he shouted, raising his weapon. “The killer’s loose!”

A second kick from The Greyhound landed on the side of the agent’s head. Jake’s eyes rolled back and his body went limp. The Greyhound scooped up the agent’s gun and raced down the long driveway.

DeShear sprinted out the door after him, several agents and army soldiers following.

The Greyhound was fast, covering the driveway at an amazing speed. DeShear was barely able to keep up. At the tree line, The Greyhound darted across the main road and disappeared into the darkness of the jungle.

DeShear hit the main road at a full sprint, the jungle coming up fast. A small hole was visible in the bright moonlight—a running trail. Palm fronds and brush hung low over the dirt path. Ducking his head, DeShear thrust through the wet leaves, their long green fingers slapping at his face.

“DeShear!” the agent called behind him.

“I’m on him,” DeShear yelled over his shoulder. “Split up and see where these paths come out.”

He bounded over the dark path, unable to see beyond a few feet. His heart raced, knowing The Greyhound could be waiting for him anywhere ahead, but his gut said the killer intended to run—and running was DeShear’s game. He hurled himself down the trail, legs churning, heart pounding. The path turned and climbed, narrowing as outcrops of rocks extended from the sides. DeShear’s shoulder caught the edge of a stony outcrop, bouncing him away and nearly causing him to lose his balance. He stopped to right himself, gasping in the still night.

He held his breath until his lungs ached, listening to hear the fleeing killer somewhere ahead. Thumps and cracking branches reached his ears. The killer was still running.

Pulse pounding, DeShear lurched forward down the path. Ahead, the trees opened to a clearing. He slowed his pace. He’d be an easy target there, even for a wounded man. He couldn’t count on the killer getting tired or missing a shot.

DeShear crouched, gasping as he checked left and right. A smooth rock jutted out from the thick, wet jungle. Sweat dripped from his nose as he slid behind the rock, his eyes darting around the clearing.

He inhaled fast and hard, trying not to make much noise, then took a deep breath and held it.

No twig snaps or brush being swatted aside. The killer had stopped.

DeShear exhaled quietly, his heart thumping. Several trails met in the clearing, but a cloud had moved over the moon, making the view hazy.

Which trail had the killer taken?

A gunshot came from his left, its muzzle blast lighting the trees like lightning. Before he could react, the rock pinged next to him, ringing in his ear and covering him in grit. He threw himself to the wet jungle floor, his weapon next to his cheek, holding his breath and waiting.

Branches crashed together as the killer fled, racing down the trail. DeShear leaped to his feet and followed.

The path sloped downward now, twisting and turning, jarring his knees as the ground dropped in the dark. He crashed into rocks and trees that sprang up out of nowhere, slipping on a dirt trail that grew muddier with each passing minute. His face scratched and stinging, he raced onward, his anger and adrenaline fueling him.

The trail turned, moonlight illuminating his way. Ahead, a tall shadow darted past the trees.

*I’m gaining on him.*

DeShear growled and pumped his legs harder, limbs and vines whipping his cheeks as he sped down the path.

Trees loomed ahead again, and the trail went dark. He rushed forward, gun raised, ready for another ambush. As he crashed through the palm fronds, he looked for a place to take cover.

His feet went out from under him. The trail dropped downward, and he fell, face first, into the mud, sliding several feet until his shoulder slammed into a tree trunk.

DeShear rolled over, panting, gun drawn, ready to shoot anyone who appeared. The jungle was quiet. He put a hand out, found a rock to lean on, and got to his feet. Dripping with sweat and wincing from the pain, he scanned the underbrush.

The roar of water came through the dense jungle. Somewhere to his left, water surged through the brush, cutting its way through the dark hillside. It was loud and constant, a river or more—probably what the trail was originally designed for. Tourists, seeking a scenic trail to walk or run on, not a killing zone.

The noise of the surging water lessened his ability to hear the man he was following. His world just got a little more dangerous, but if it did for him, it did for the killer, too. He peeked over his shoulder. Any FBI agents or Indonesian soldiers following him wouldn't be able to hear verbal directions now, but that might be a good thing. Whatever they could hear, the killer could hear—potentially giving away DeShear's position and making him a target.

He leaned forward into the brush, pushing aside a large cluster of leaves. The path worked its way downward through the thinning foliage. A scenic trail would have water views if it was this close to the water, but that water sounded too fast and too loud to get close to.

He crept over the path, hunching down to be a smaller target if anyone was going to shoot.

Another gunshot pierced the night air. He heard it, and saw the reflected flash off the wet leaves near him. It missed, not even coming close, but it told him the direction of the killer—and that was all he needed.

*He's shooting blindly. He doesn't know where I am.*

DeShear could no longer hear footsteps or someone making their way through the brush. Not over the noise of the rushing water. But he could follow a shadow down a trail. Keeping low, he moved fast, using the moonlight as his guide while he could, and keeping the river on his left.

DeShear's heart pounded as he raced forward, calculating the killer's options. There were only two directions, and really only one. The killer couldn't very well come back toward him if he intended to get away; somewhere behind DeShear, FBI agents and Indonesian soldiers were coming. He couldn't go left; the river would drown anyone that tried to enter it. And he couldn't go right—up a wet jungle cliff in the dark? No chance.

The killer's only option was forward—downward, moving along the same path he'd chosen in the clearing. His only escape was to outrun them all, and bleeding from a gunshot wound, that was unlikely.

DeShear gritted his teeth and pushed another clump of leafy branches out of his way. The ground sloped downward more sharply, with a row of short, straight lines appearing through the dark.

*Steps.*

It was definitely a tourist trail, then. DeShear moved quickly over the wet steps, climbing down through the thick foliage. He looked ahead, trying to see through the brush. A shadow moved. DeShear stopped, holding his place and not trying to find cover. The incline was too steep, and any sudden movements might give him away.

He waited, gun drawn, watching the shadow.

It was longer now. Stretched out, and moving in a slow, awkward fashion.

*Crawling.*

*Maybe he lost too much blood to continue his escape.*

DeShear lowered his foot to the next step. It was shorter, and wetter, than the others. A smooth stone that had become wet and slippery in the growth of the jungle. The shadow kept crawling, so DeShear kept moving down the steps. One by one, he inched lower, never taking his eyes off The Greyhound. The steps were like ice, slick and wet. He'd easily fall if—

*That's what happened to the killer. He fell, and he may have broken a leg, too. No way he'd stop running.*

The hairs on the back of DeShear's neck stood on end. A cornered animal fights hardest. If The Greyhound had broken a leg, he'd shoot to kill for sure—if he still had the gun.

The roar of the water was louder now, impossibly loud for a river. It had to be one of the waterfalls—and a big one. In the darkness, it'd be hard to tell, but maybe the moon would show it. He crept down the last few steps, inching toward a flat, grassy area.

A faint white cloud swirled just past the edge of the clearing, a darker, more iridescent one churning below. The river was about thirty feet down a cliff, a wide, rushing beast, flowing out and off the edge of the world and down into the darkness.

At the edge, the shadow stood, a silhouette against the faint white cloud. He was tall and athletic, but slouching. DeShear stared at the figure, uncertain if the killer was looking at him or the rushing water below. A few feet away, the end of the earth beckoned. A cloud moved over the moon, but the vista was visible enough for DeShear to recognize it from pictures. Nungnung was hundreds of feet up, and recent rains had made it angry. Its dark water sped past, covering the visible distance in less than a second.

The shadow heaved its chest, its shoulders going up and down, just like DeShear's. He wiped the sweat from his brow. The runners' race was over. Only a victor needed to be decided.

The killer spoke, his words all but inaudible over the noise of the falls.

"What?" DeShear shouted, his gun trained at the man in front of him.

Limping along the edge of the cliff, The Greyhound raised his voice. "What now?"

Injured or not, DeShear kept his gun aimed at the stranger. He'd seen the act before, at the ambulance, and he had no intention of falling victim to it like the FBI agents had.

"Now we go back," DeShear yelled. "I take you in, and you go to prison."

The shadow shook his head, shouting. "You can't be on their side. You know what they've done. You've seen it for yourself."

DeShear saw no gun in the killer's hand, but that could be a trick. It could be in his belt, and it could be fired at any moment.

"I'm not on anybody's side," DeShear said, the roar of the waterfall eating his words.

"Killing me allows them to continue. You know that, and you know they have to be stopped. You want that as much as I do."

DeShear took a step backwards, keeping his gun aimed at the killer. The shadow was too close to the edge. One bad step could send him down the cliff and into the churning water below.

"You know I'm right," The Greyhound said. "You saw the graves. That's a part of your nightmare now, like it's been part of mine."

DeShear blinked sweat out of his eyes. "Let's go back to the hotel. Talk about it there. Plead your case to the press. Get some public sentiment."

The shadow shook his head. "I'm all busted up. Hauser took my arm." He took another step along the edge of the cliff. "Those steps did the rest. I can barely hold myself upright."

*Strong guy, to be standing after all that.*

"You won't shoot me," he said. "You can't. You see that I'm right."

"Let's not shoot each other. Deal?" The mist from the massive waterfall made the gun slippery. DeShear tightened his grip. "There are other ways."

"Like what, send them a sternly worded letter? I got a congressional inquiry, and they put the lead senator on their Board of Directors. They held all the cards until I started killing them. Your IRS trick sure isn't going to stop them. But my way works. It got their attention. And it will get other people's attention. This will make it stop. My way."

“That’s not for me to decide.”

“I didn’t say it was.” The Greyhound held his finger to his chest. “I made the decision. After all they did to me . . . it was mine to make.”

The two men stared at each other in the darkness, the roar of the waterfall filling the air.

DeShear lowered his gun. “Come with me.”

The Greyhound held his ground, unmoving, as clouds of mist floated up in the distance. Slowly, he nodded his head.

The clearing burst white with light, the crack of a large rifle blast booming through the night. The Greyhound jolted backwards.

DeShear dropped to the ground, turning in the direction of the gunshot. In the pale moonlight, soldiers from the Indonesian army came into view. Wading their way through the brush, they burst forward.

Twisting, The Greyhound’s arms grappling for vines and leaves as he arched backward. His fingertips flicked over a few branches, then he disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

DeShear sprinted forward, staring at the water below. It raced past, a dark and powerful force of energy, rushing over the edge of the cliff and crashing into the black water below. He stood there, his heart pounding. No one could live through that. But if anyone could, The Greyhound would.

*If we don’t find the body, we might never know if he’s really dead.*

The soldiers came closer, shouting and waving at him.

DeShear turned to the water, and jumped.

The icy cold of the river shocked his system, but only for a second. The water threw him forward and over the edge. His stomach climbed to his throat as he fell, a roller coaster without cars, plummeting forever into the darkness, then the terrible crash and churning of the water below. He kicked and rolled, his lungs aching, fighting to find the surface, depleting himself as he clawed the water crushing him.

It lasted forever, fighting the dark water, his exhaustion turning his arms and legs into heavy bricks, but at last his lungs found air. He strained to push himself upwards through the water, breaking the surface again and again to greedily suck bites of air with his last ounces of strength.

The water past the falls was calm, a drastic difference from the churning monster above. The current pushed him to the edge where the river turned, and the sandy bottom met his dragging feet. With aching arms and rubber legs, he inched onto the riverbank and collapsed.

He lay there on his back, gasping, the moon staring at him through the trees.

Beyond him, a twig snapped in the brush. He mustered the strength to turn his head, spotting the shadow of a tall, athletic man, a silhouette in the moonlight, lumbering through the brush. The shadow stopped, seeming to look at him.

DeShear swallowed hard, panting as he lay on the wet riverbank. He had no gun, and no strength. He would lose any fight right now, and maybe the stranger knew it. He stared at the man, and the man stared back at him.

Then the stranger turned and walked away.







THE SOLDIERS RADIOED for a Jeep, and within an hour, they'd found DeShear and gotten him back to the Viceroy hotel lobby. Lanaya wrapped him in towels and a robe, insisting a medic from the Indonesian army check him over while she asked a thousand questions. Camilla's team was scouting the grave site, sending pictures to her in the lobby—her makeshift command post—as she sat next to DeShear and guzzled coffee.

“Yes, it's possible he got away.” DeShear shrugged. “My guess is, he drowned.”

“The man you saw at the bottom of the falls,” Lanaya said. “You claim he walked away—but The Greyhound was limping.”

“Yeah.” DeShear nodded. “But he could have been faking at the top of the falls.” He pushed away the intern's hand and climbed off the couch. “Look, I don't know for sure. But I don't think he's a threat anymore.”

“Why?”

“Just my gut.” DeShear sighed. “He could have killed me in the jungle just by waiting around a corner and ambushing me. He had a gun, and I'd have never seen him until it was too late. He could have shot me at the top of the falls, too, in the clearing. The shots he fired when I was chasing him were to get me to stop following him. I think he missed on purpose. And if he really was the guy I saw walking away from the river, he could have dropped me right then and there. I was done, exhausted from fighting the river. I had nothing left, and it was obvious.” He shook his head, his eyes focused on the floor. “He had me several times, and never made a move. And I could have killed him, too, at the edge of the falls. I didn't shoot him. We both just . . . I think we decided not to shoot each other.”

“That's you.” Lanaya knitted her hands. “What about me?”

DeShear patted her shoulder. “If he didn't kill me, he won't kill you. We're connected, you and I. And I think he gets that.”

“Whatever goes over the falls is never seen again.” The Special Assistant to the Prime Minister crossed the lobby, approaching them. “I hope you are recovering well, Mr. DeShear.”

“Looks like he'll live,” Camilla said to her. “I wish I couldn't say that about your special friend, Dr. Hauser.”

Dina took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It has been a long day for all of us, but as I said, Indonesia does not want trouble with our friends.” She looked at Camilla. “Your press is fond of calling my country a semi-dictatorship. Well, in a dictatorship, the news is what the government says it is. So if we say Dr. Hauser's plane exploded on takeoff, then it did. And if we say he was not taken to a warehouse and executed, then he was not.”

The small woman looked into the eyes of each of the three shocked faces in front of her. “Someone once said, ‘Sometimes you simply have to do what needs to be done—and often the best choice is clear, but unpleasant.’ I agree. Have a nice trip home.” She strolled past the large Christmas tree in the lobby. “You may make it back in time to do some last-minute Christmas shopping.”

Camilla stared at her long after she had gone from view, a hint of a smile on her lips. “I don't need to go Christmas shopping. I think I just got everything on my wish list.”

Lanaya turned to DeShear. “What about you, Hamilton? Are you ready to go back home to sunny Florida?”

He groaned. "I am, but I'm not sure what I'll be going home to. My apartment burned with all my belongings."

"Well," Camilla said. "When Hauser's people were trying to make it look like you and your client torched your place, they paid your insurance premium first. It was probably to keep investigators focused on you two for the arson rap, but Harriman says Lanaya's flight schedule checked out and so did your alibi—so you'll be able to collect. I have a feeling that it'll all track back to Angelus, and I don't think they're going to fight that claim very hard. Their best bet will be to write a big check—if they have any money left after all this." She picked up her coffee cup. "And like Dina said, there are still a few shopping days before Christmas." Camilla crossed the lobby to the coffee machine, stopping to talk with her agents there.

"Wow," DeShear said. "Maybe I'll go on my Bahamas fishing cruise after all."

"Well, I will certainly be looking forward to getting home." Lanaya rocked back and forth, smiling. "It's been quite a while since I kissed my babies good night, and I *do* have some Christmas shopping left to do!"

DeShear sat up, toweling off his damp hair. "Next time you want to go on an adventure, schedule it a little sooner. I'm bad enough at buying presents as it is."

"I couldn't." The smile disappeared from her lips. "You were sick."

"Huh?" DeShear cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Lanaya's hands dropped to her lap, one massaging the other again. "I'm afraid there's one last thing I need to tell you. I've been meaning to, but there was never a good time. This isn't either, I suppose, but . . ." She swallowed hard, glancing over her shoulders. "You remember when I told you about The Greyhound—about the Gammas, the genetic group he was part of. There are others." She lowered her voice. "You, for example."

"Me." DeShear sat frozen, the implications reverberating through his head.

"You were sick the week before I called on you. The flu, you said, but . . . it wasn't. We checked. And you are the right age."

His jaw dropped. "The sequence? But I'm fine—I just ran a marathon through the Indonesian jungle." A nervous laugh escaped his lips.

She lowered her eyes. "I think, in a few more days, that will very likely change." Taking his hand, Lanaya's voice fell to a whisper. "I'm sorry, Hamilton. Your records came to us like a lot of others. You weren't adopted. That was a cover story. You were born at the Arizona facility, as part of the program."

He looked at her, his mind racing, but the overwhelming pall of truth seeped through her words and settled in his gut.

*I'm one of the Gammas.*

Lanaya was many things, but not a liar. Not about something like this.

His heart sank. "So, uh . . . in a few days, I'll start in with all the symptoms." Her words came back to him about the months of suffering the others had gone through, and the slow death that followed. "I just—I spend the next year of my life in pain at a hospital, until . . . I die?"

Hearing himself say it out loud, when it wasn't about someone else, was strange. As a cop and a private detective, he'd delivered bad news to people before, but this was different. It seemed like a bad joke, but without a punch line—and no one was laughing.

"So, no cruise, I'm afraid." Tears welled in Lanaya's eyes. "You'll be ill for ten months or so." Her voice broke as she spoke. "But—but Dr. Carrera says their latest tests have shown remarkable results." She wiped away a tear, forcing a smile. "One in five survived before, and with proper

treatment, and the new meds, there could be great improvements. After what I've seen these past few days, you strike me as a fighter. You'll not only beat it, you'll lead the charge."

He swallowed hard, his eyes focused on the floor, empty inside. Learning of your own imminent death had a way of drowning out everything else.

"I'm sorry I deceived you, Hamilton, but working together has helped us connect with the very people who can help you." She sniffled. "They think there's a good chance you'll be fine."

"It's . . . not exactly the kind of news anyone wants to hear." He sat back, letting it sink in. He was part of the group, yes, but the drugs were available to possibly cure it now. If something like this had to come along, there were worse ways for it to happen.

And he'd learned from his friend, Harriman, how to fight such an illness. He'd been there for Mark; Mark would be there for him now, too.

He looked at Lanaya. "I . . . kinda wondered what made me so highly recommended."

"My self-appointed duty these past few years has been to seek out people like you. To make up for my role at Angelus. It was another deception I had to maintain until now. I'm very sorry."

He pushed himself to his feet and went to the window. The hotel lights illuminated the edges of the jungle. Palm trees swayed in the hot breeze. Beyond them, only darkness.

"Ten months." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "You skipping out on me until then?"

"Not in the least." Lanaya sat upright. "In fact, I have small children. I thought perhaps it would do them well to see what a real-life hero looks like, close up. Regular visits, perhaps. If you'd like."

"Lanaya and her kids." Deshear shook his head, a smile crossing his lips. "Well, if the illness doesn't kill me, that might."

"My dear Hamilton." She went to him, wrapping her arms around his muscular torso and squeezing him tight. "I have many friends. None but you have ever saved my life. In the end, it's life that matters. I owe you."

He sighed. "Okay, but no more deceptions. We're linked, you and I. Partners tell the truth to each other."

"Okay," Lanaya whispered, holding him. "I promise I won't lie to you anymore."

"Thank you."

"Unless it's absolutely necessary." She released him from her hug. "And in ten months, when you're all better, I'll have some more work for you."

"Ten months." He rubbed his chin. "You know, if there are other Gammas, there'll be other Greyhounds. Followers. Extremists."

"Indeed. And we shall need someone on our side to lead the charge."

DeShear nodded. "Yes, you will. Then let's talk in ten months. You have my number." He smiled at her. "And I'll be around."

THE END

• • • •

Hamilton DeShear returns in

**Rogue Elements**

*The Gamma Sequence Book 2*

[CLICK HERE to buy Rogue Elements.](#)

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •



Get on the list to find out about new titles, bargains, giveaways and more!

[AUTHOR DAN ALATORRE'S READERS CLUB](#)



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING author DAN ALATORRE has published more than 30 titles in over a dozen languages. His unique writing style can make you scream, chuckle or shed tears—sometimes on the same page. Regardless of genre, his novels always contain unexpected twists and turns, and his brilliant characters will stay with you forever.

Readers agree, making his string of #1 bestsellers popular across the globe.

You'll find heart stopping chills in the medical thriller series The Gamma Sequence, action-adventure in the sci-fi mystery The Navigators, a gripping roller coaster ride in the paranormal mystery A Place Of Shadows, an atypical comedy-romance story in the very sexy The Italian Assistant, spine-tingling chills in the short story horror anthology series Dark Passages, and much more. In addition to being a bestselling author, Dan has achieved President's Circle with two different Fortune 500 companies.



# SUZANNE JENKINS: SLOW DANCING

---

SLOW DANCING  
BY SUZANNE JENKINS

**Author's Rating:**

**Language: \*\* Sexuality: \*\* Violence: \*\***

**F**or your convenience each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence



Slow Dancing. Copyright © 2014 by Suzanne Jenkins.

All rights reserved.

Created in digital format in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations in blog posts and articles and in reviews.

*Slow Dancing* is complete and total work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



**A**fter midnight, a mysterious stranger appears at the edge of the woods and the peaceful life fifteen-year-old Ellen Fisher has with her beloved stepfather Frank is turned upside down. Small town gossip, jealousy and murder strive to tear them apart in a tale of secrets and unrequited love.





FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD ELLEN MacPherson sat on a wooden step off the porch of her house in Seymour, Alabama. It was getting late, after eleven, her stepfather Frank watching the news in the living room just behind her. The smell of beer wafted out of the screen door while he listened for the weather report, familiar and comforting voices echoing out onto the porch. The light from the TV cast a blue glow through the window, competing with the yellow lamplight from the street. Their front lawn stretched to the river's edge, the smooth, green expanse broken by a thread of dirt road. She waited for Frank to shut the lights off in the house so she could watch the fireflies, the light from the moon revealing the disturbance in the water as the bugs hit its surface. When she first saw the pings make concentric circles on the smooth sheet of the river, she thought they were fish coming up for air, but Frank said it was the bugs.

"Watch careful," he said. "You'll see the bugs hit the water, and the rings travel away from where it hit." She did as he said, and sure enough, the bugs came in for a drink. The circles drifted out from the center, stronger at first until they faded away, back into the smooth surface of the river.

She heard the TV switch off. "I guess I'm goin' to bed, Ellen. Don't stay up too late." She turned around to look at him standing in the door behind her, just as he glanced over at the woods, concerned leaving her, but wanting to show her he understood she was growing up and needed time alone.

"I won't Frank. Night," she replied. He turned the lights off in the house but left the one over the kitchen stove on so she could see her way back in the house when she was ready. With the dim, yellow light coming from the streetlamp, the black outline of the trees to the right of their property came into focus. The neat lawn stopped at the woods; tall oak and pine trees with little underbrush. Sunlight didn't penetrate deeply enough to support undergrowth, and the trees grew so tightly packed together that it was difficult to walk through. Ellen had lived next to the woods as long as she could remember and she knew what was on the other side, downriver.

The thread of the road ended in front of her house, at the woods. Every so often, a car would come down the road and stop at the woods. The driver would look around confused, put the car into reverse, back up onto their lawn, and drive off again. Rarely, someone would come up to the door and ask for directions, but neither Frank nor Ellen knew much about the area beyond the village, even after living there all of their lives, so they were of no help. They went to town to buy food, Ellen to school, and Frank to his garage. That was about it.

When Margaret was alive, they drove to Hallowsbrook to visit her, in the town of Beauregard. Ellen normally didn't want to think about Hallowsbrook, built on the same river she was looking at now in front of their house, ten miles downriver. But when she got melancholy, she liked to remember what it was like to get ready on visiting day.

Frank would wake her up earlier than usual on Saturday, the one day they had to sleep in. He'd have her breakfast made, and it was always something special; pancakes or corn muffins or scrambled eggs with cheese and biscuits. She'd walk into the kitchen, and Frank would be dressed with his suspenders on, his white shirt draped over the back of the chair. The ironing board would be down from the wall where it was stored in its own recessed cabinet. Standing at the ironing board, he'd be ironing one of her pretty dresses; something with a full skirt. They dressed as if they were going to a party when they visited Margaret. He always asked Ellen the same thing.

"You ready for this, sister?" and she'd nod her head and say the same thing she always said.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Since she was just a little child she’d say the same thing, and Frank laughed. It was the way they’d get through the ordeal. Frank tried to do everything he could to soften it for her; the breakfast, the pretty clothes, shopping when they left the hospital, even a movie if she wanted it. But more often than not they’d be so exhausted, Ellen would reach over the seat from the back and tap Frank on the shoulder.

“I guess I want to go home,” she’d say, and he’d nod and look at her in the rearview mirror.

“Me, too. I reckon we both had enough adventure for one day.”

Finally, in March right before Ellen turned fifteen, Margaret died suddenly. It was a relief. Although in the weeks preceding her death Margaret appeared to be getting better, it must have been just a smokescreen. Several months after she was admitted, she ceased acknowledging them half the time, and eventually they stopped trying to engage her.

“We visit just so the nurses know she’s cared about,” Frank said. “They’ll know once a month someone will come to see she’s okay. That’s why we gotta mix up the times, not let ‘em anticipate it.”

They’d walk into her room and look at her skin and her hands, make sure her nails were nice and her hair was clean. She was well taken care of; they didn’t need to worry after all, but still were untrusting. They’d sit with her in silence until someone brought her lunch. She’d feed herself, which hit home to Ellen. *If she can feed herself, why won’t she look at me?* She asked Frank about it.

“Margaret’s a lunatic, sister. Don’t take it personal if you can help it. She checked out long ago. We kept ‘er home as long as we could, but it ain’t fair to you when she got bad and started wanderin’ off.”

Ellen looked out the window as they drove. It wasn’t so terrible, having a mother locked up, out of town. Not many people in the village who knew the real details about it; that Margaret got sick shortly after she and Frank were married and the mechanic had his hands full taking care of her and her toddler, and those that did know never spoke of it to their faces.

Gossips embellished the story with cruel lies about Margaret, that she was a kleptomaniac or worse. Word got back to the family that people in town said Frank was a better parent than Margaret ever could be, but when Ellen was old enough to understand, she didn’t think that was fair. How’d *they* know? *She* could feel that way, but didn’t want others to say it. She and Frank made a pact that they’d never speak ill of Margaret to others. To each other, anything was fair game. But if someone would dare to say anything untoward, they planned to look to the ground and sniff, like tears were near the surface. It worked every time.

After a few months of responding in this way, no one inquired after Margaret again. “It’ll make ‘em too sad if you ask,” people around town whispered. It was as if she had died long before it really happened.

Ellen, brooding, so out of character, had teenaged angst. She tried to reason it away, but couldn’t. Her mother dying might have had a little bit to do with it, but she disregarded the idea.

*There isn’t much to look forward to,* she thought. Her school friends got summer jobs in Beauregard; waitress jobs and babysitting jobs. Finally, she asked Frank if he’d let her come work at the garage.

“I can answer the phone,” she said. “Check people in. I’m gettin’ too old for a babysitter, and Mrs. Edwards is gettin’ too old to babysit.” He chuckled while he rubbed his chin, thinking. It made sense letting her come into town. He didn’t want her alone all day; the thought frightening him.

“Just for the summer, now, not during school. You got to do *good* in school so you can go to college,” he said.

“What’ll *you* do if I leave for college?” Ellen asked. The thought of leaving him alone frightened her more than going away.

“I reckon the same thing I’ve been doing all along. Goin’ to work and waitin’ fer you.” They laughed out loud. Then seriously, he frowned. “You keep gettin’ good grades, sister. You’re a smart girl. No point in hanging around this place jus’ cause you grew up here.”

“You stayed! What good did college do you?” she asked. He went to college for four years so he could take over his father’s auto garage.

“If I’d gone away, I’d never met you and Margaret. So you need to go to college, regardless.”

“Not too far, though,” she said. “I want to come home each night, like I was workin’ a job in the next town.”

“We’ll see about it,” Frank answered.

By the middle of June, the routine was set. She got up with Frank as usual, but instead of sitting with him while he had his coffee, she had a cup, too. He’d put her bicycle into the back of his truck so she could leave a little earlier to start dinner each day, and they would drive off to town together. Ellen loved being in the garage right from the start. It smelled like clean oil and cigar smoke.

“How’s oil smell clean?” her best friend, Marisa Dalton asked.

“You can tell it’s from the earth,” she replied.

“But the earth isn’t clean,” Marisa would argue. “You need to come with me to Dairy Bar. I made six dollars in tips Sunday afternoon.” But Ellen didn’t want to be away from Frank; spending the day at the garage with him had always felt right to her. Since she was little, walking home from school and waiting for him at the garage was something she looked forward to.

The oil smell and the bubble gumball machine Frank polished up each week and refilled with colorful, shiny gumballs were memories from the childhoods of the children whose parents brought their cars in for repair. The garage was in the center of town, on the same side of the street as the auto supply store and Miss Logan’s Beauty Parlor and across the street from the post office, the grocery store and the café. Frank set up a low table and chairs with coloring books and crayons for the children to use while they waited, a fresh box every week. At the end of the week, he dumped the broken bits of crayon into a big metal can bolts originally came in and although a few children liked using the new crayons, most children preferred the nubs, sifting through the big can to choose just the right color. Frank papered the window facing the beauty parlor with the most recent works of coloring book art. Women getting their hair done inside would brag about their child’s page of coloring book drawings.

“That’s my Wendy’s elephant in Frank’s window today!” Whenever Frank had time, he’d box up the drawings left behind and drop them off at the local nursing home, to distribute among the residents.

For the adult customers, instead of the typical row of uncomfortable chairs with ripped vinyl seats like other garages had, he set up a bigger table and chairs, and an electric coffee pot. In the center of the table, a neat pile of current magazines he picked up at Family-Owned waited for customers to look through. Every hour he faithfully made a fresh pot of coffee. When Ellen came to work, she asked him if he’d like her to make the coffee.

“No, no, that’s all right, I’ll keep doin’ it,” he answered. “When school starts again and you leave, I’ll forget and the coffee will get thick and black and smell up the place.” She knew what he meant. Once, when she was thirteen, she got her hair cut at Miss Logan’s and the first thing she noticed when she went into the beauty parlor, above the rank ammonia smell of the hair dye and the chemicals women used to put permanent curls in their hair, was the odor of old coffee. She thought it was odd

that her mechanic father kept his coffee pot shining clean and used good coffee and real cream, a little half pint carton set in a bowl of ice. Yet in a beauty shop with a bunch of women, they'd have horrible powdered junk to lighten coffee often left over from the day before. Customers coming into the garage remarked that they patronized Frank's Garage because it was so clean and Frank made the best coffee in town.

Frank put a stool behind the counter for Ellen. He never needed one because he didn't have time to sit down. He'd finish with a car and walk behind the counter to write the bill, and then after the customer paid he went back out into the garage to work on the next car. Now that Ellen was there, he'd walk into the office and write the bill, but give it over to Ellen who'd take the payment while Frank lotioned his hands up. "When you go back to school, my hands are gonna miss this care," he said, teasing.

While she waited for customers to come in, Ellen read. She always brought a book with her and when she finished whatever little tasks Frank found for her to do that day; sorting nuts and bolts into their proper bins, or transcribing sales receipts into a ledger, she took her book and went back to the counter to read. Sometimes he'd have her come into the garage, which was her favorite place, and she'd do inventory of the belts and parts and other items necessary to keep an auto repair garage in business. At four each day, he'd come into the office and say the same thing. "You about ready to call it a day, sister?" She'd hop down from the stool.

"Okay, I guess it's time," she'd answer. He'd watch her put her helmet on, buckling the strap snugly under her chin, and he'd resist the temptation to check it for safety.

"Be careful, now, you hear? Walk your bike across First Street, and stay up on the sidewalk as far as you can." Ellen smiled, didn't get ornery or defensive the way some kids got when their parents fussed. She knew he was just worried about her. "And please call when you git home." She never forgot to call; the moment she unlocked the door and went into the house, she reached for the phone. If he couldn't get to the phone, she'd holler into the answering machine so that her voice echoed throughout the garage.

"I'm home, Frank!" He'd grin at the car he was working on and when he got a chance always called back.

They'd have stayed in this mode of mutual love and respect forever, if it hadn't been for that one summer night when she couldn't sleep. After the lights went off in the house, and she saw that he'd left the light on above the stove for her, she put her head down on her knees and swept a little sand that had accumulated on the step into a pile. Meditatively, she swirled the pile into a design, first this way and then that, until she was almost mesmerized, sure she could go to sleep as soon as she could get the gumption to go inside for the night. When she started to lift her head, she knew.

The hair on her arms rose up, and the goose bumps appeared on her skin; someone was there. She could feel the difference in the way the air was coming off the water. Too afraid to move, to turn her head to look, she waited until her heart slowed down from the racing pace to which it had climbed, her throat dry, closing up so that screaming for Frank wasn't an option. She got the courage to slowly turn her head while keeping it down on her knees, and that's when she saw him. He was on the edge of the woods, just at the bank of the river. Having crept out of the woods, or along the bank, she could clearly see the outline of a tall, lanky man, watching her in the moonlight. His was a black silhouette, but the moonlight shone on his head as a beam of light.

With speed and precision, she leapt up from the porch and opened the screen, slamming the big door shut and locked it while she yelled for her stepfather, her voice trembling. "Frank!" There in seconds, dressed in t-shirt and sweatpants, handgun in his right hand, he grasped her arm.



“There’s someone out there,” she breathed. He went to the door and looked out the four by six inch window at eye level, automatically looking to the wood line, but seeing nothing.

“No one’s there now,” he said. “No one I can see. Man or woman?”

“Man, I’m pretty sure it was a man. He was right at the river edge, right by the big pine.”

A tall pine tree towered over the rest, its roots in the soft embankment of the river so the weight of the tree was slowly pulling it over, but it was still the tallest tree.

“Stand back, stay inside,” he said, gently pulling her around behind him as he unlocked the door and opened it.

Stepping out on the porch, he looked close to the house before scanning the wood line and the riverbank, but nothing popped out. “It looks like the coward retreated into the trees.” He turned to her.

“You okay?” She nodded. “It’s a darn shame a person can’t sit on their own porch after dark.” He came inside and locked up the door again. “No need to be frightened now. I’ll see to the windows and doors if you want to go back to your room.”

She nodded her head. Tonight, they’d sleep with the doors to their rooms open. He called out for her, asking permission to come into her room to check the window, low and facing the front of the house.

“Just as a precaution, tonight I’m gonna pull your dresser in front of this window,” he said.

“Okay,” she answered, watching him work. Slowly, the fear the interloper instilled in her was fading; she was safe in her own house and her stepfather wouldn’t allow anyone to harm her.





THE NEXT MORNING, FRANK called the postmistress, Jessie. "I have a big favor to ask, to one as busy as yourself," he said, chuckling.

"Go fer it, Frankie," Jessie answered. "I ain't got all day."

"Can you write a note that I'll be in at nine-thirty today and tape it to my door? I got a small job that I got to attend to here before I come into town." She agreed to it, to tape a hand-lettered sign in her neat penmanship.

*Frank be late today.* Not exactly what he had asked for, but close enough, and people in town knew what it meant.

He was standing at the stove frying potatoes when Ellen came out. "Sorry about last night, Frank," she said. "Think my imagination must be gettin' the best of me."

"No, no. You did the right thing. Intuition saved many a life, I reckon." She went to the coffee pot and poured two cups. "I'm going out to look at the river's edge after breakfast."

"What about the garage?" she asked.

"Jessie' gonna put a note up," he answered. "This is more important for now." They ate in silence, the possibility that someone meant to do Ellen harm foremost in Frank's mind. He wasn't sure what she thought, and didn't want to alarm her. When they were finished, he adjusted the holster attached to his belt and stood up to put their dishes in the sink.

"I'll get those, Frank," she said.

"No, I will. It's my job to do the morning dishes." He was a creature of habit, but more, didn't want Ellen to think her lot in life was to wash up after a man, even her stepfather. "I'll take care of it when I come back in."

"I'm going with you," she said.

He paused for a moment, doubtful at first but then seeing the wisdom in it. It might be good for her to go, to see exactly where the man stood. It was dry last night, so footprints in the sand should be visible. They walked out the door together, pausing at the house to survey the formal garden that surrounded it; beautiful roses, peonies and perennials that bloomed throughout the summer months and into the autumn, annuals they planted together, and an herb garden; herbs like sage, said to protect the people who lived within. Ellen bent over to pull sheep sorrel out of the herb bed.

"A vicious, invasive weed, delicious sautéed in olive oil," Frank said, all traces of his Alabama accent gone. Ellen laughed out loud.

"Yes!" They walked to the wood line, the edge of the forest that bordered their property. It was never a scary place; as a child she'd set up her little tent there with friends each summer, a perfect, quiet place away from the adults to play Barbie. Now, not so sure, she didn't think she'd feel safe out after dark ever again.

"I wish we could put up a fence," she said, shaking her head.

"Haft' to be awful high though," he said. "Haft' to have barbed wire on top. When it gets that bad here, we best move away."

"This is it," she said when they reached the area. "I think this is where he stood."

They were careful not to step off the lawn, because clearly, right under the big pine, a line of large footprints were visible in the sand, the edge just beginning to be lapped up by the water as the gentle tide came in. It looked like whoever it was had walked along the water's edge, to avoid the forest.

“Where did he come from?”

“I’m going to call the sheriff before we do anything else,” Frank said.

He wanted to follow the footprints, to discover their origin. He looked up across the river at the opposing bank. It was desolate across the river, directly in front of their place; there were more cottages upriver, less down. The woods were thicker on the other side, the current was swift, and there was no dock or place to tie up unless the boater used a tree. He doubted whoever it was came from across the way, but crept along the river’s edge from the same side.

“You go on now, find something to do. I don’t want my conversation upsettin’ you,” he said when they got to the house.

She smiled at him, but didn’t argue. It was making her queasy, the thought that her imagination wasn’t playing tricks. A stranger possibly wanting to do her harm had taken the trouble to make his way along the desolate coastline to spy on her.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go read awhile.” He nodded at her and waited until she was out of sight to call the sheriff. Well known in the county as a reliable and trustworthy auto mechanic, Frank did the work the county needed on many of their patrol cars. So when he called with a dilemma, they took him seriously. It was the first time he’d needed to call in years, since Margaret disappeared into the woods one day ten years ago.

• • • •

THE THREE OF THEM, five-year-old Ellen included, were in the yard puttering, watering the roses and pulling weeds. When Frank stood up, Ellen was beside him but Margaret was gone, the hose with the precious water still running left on the ground. He looked in the house and then taking Ellen by the hand, walked to the river’s edge, just in case. It didn’t look like she’d gone for a dip, so they proceeded to the woods. Holding Ellen’s hand, they walked as far as they could into the forest, until the trees grew so close together he couldn’t get between them.

“Okay, I guess she’s not in here,” he said, smiling down at Ellen, not wanting to scare her. “Let’s git’ back to the house and make a few calls. Maybe she went to see her friend, Mary.”

“Momma doesn’t like Mary,” Ellen said, frowning. This was news to Frank.

“No? Why’d you say that?”

“She said Mary got the cooties,” Ellen said, obviously repeating what she’d heard Margaret say.

Frank turned away, frowning. Margaret’s use of the word *cootie* to her five-year-old daughter transcended inappropriateness in spite of its truthfulness; he tended to agree with his wife.

“Oh, well maybe momma didn’t feel good when she said it,” Frank explained making an excuse for her. He was going to call Mary regardless. He reached out for Ellen’s hand. “Come on, sister, let’s get inside.”

Then, on second thought, he reached down and scooped her up. She yelped with glee. When they got inside the house, he put her down.

“Run along now, darlin’, go on and play for a while.”

She did as she was told and ran off to her room. He picked up the kitchen phone and dialed the sheriff’s office.

“Boyd here,” Boyd Dalton said when he answered the phone.

“It’s Frank McPherson, Boyd. I gotta slight problem here,” he said. “Margaret done took off again, but this time she did it right under our nose. I turned my back for a second and she was gone.”

“Okay, I’ll come out,” Boyd replied. They said good-bye and hung up. Frank walked to the back of the house to the bedrooms to get Ellen. It was a tiny house, cottage style.

Frank's father built it after the war, and when he died, Frank left the apartment above the garage and moved back to his childhood home. Two months later, he met Margaret and her baby daughter, Ellen.



MARGARET FISHER'S CAR, a vintage Buick, broke down as she was driving from Saint Augustine to Galveston. She just made it into the village limits when it started to spit, the engine sputtering for seconds until it died. She looked in her review mirror as it came to a rolling stop. Ellen was just two years old, in her little car seat, smiling and shaking a toy at her mother.

"Momma, go!" she said leaning forward.

"Nope, can't do it. The car is broken, sweetheart. We have to stop here, unfortunately." She looked around the dusty street and saw the line of storefronts, the gas station and the post office, and across the street, the blue painted cement block building with a neon sign out front spelling Frank's Garage. "Thank God, there's a garage." She got out of the car and opened the back door, reaching in to unbuckle her toddler from the car seat.

"Walk!" Ellen hollered squirming to get down. On the sidewalk, Margaret put her daughter down.

"You have to hold my hand, honey," she said, gripping her child's hand, the terror of a dream she'd had the previous night in which unseen forces, still vivid in her memory, took the baby from her. Ellen didn't fight her, staying close by. Locking the car, Margaret wasn't sure what sort of town this was, whether she and her belongings were safe or not.

Looking around the area, Margaret saw an old-fashioned place, quaint almost; a throw back to another time with a café in the center of town and a small, family-owned grocery store crowded with locals, the sign out front; Family-Owned Grocery Store. She chuckled, first noting the women chatting with each other on the sidewalk and then, more sobering, groups of motley looking men sitting along a wooden bench near the entrance. They were waiting to assist shoppers as they packed their cars. She decided if she lived there, she could never shop for food at a place that hired such intimidating help, not knowing the men were indigents the storeowners allowed to work for tips. When she reached Frank's, a customer was just leaving and he held the door for her to enter, smiling at her. Frank was still behind the counter.

"Help you?" he asked.

"My car just broke down, luckily, practically right outside of your door." She pointed to the car across the street, and Frank came around to the front of the counter to look out the window.

"Let's take a look," he said. Just then, Ellen looked up at him and with her free hand, grabbed his.

"Dada," she said. Margaret burst out laughing. Frank stopped in his tracks and looked down at the little girl, clearly moved.

"Oh, sorry! Pay no attention. She's at the age where every man is daddy," Margaret said, chuckling. And then under her breath, "I'm not married to her father."

A raise of her eyebrows and a grin said it all. She wasn't *married to anyone*. Frank, not used to being flirted with and ignorant of the ways of women, took the little girl's hand, sure his face was red.

"This yers?" he said, nodding his head toward the car and she said *yes*. "Better stay up on the sidewalk now." Gently withdrawing his hand from Ellen's and giving it to Margaret, he reached over and popped the hood. He looked it over, but couldn't see anything obvious.

"Why not go get something to drink at the café and I'll pull it into the shop to take a closer look."

She agreed and walked away from him after giving her car keys over. She made sure she walked with just a hint of wiggle, and turned slightly to see if he was watching her. But he was already on the

phone, calling Paul's Auto Supply asking for help to push the Buick into the shop. Margaret wasn't used to being ignored; she got plenty of attention from men, so his disinterest fired something within her that would help keep her in the small town for longer than she expected, Galveston put on hold. She would call Alan and let him know there had been a delay. She was going to be stuck in Seymour for a day or two.

She still wasn't sure how she happened to get there; it was far off the path she was taking, a wrong turn in Mobile probably. "Come on, sweetheart, let's get some breakfast," she said to Ellen, who was tired and ready for a nap.

Margaret picked Ellen up and with her head on Margaret's shoulder, fell asleep quickly. No doubt tired from the previous night, after pulling over to the side of the road when she'd realized she was lost, they slept in the car with doors locked. In the morning, she drove to a gas station to use the ladies room and get a wash up.

Now she had no idea where she was, exhausted with a broken down car. But Margaret never got disheartened. It was her nature to look to at the bright side of everything. When she sat down, the sleeping Ellen slid down to her lap, Margaret cradling her with an arm while she drank coffee and ate eggs and toast. She'd ordered an egg sandwich for Ellen to eat when she woke up. The waitress, a young woman named Mary, was a talker.

"You just get into town?" she asked.

When Margaret explained what happened with the car, the woman launched into Frank's history, he was a bachelor all the single women in town had eyes for, but he wasn't interested. No one said out loud that he might be a homosexual, although some of the women wondered secretly.

"In high school, he dated the same girl till he left for college." Margaret frowned; where she came from it was inappropriate to guess about someone's sexuality. Either you were, or you weren't. Maybe, hopefully, he wasn't.

"He's got his own little place down by the river, a real gem of a piece of property, and he owns that building the garage is in. You see how he looks; we women around these parts wait all summer for Frank to take his shirt off and work in his t-shirt. It raises the temperature a few degrees, let me tell you." Margaret looked out the window, across the street to the garage. The door opened to the bay and she could see the back of her car but not the activity.

"How old is he?" Margaret asked Mary, now more than curious.

"He graduated high school the year I started. So he must be about thirty," she said, sideling up to Margaret. "Don't you think he's dreamy?"

"I haven't given it much thought," Margaret said, thinking about nothing else but the handsome business owner with his own house on the river. "What's the rent like in town?" She finished breakfast just as Ellen stirred.

"Not bad. You lookin' to stay?" Mary said, interested. Margaret shrugged her shoulders, not willing to reveal anything about her history or motives to a stranger, not even knowing herself what the next hour would bring.

"Let's find a ladies room, okay sweetheart?" Mary pointed to the back of the café. Margaret and Ellen walked between the tables, diners curious about her, the men glancing up at her face after taking in her figure and she didn't miss their interest.

While in the bathroom, she dug out her wallet from her purse and counted cash. She had exactly fifteen hundred dollars. It was her savings from her secretary job, enough to get her and Ellen to Galveston and have a little nest egg in case it didn't work out with Alan, or if he didn't have money for her after all and she needed to move on or get back to Saint Augustine. Now this darn car thing;

hopefully it wouldn't cost too much to fix. She looked in the mirror and reapplied her lipstick, then washed up Ellen's hands and face.

"Let's go sweetheart. Let's see if that car of ours is going to get us out of town today." They left the restaurant waving to a disappointed Mary, and crossed the street. She walked through the bay door of the garage and saw Frank standing over the engine compartment with a tool in his hand.

"Hi," he said. "It's gonna to take me longer than today to fix this. You gotta place to stay tonight?" She shook her head.

"No. I don't even know where I am. We got lost back at the river." He nodded his head. People were known to take a wrong turn in Mobile, ending up in town as a result.

"Mary over at the café rents out rooms in her house. You want I call her for you?"

"No, that's okay. I'll go back and ask her myself. We were just talking, her and me," Margaret said.

"Come back in an hour. I should have a better idea how long it's gonna take by then." She nodded at him, finally catching his eye. He'd looked at her beautiful face and huge blue eyes, auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders. She saw the admiration in his eyes and smiled back, giving him the approval he needed to keep looking.

"Okay, bye for now," she said.

Ellen waved. "Bye bye, dada."

Frank chuckled and waved to her. "Good bye."

Margaret walked back across the street to the café. It was past breakfast and the space had cleared out. Mary was wiping down a table when she looked up as Margaret came back, and couldn't help but smile.

"Frank tells me you might rent a room for the night. Looks like my old car is going to take longer than we thought to repair."

"Yes! I'm the only place to lay your head in Seymour. I have a crib, too," she said, suppressing her excitement that Margaret and Ellen were going to stay. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a key and a card with an address on it. "That's my only key, so hold tight to it. Go on over now if you want. You both look tired. Your room is right off the living room. The one with the crib. You can freshen up and have a rest. It's right down that street, to the left." She pointed to the street next to the beauty parlor. Five oh five First."

"Thank you so much," Margaret said.

The thought of a cool place to sit with her child was heavenly. Taking the card, they left the café again and proceeded down the street. It occurred to her that Mary was pretty dumb to hand a house key over to a stranger. What if she was a burglar? The lock was stubborn, but she got it open, and the cool air inside rushed out at them. When they went inside the house, she understood why she'd hand over a key; it really *was* a rooming house with no personal objects around or anything of value that could be stolen. It made Margaret feel better for some reason. It appeared Mary didn't have much more than she did.

"House?" Ellen asked, and Margaret confirmed it. "*House.*"

"Let's walk back to the garage and get our suitcase," Margaret said. Frank was standing in front of the auto parts store talking to the owner Paul, when he saw her walking towards him, the sight of her rendering him speechless for a moment.

"I need my suitcase," she said demurely, looking up into his eyes.

"Suitcase," Ellen repeated. They laughed, walking back to the garage. Frank opened the trunk of her car so she could get a bag out, and feeling its weight, offer to carry it back to Mary's for her.

They didn't talk as they walked side by side, Margaret carrying Ellen on her hip. But if they had admitted what they were thinking they'd have been surprised that it was similar thoughts. Margaret imagined the kind of couple they made; people would take notice. Frank thought of the empty cottage he'd recently moved to, filled with a ready-made family. They arrived at Mary's but he didn't linger explaining he had to get back because he'd left the shop open. It was that kind of town; you could leave your business wide open and it would be safe.

The rest of the day Margaret and Ellen spent dozing, playing, and chatting. At three, Mary came home with a bag of sandwiches for their dinner. A door at the back of the living room led to her personal apartment, and Margaret was happy to see that Mary's space wasn't quite so Spartan after all.

"I'll charge you seven dollars a day. No food allowed in the rooms because of bugs, but you can have space in the kitchen. You can use my washer and dryer 'cause of the little one. Does that sound like a deal?" She was willing to let them stay with her free of charge if it would mean having Margaret close by. Margaret nodded and smiled; it was more than fair.

"What do I owe you for dinner?" Margaret asked.

"It's on the house," Mary said. "I can bring home food from the café from time to time if there are leftovers that won't keep for the next day. If you're going to be here for a few days, I'll bring something home each afternoon if you want me to, should save you on your food bill."

"Okay, thank you." She didn't think it would take longer than the next day to fix her car, but it was better to have something lined up, just in case. A knock at the door brought Mary to her feet; she rarely had guests but when it rained, it poured. Surprisingly, it was Frank.

"Hey there, Frankie," Mary said. Frank grimaced at the use of the name, but good naturedly, as Mary stepped aside to let him pass by.

"Can I talk to Margaret?" Mary waved him on.

"Follow me; we're back in the kitchen." His eyes visibly brightened up when he saw Margaret and Ellen. Ellen was standing at a chair running the bowl of a spoon back and forth, like it was a car. He chuckled, the sight of the little girl making him happy for some reason.

"She likes cars, eh?" he asked.

"I didn't bring enough toys for her, obviously," Margaret said.

"Your car should be ready tomorrow afternoon. Sorry it's takin' me so long to get a part. I have to wait for delivery tomorrow."

"I get it," she said. "It's no problem at all."

"Have a seat, Frankie," Mary said. "Have dinner with us. Just leftovers from the café."

"Okay, it sounds better than what I was gonna have, that's for sure." The women waited for him to tell them what it was. "A can of Pork and Beans."

"Ew!" They cried in unison, laughing. "You'd better eat with us." They chatted until the sun came around to the other side of the house, taking turns holding Ellen, sharing stories. Margaret asked questions, getting the others to talk about themselves.

"It's about time for this young lady to go to bed," Margaret said, reaching for Ellen who was rubbing her eyes. "If you'll excuse me?" Frank stood up and nodded at her. Mary was excited that she had Frank McPherson in her house, but it looked like he was going to go now that Margaret was going to her room.

"I'd better get back to the garage and lock up," he said. "If there's anything left to protect." He was teasing, of course, the whole town in the habit of leaving things open, trusting, helping. It was just the nature of things. "Thanks for the coffee and sandwich, Mary." She followed him to the door.



“You don’t need to leave,” she whispered, giving a last effort to engage him. But he wasn’t interested. She thought for a moment that there was a glimmer of something, but it must have been for Margaret’s benefit. He smiled down at her.

“I’d better get goin’, Mary, but thanks. And thanks for taking her in for the night.” He was a nice guy, just not interested in *her*. She locked the door after him. It was early; she’d fix her hair and go out for the evening, hopeful she’d find someone who *was* interested.





THE NEXT DAY, THE PART needed to repair Margaret's car didn't arrive at Paul's as expected. It was coming from Dallas, so he couldn't hop in his car and fetch it as he could if it were coming from Mobile. Frank walked over to Mary's house and knocked on the door. This time, Margaret answered. She was still in her nightgown, and without meaning to, against his will, looking at her aroused him. The gown was of a soft, gauzy fabric, virginal and feminine. The way the fabric swirled around her curves, his imagination took flight. He looked away.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "The part I need didn't arrive as we expected it would. Won't be here now until Monday. Don't blame you none if you're angry." She looked down at her hands. A weekend here in this village with kind Mary and handsome Frank wasn't such a bad thing.

"Have coffee with me," she said. "I'll be fine right here at Mary's place." He looked at his watch.

"I'm supposed to open up at nine. I'll make a call." He went to Mary's phone, a yellow Princess model with a rotary dial hanging from the wall. He dialed the number of the post office.

"Jessie," he said when she answered. "Can you do me a favor and put a note on my door that the garage will open today at nine-thirty?" She agreed to do it, so Frank could have coffee with his new friend.

"So yesterday I talked all afternoon about myself. Now you tell me about you," he said, smiling.

Margaret was a good storyteller. "There's not much to tell," she lied. "I work in an office back in Florida. But I needed a break, so we're headed to Texas to see a friend. It won't kill me if I alter my plans a little."

"We're you born in Florida?"

"Yes, Saint Augustine. The only family I have is an aunt and my brother Peter who is in an asylum there."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Frank said. He was curious why, but too courteous to ask. She didn't mind telling, though.

"He's mentally ill. Doesn't speak or communicate at all. Can't take care of himself. It's really rather sad. I'm glad my child is okay. There's nothing shy about Ellen!"

"No, there sure isn't," Frank agreed. "Was your brother always sickly?" Margaret hesitated, grateful.

"I never looked at it like he was sick. But yes, he was always mentally ill. From the time he was a little one, he would hide from our momma, or refuse to eat, or steal. He was devious." Frank didn't think any of those things sounded that unusual, especially for a boy, but didn't offer his opinion.

"Sorry to hear it," he replied. "Must be difficult on the family." She nodded her head.

"We coped," she said. "My momma tried it all; beatings, makin' him sit in the corner, any punishment you can think of, and finally one day she just gave up." Frank didn't want to upset Margaret, so he changed the topic.

"Since it looks like you're going to be around this weekend, do you want to go to a movie?" She brightened up at the suggestion, Peter forgotten.

"Oh yes, I'd love it!" and then crestfallen, "But what about Ellen?" He paused and then had an idea.

"We'll go to a drive-in and then she can come with us."

"Okay, that's even better," she said. So their first date was set.

"I'd better get back to the garage." He dug through his pocket and came up with a business card. It had a cartoon of a man with a blue uniform on, smiling and saluting. *At your service!* Handing it to her, he told her to call him if she needed anything. He averted his eyes, not wanting to gaze on her in her nightgown again. She was as unselfconscious as could be.

The day went by quickly for Frank. He had another complicated repair in addition to Margaret's Buick, which sat forlorn, waiting. He was secretly happy the part didn't show up in the morning deliveries. Back at Mary's house, Margaret used the Princess phone and left a message for Alan; her car had broken down and she'd be delayed until next week.

She and Ellen were getting cabin fever, so they left in search of a park, finding a nice, grassy area in the center of town, with swings and a duck pond. At lunchtime, they walked to the café, and Mary took her break as soon as the lunch crowd left. She was genuinely happy for Margaret when she told her about the drive-in movie date.

"Having a child really changes the way you spend your social time, I guess," Mary said. Margaret nodded her head. It surely did.

"But I wouldn't change anything about my life," Margaret said. "I love being a mother, and she is the sweetest little girl." Mary wanted to ask about Ellen's father. She already could tell Margaret was secretive, holding her personal information close.

"What's Ellen's daddy like?" she asked.

"Alan's okay," Margaret answered, but was reluctant to elaborate and Mary didn't press her. She'd learn what she wanted to know in time.

After lunch, Margaret and Ellen went back to Mary's house for naptime. When her shift was over at the café, Mary returned home with a bag of food containers. They were having roast turkey for dinner, compliments of the village café. Mary put the food away then tiptoed to Margaret and Ellen's door just as Margaret let out a blood-curdling scream. Opening the door right away, Mary saw her in the throes of what appeared to be a nightmare, while Ellen was snoring softly in the crib, unfazed. Mary went right to the bed, crawling in next to her and put her hands gently on Margaret's shoulders to shake her.

"Margaret, wake up!" Her eyelids flickered slightly, and finally opened as Mary embraced her.

"I'm awake," she said, getting up on one elbow, face flushed and eyes shining. "Thank you. I don't have anyone to wake me up and they have to run their course like dreams do." Mary nodded her head. She knew the disadvantages to living alone, and suffering through nightmares was definitely one of them. "I'm okay now."

"I really like you, Margaret. I don't want you to leave Seymour," Mary said. Margaret smiled at her.

"That's really nice to hear. I don't have any girlfriends where I come from. Not a one. I wonder why that is?" Mary chuckled.

"I bet I know why," she said. "They're jealous of you." Margaret shook her head.

"Aren't nothing to be jealous of. I got nothing, except Ellen." She looked over at the sleeping form in the crib.

"Where's her dad?" Mary asked softly. She was feeling the pain of being alone with a small child.

"Alan's gone. Never was involved. You know the story I'm sure. I listened to lies and got caught. I was just glad my folks was dead. They'd 've been so angry with me and I don't want that anger around my little girl."

"And you got the girl, that's a big dividend." The women nodded their heads, both looking over at the crib. Ellen was worth it. Mary hugged Margaret, and they held each other, lying in bed side by

side. Mary smelled Margaret's hair; it reminded her of the outdoors, cool breezes and grass. Margaret nestled her head in the crook of Mary's neck, kissing her there.

"Thank you for caring for us," she said, sighing. "I feel safe here."

"I'm glad for it," Mary replied. "It's nice havin' you and the little one here." She pulled back from Margaret and smiled.

"Well, you hungry? We're having roast turkey with the fixins' for dinner. If you'd like, I'll invite Frank."

"You sure you don't mind?" Margaret asked, sensitive to what his interest in her might mean to Mary.

"Naw, he's not interested in me. I'm glad he's found someone, if you're the one." She got up and went to the phone in the kitchen, dialing the garage number by heart. Frank was grateful for the invitation.

"I have to go home and get cleaned up and then I'll be back," he said. They'd have dinner together and then go to the drive-in.

The couple enjoyed the movie, sitting across the bench seats with little Ellen in the middle. Around nine, she fell asleep with her head next to Margaret. When the movie was over, Frank drove to a drive-in restaurant on the other side of town for a snack. They drank milkshakes and talked until midnight. Margaret stifled a yawn.

"I better think about heading back to Mary's," she said. "Ellen doesn't know the meaning of sleeping in yet."

"Okay, I guess you're right," Frank said, leaning over to turn the key in the starter. "Thanks for goin' with me tonight. I guess it's the first movie I've been to in a long while."

"You're welcome," she replied. "I never go myself. No one to go with before Ellen and certainly no one to go with since." She looked over at Frank, and he was looking at her intently.

"How'd you feel about takin' on another man's child? If it ain't too early to talk of it." She'd slipped into her old, comfortable way of talking about half way through the movie. City Margaret segued to country girl Margaret.

"I think it would be mighty fine," he answered. "I like her very much, seems she's fond of me, too." They laughed out loud. "And it definitely is not too early to be talkin' about such things. At my age, I'm not wastin' time playin' games."

"You don't know anything about me," she said. "And I don't know your age."

"I'm thirty-one," he said. "I reckon you're not older than twenty or twenty-two." Margaret turned her head. She was over thirty-five, but she wasn't letting on.

"You're close," she said, smiling. "I don't like to talk about my age. Is that a problem for you?" He quickly shook his head.

"You could be any age and I won't care," he answered. "So I guess I'll take you back to Mary's now. Does this mean you'll be sticking around? Or do I have to drag out the car repairs for a little longer?"

"I'll be staying here, I guess," she said, smiling. "I like it here." He smiled back at her and pulled out of the parking space. When they got to Mary's, he carried Ellen into the house and helped Margaret get her ready for bed and into the crib.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said, bending over to kiss her on the cheek. She put her arms around his shoulders and hugged him, letting her body cover the length of his.

"Thank you, Frank," she whispered. "Thank you so much."





AFTER ELLEN AND FRANK discovered the footprints in the sand, the sheriff didn't waste any time getting to the McPherson place. He and his deputy looked around and decided to call a forensic team to make impressions of the footprints, just in case.

"Don't want to regret that we didn't do this if the person shows up again."

Frank grimaced, frowning at Boyd. "Please, keep yer voice down," he said under his breath, nodding toward Ellen who was standing at the counter making a fresh pot of coffee. She perked right up.

"So you're thinkin' there's a chance he'll come back," she said, frightened. She'd stopped pouring water into the coffee maker, concerned, looking at Frank and Boyd. Frank had an *I warned you* look on his face, and he let Boyd answer.

"Oh no, no, no, that's not what I meant. He might be peeping on other families in the area, that's all. Best we have casts of his footprints in case he does it someplace else, then we'll have something to compare it to." That explanation seemed to satisfy her and she went back to measuring water.

Once the casts were made and the sheriff and his deputy and the forensic workers left, Ellen and Frank decided that no good would come to them if they hung around all day, stewing. "Let's go to town," Ellen said. "You got work to do and I could use a change of scene." Bypassing the bike, she would ride home with Frank for today.

When they arrived at the garage, Mary was waiting for them. "You two goofing off today?" Frank shook his head.

"We had an intruder on the land last night," he said as he unlocked the door for Ellen. There was no reason to hide it, he decided. The more people who knew, the better.

"Oh my! That sounds so foreboding. Did you have the sheriff out?" He nodded his head.

"Just now. There's nothin' they can do, of course. But we wanted it on record, just in case." He nodded his head over toward Ellen and made a "shush" sound. Mary caught on and nodded in return, following him into the office. Ellen was frowning, watching the two of them, concerned Frank might succumb to Mary's flirtation now that Margaret was dead. But she needn't have worried. He'd never look at another woman again after Margaret, and it was certainly too soon to even consider it, her being gone just a few months. Especially not Mary.

But in spite of Frank discouraging her, Mary had never given up flirting and coming on to him steadily since Margaret was committed. The day Margaret disappeared ten years ago, when five-year-old Ellen revealed that Margaret said Mary had cooties, the sheriff came out right away that day, too. They took a picture of Margaret; the most recent one Frank had and went back to town to file a missing person's report. With Margaret's history and all, they didn't want to waste any time. By now, Frank knew a lot more about her, knew it was Margaret who was mentally ill, who spent time in a mental hospital, and not the fictitious brother, Peter. Margaret, who just happened by in a car with a burned out motor, on her way from Saint Augustine to *only she knew where* with a toddler, would steal Frank's heart.

The positive part was that she functioned at a very responsible rate most of the time. For the three years they were together, Frank learned the warning signs when life was getting to be too much for her, and if he was swift to take action on her behalf, nothing bad ever happened. She learned to trust him, to tell him if she needed an outing or some fun or more of his attention, and usually if he gave her

what she said she needed, she'd be fine. On the rare occasion, when all of those things failed to comfort her, thirty days in Hallowsbrook with intense psychotherapy and drugs were somewhat beneficial until she was discharged, good as new for a brief time.

At first, during those thirty day bouts, Mary would watch little Ellen for Frank in the afternoon when she got off her shift at the cafe. She offered to keep the child overnight, but he wanted her home with him, and she wanted to be home. One day however, Ellen overheard Mary whispering to someone on the phone, using the words, *something not right between stepfather and stepdaughter*, and little Ellen repeated it to her stepfather as soon as she could.

Frank refused all Mary's offers of help after that, the implication was so seedy, so disgusting. Bringing the child to work with him, Frank and little Ellen became a novelty in town. When it was too hot to bring her into the garage, he fielded trouble calls from home, going in together only if someone needed a repair. He got the office air conditioned during this period, while they waited for Margaret to come home.

Within days during the last disappearance, police found Margaret sleeping behind a vacant store downriver. They notified Frank and he drove as fast as he could to the police department to identify her, but it was too late. A judge was committing Margaret to Hallowsbrook permanently. The courts told Frank when he attempted to fight the decision that he was putting himself in jeopardy of losing Ellen if he fought it, that Margaret had proven to be an unfit parent. So the trade off was leaving his wife in a mental institution to keep her child. He never told anyone what he was forced to do.

"How is he going to raise a girl child alone?" Mary said to a customer in the café one day, as they watched Frank arrive at the garage, little Ellen riding his back like a chimpanzee baby while he carried baskets of toys and pink items, transforming the garage office into a Toyland.

The office door was kept locked now, the room utilized as a giant playroom, and customers were expected to enter through the garage door. During the summer, a teenaged neighbor became Frank's helper. Mary, put out, complained to anyone who would listen. Soon, everyone in the village knew that Mary was angry with Frank. *If they don't need my help, to hell with them.* But she continued to haunt Frank, coming into the garage after having had too much to drink in the afternoon, trying to kiss him, or worse.

The weekly trips to Hallowsbrook started soon after, with Margaret lucid and pleasant at first. But the longer she stayed, the crazier she became. "It's the drugs they're giving her," Boyd said. But the drugs were keeping her alive. She'd become paranoid, then suicidal and it was taking more and more psychotropics to keep her stable. Frank and Ellen made fewer and fewer visits as Margaret got worse; decreasing to the monthly checkups until those last weeks before she died when she seemed to be getting better.

Mary continued to visit Margaret weekly, trying to mollify Frank, and it helped, he softened toward her again in spite of the gossip she'd started, until she showed up at the riverside cottage one night.

"Mary, you know this would never work," he said. But she was determined, wrapping her arms around his neck, nuzzling his neck with her lips, and going straight for his crotch.

"Please, I need you Frank, and I can feel you want me," she said, discovering he was aroused, but he shoved her hand away seconds after she tried touching him.

"Mary, my wife is still alive, and my child is right inside the house. This would never work," he repeated.

The final blow came by telephone call in the early morning hours; Margaret had died of unknown causes. Boyd hinted that Frank should take legal action against Hallowsbrook since they couldn't



determine the exact cause of death, stating natural causes on the death certificate in spite of the coroner hinting at suicide with a vague substance overdose as the source when he added *possibly self-inflicted*.

“What the hell does that mean?” Boyd asked. “Frank, you need to take a stand.” Faye Baker, the ADA wouldn’t even talk about opening an investigation unless the family was in agreement.

“Her death certificate says natural causes,” Frank said. He didn’t need another hobby, following the course of a lawsuit. And it wouldn’t be fair to Ellen, who agreed secretly with her father that Margaret was at peace at last no matter how she died. Rarely talking openly before, they continued skirting the issue. The pain was simply too intense for Ellen.

After Margaret’s hospitalization when Ellen was five, she ceased to be a parent. All Ellen needed was Frank who provided for her, protected her, guided her. He was a *real* parent. She may have called him Frank to his face, but he was dad to everyone else. “My dad” or “my father.” Frank had the purest intentions of any human being she’d known. He was incapable of being negative, at least in her presence. “Don’t even ask my dad’s opinion,” she’d say. “He’ll only look at the bright side.” When Margaret died, it was a relief.

“Now don’t be surprised if you still mourn,” Frank said.

Ellen knew all that, but once she allowed herself to feel the sadness, she realized it was sadness that her mother was incapable of being a mother to her, her illness making her the most self-absorbed, selfish person imaginable. She even attempted to counsel Margaret.

“Mother, perhaps if you tried to focus on somethin’ else, somethin’ other than yourself, you’d feel better.”

But of course, Margaret wasn’t able to do so; she’d looked at how everything related to her and how it made *her* feel for so long that it was all she was capable of. Ellen’s challenge made her retreat further into herself, at least when her family was around. Ellen confessed how she felt to Frank, and it was during the visit Frank told Ellen Margaret had always been insane allowing the word to be spoken out loud for the first time. He wouldn’t say more than that at first, but slowly over the three months since she’d died, he opened up to his stepdaughter about what his life had been like, falling in love with a lunatic.





ALAN JOHNSON SOLD CARS in Saint Augustine, the number one used car salesman four years in a row. Corporate even took notice. Summoned to Galveston to head up the sales team there, “I’m gonna teach those Texans a thing or two about the way we do it here in Florida,” he said, bragging. Margaret looked the other way to hide her smirk; she was so sick and tired of Alan’s boasting about promotions and raises, advances and at-a-boys, yet she never saw evidence of it. She worked fulltime in a secretarial pool, paid her own bills, loaned him money with promises that he’d pay her back, and then she got pregnant. It was a shock; she’d been sexually active for years, never took a precaution, and never got pregnant. What was different now? She thought the difference was that, confronted with the possibility to finally be free of Alan, she’d be bound to him for eternity.

Trying to break up with him was impossible. He just wouldn’t be alienated. They’d started dating a year before; he was very attractive at first, tall and built, jet-black hair that he confessed he dyed to hide a shock of white across the front, like a skunk. “It’s a birthmark,” he said. “My mother has the same thing.”

His cocky attitude was barely tolerable and until the incessant bragging began that never seemed to result in anything real, Margaret thought she could deal with him. She never saw a paycheck, wasn’t even sure he really worked. They didn’t live together because she wisely resisted it, refusing to have him over for even a night. Within a month’s time Margaret also made the decision she would not introduce him to her friends; they would hate him and she didn’t want to be put in a position of being his defender.

When he was about to leave for Texas, her period didn’t come. She didn’t tell Alan; not sure it would have made much difference anyway, and she didn’t feel any obligation to him. After he left, the long phone calls began, saying he was getting a place for them in Galveston that he’d send for her as soon as he got settled, but he never did and he never sent her a dime. The money she’d lent him became an icon; the phrase *life would be easier when Alan repaid her* peppered her inner dialogue, conversations she had with herself when the fear of caring for a newborn overwhelmed her. She’d given Alan most of her savings and now the possibility that she would lose her job loomed large. Looking the other way as the pregnancy progressed; her boss did what he could for Margaret. It was after the delivery that would be the problem because her company didn’t make allowances for maternity leave; it was not mandatory in the state. Faced with losing her apartment just as she needed to care for another human being, her solution was to downsize and move from a two bedroom to a studio apartment. Chances were good she’d never entertain a man again, certainly not overnight.

For the next eight months, she saved every cent she could and sold anything of value she had, including her television and radio. Only her bed, table and chair in the kitchen and a rocking chair in the living room remained, and her car, a used Buick LeSabre with seventy-thousand miles on it. But soon, the place filled up again as friends brought by their cast-offs. Her coworkers gave her a baby shower and she received everything she needed to care for a newborn.

Nine months went quickly. Mildly nauseated at dinner the night she went into labor, she forced herself to eat soup and crackers, just in case. Hearing about women who went without eating for days while they were in prolonged labor, Margaret didn’t have any extra weight in reserve. At bedtime, she brought a cup of tea, a package of cookies and a book into bed and the last time she looked at the clock, it was well after midnight. At about two, she woke up with a stomachache. She went into the

bathroom to brush her teeth deciding she'd get ready to leave and if it was a false alarm, at least she'd be prepared for the day. But it wasn't false, it was the real thing. By three, she was keeping track of the contractions, leaving for the hospital before they got so bad she'd be unable to drive.

The car park was a block away, but her suitcase was small so it wasn't bad walking to the emergency entrance. When a wave of the contraction came, she stopped and put her hands on her knees breathing through it. Just as she got to the ER reception desk, her membranes ruptured, sending a flood of amniotic fluid cascading down her legs. She leaned on the desk and looked down at the puddle she was standing in. "Lovely."

Ellen Marie Fisher was born the next day at two in the afternoon. Labor wasn't that bad after all, Margaret decided. Once the barbaric part of it was over, the evacuation of anything left in her body, the sewing up of parts too small for the stretching they'd require, it was sweet, lying on the delivery table with all eyes upon her as she held her newborn daughter for the very first time. Nursing Ellen was not an option for Margaret. She wanted her body back as soon as possible; wanted her life back. When twenty-four hours were up, she was ready to leave. Lying to the nursing staff, she said a friend was picking her up, and when they wheeled her out to the front entrance in a wheelchair, insisted she'd wait alone. When she was sure it was safe, she walked the distance with a newborn and a suitcase to her parked car and drove home.

Getting used to mothering was easy for Margaret. Ellen was a built-in friend, a little companion, guaranteed to amuse and entertain. Wherever Margaret went, Ellen went with her. When she was two weeks old, Margaret started taking her to work, the thought of leaving her with a sitter too frightening.

"Now don't make a peep," Margaret told her.

Walking into the office with the infant in a little plastic chair, she stashed Ellen under the desk with her diaper bag, picking right up where she left off before the birth. During breaks, the baby came out of hiding and got her bottle and diaper change. By Friday, her boss came up to her desk with a smirk on his face.

"So, I hear we have a new employee. Can you introduce us?" Margaret pushed her chair back and reached down for Ellen who had both fists up to her mouth.

"It's almost lunchtime," Margaret explained. Her boss scratched his head.

"I'm afraid of setting precedence," he said. "And I'm sure not every baby would be as quiet as this one."

Margaret was terrified he was going to tell her to leave. She imagined the scenario; cleaning out her desk, walking out to a car that very well wouldn't start, having to take the bus to the welfare office, paying for formula with food stamps.

"Please don't make me leave," she pleaded.

"No, no, I'm not going to. But I need to figure out something else. It's not fair to; what's her name?"

"Ellen."

"It's not fair to Ellen to have to spend the day in the dark under a desk, like a leprechaun. We can do better than that. Give me the weekend to think about it."

The following Monday, Margaret was directed to take Ellen to a room down the hall from the office. A nursery with one other child was in place, waiting for Ellen. It was as ideal as it could be while it lasted. Before Ellen's second birthday, the company was sold and Margaret was terminated along with many of her co-workers.

Desperation set in. The only thing she could do was ask Alan one more time to pay her the money he owed her; over ten thousand dollars.

“Come here to Galveston and I’ll see to it you get your money,” he said.

Although the few friends who knew she’d been with Alan figured he was the father, most of them didn’t know Ellen’s paternity, but they’d encouraged Margaret to file for child support from whoever it was. Doing so would alert him that he had a child and he might insist on sharing custody. The idea that he’d be entitled to taking Ellen terrified her.

While she still had a little money and her unemployment about ready to expire, Margaret made the tough decision to go to Galveston and confront Alan. He didn’t need to know Ellen was his; she was small enough to pass for an eighteen month old.

“How can I be sure you’ll keep your word?” she asked him. “It’s a long way there. I’ll be using the last of my cash.” She didn’t add, “Thanks to you.”

“I’m crushed that you have so little trust in me. What did I do to deserve it? I thought I took good care of you while I was there.” The allusion was sexual in its undertone and the hair on her arms lifted in gooseflesh. Had she really been that needy to succumb to him?

“Whatever, Alan. All I know is that you asked me for a loan which I freely gave, trusting you completely when you said it would be repaid. I’m unemployed, broke and desperate. Maybe you could send me money to get there.” He was silent on the other end of the line.

“I guess I could do that; send you a little something.”

“If you did, I might be able to trust you again,” she said.

“Send me your bank account info and I’ll make a deposit,” he said, suddenly hopeful. But she was on to him.

“I had to close my account,” she lied. “Just send a money order. I can get that cashed anywhere.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, trying but failing at hiding his disappointment.

But the money order never came and before she had to pay her rent again, she loaded up the car, buckled Ellen in her seat and headed west. She didn’t put a lot of thought into what she was going to do once she got to Galveston. But thankfully, she never had to worry again. Frank took care of all of their needs.

• • • •

AFTER THE DATE, THE leftover-café-turkey-dinner, drive-in movie date, Frank and Margaret knew they would be together. He dropped her off at Mary’s house, and before they walked up to the door together, the sleeping Ellen on his shoulder, he asked her to marry him.

“I know it’s ridiculous, asking this fast. But pretty much what you see with me is what you’re gonna get. How long do we have to wait to make it seem less ridiculous?”

Margaret laughed. “We don’t have to wait at all, if you don’t want to. But maybe we should, just for Ellen’s sake. Don’t want her growing up with people talking about her folks getting married the week after they met.”

“Okay, how about a month? Will you marry me in a month? Your car should be fixed by then, at least,” Frank said, teasing.

“Yes, Frank. A month sounds very nice. Let’s get married in a month. I wonder if Mary will let us stay here for a whole month.”

“I don’t see why not,” Frank said. He didn’t want to warn Margaret not to tell Mary too much of her business. It might appear he was worried about her knowing too much of *his* business. He decided a little information might be a good thing. “You probably figured it out that Mary is the town crier.” He looked over at her, the corners of her mouth turning down.

“I wondered. Thanks for the heads up.” She reached for Ellen. “Thank you for tonight. It was very nice getting out.” She stood on her toes and kissed him gently on the lips. It startled him for a second. He’d been anxious, worried about the right time to hold her hand, the best time for a kiss.

His lips were soft and dry, and she could feel the bristles of his whiskers, long past five-o’clock shadow. After they said goodnight he fell to thinking about *her* lips, how soft and warm *they* were. Her breath was nice, too; chocolaty from the milkshake. He didn’t allow himself to think more because they’d be married in one month if everything fell into place. Dreaming, she would come to the little house and share his bed and the little girl would grow up in the bedroom across the hall from their room. He’d drive into Beauregard to get new bedding; shopping in the village was out of the question; the raised eyebrows and comments infuriating. It was none of their business.

The next afternoon, he closed up and drove his pickup truck north. The traffic was nerve-wracking in the city. He found the department store he wanted; the same one his mother and grandmother had shopped. Without wasting time, he chose a new mattress and box springs. A saleslady helped him pick out new sheets and bedspread. It wasn’t frilly, but it wasn’t something he’d have thought of.

He arranged for the new mattress to be delivered; he didn’t want to be seen driving through town with it in the back of his pickup. They would haul the old away, too. He wanted to call Margaret, but having to speak to Mary first put him off. He might as well drive over there before he headed for home. Mary greeted him at the door.

“Come on in, Frank. We’re just talking about dinner.” He put his hand up.

“Nope, I won’t impose upon you for a meal again. Next time, it’s my treat. If I’d been thinkin’ clear, I’d of brought something with me.” Margaret came to the door with Ellen in her arms.

“Hi, Frank,” she said, smiling, with just enough smoothness to her voice that Mary took notice, but didn’t say anything. It was clear she hadn’t heard the news. “Can we have dinner together tonight?” Without thinking, and especially without thinking about Mary, he nodded.

“Come home with me, tonight. I want to show you my garden, anyway.” It was a lame excuse, but it served in front of Mary.

“Frank’s ma had a green thumb,” Mary said refusing to be excluded. “You’ll see. Margaret told me she likes to garden, Frank. You’re in luck!” Mary had a smirk on her face; they weren’t kidding her with their secrets. He smiled, ignoring her.

“Get the baby’s things,” he said to Margaret.

Ellen put her arms out to him and Frank took her, and unabashedly kissed her cheek. Mary turned away; sad it was a stranger’s kid he was kissing and not hers. Hers or theirs. Another fantasy, squashed. *Oh well. Maybe just temporarily.*

“I’ll be home early,” Margaret said, smiling sweetly at Mary.

*Maybe.* With Ellen in one arm, Frank opened the screen door and stepped aside for Margaret to move out first. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Mary.

“Next time, dinner’s on me,” he said.

Mary smiled back, but in her head the chant *Fuck off, Frank*, circulated through her brain until she was seething. She didn’t respond, keeping her head down, closing the door as soon as he was outside on the porch. The motor of his car starting up, pulling away from the curb brought a fresh torrent of a combination of jealousy and sadness.

It was a contradiction; Margaret was a fun companion, smart and easy to talk to, and her little girl was so sweet. Having them in the house brought her renewed joy that living alone for so long had depleted. Frank’s interest in Margaret was a nice twist. It wasn’t Frank that made her angry. It was the

combination of the two she took exception to. Why Margaret? Anyone else in town she'd have dealt with, but she wanted Margaret as her friend, or more, and Frank was screwing it up.

During the afternoon, they'd shared confidences, Margaret on the cusp of confessing the story of Ellen's paternity, just the mention again of the man named Alan. Frank's surprise visit ruined it. "Oh what the hell," she said, going to her apartment. She'd get dressed for the evening and take a ride into Beauregard. She wasn't sleeping alone tonight.

Ellen sat in between Frank and Margaret, chattering while the adults drove in silence. Margaret looked around the area, the sandy road leaving the village, entering a rural area where a few hardier souls lived. Houses were set back from the road, driveways obscured by trees. "Is your place isolated like this?" she asked. Frank shook his head.

"We're in the middle of a wide open space. My father built the house by his-self. It's in a valley the big river runs through. You'll see. The trees come right up to my land, but they was never part of it. 'Cleared natural,' my father said. 'Just waitin' for a house.'"

The sandy road wound through the pine forest for a mile to big clearing.

"This yours?" Margaret asked. Ellen tried to sit up to look but her seatbelt and little chair held her down.

"Up!" she demanded.

When Frank pulled into the driveway, Margaret unfastened her seat belt and the child stood up with her hands on the dashboard.

"My house," she screamed. Margaret looked at Frank.

"What's this all about?"

"We was talkin' about a house," he replied. "She just picked up on it. Smart little girl."

He put the gearshift in park and as natural as if he was taking his coat with him from the front seat, the little girl leaped into his arms. He met Margaret in front of the truck and put his free arm around her shoulders as they walked down the path from the barn to the cottage.

"What a great place," she said, smiling. "I'll be happy to live here." Frank looked down at her.

"That right? That's a relief. It's nothin' much. You might change ye'r mind when we get inside."

"I don't think so." She let him have a very small glimpse of what her prior life had been like.

"In my last place, I slept on a mattress on the floor. Anythin' is an upgrade from that."

"What happened?" Frank took his arm off her shoulder and dug in his pocket for the key.

"I was tryin' to save money in case I lost my job when Ellen was born. Whatever I could sell went out the door. My friends came to my rescue, but it was still a bare bones existence."

He felt awful hearing her story, deciding right then he'd make their life much better than it was.

"We can buy whatever you want for the house," he said. "If I can afford it, it's yours."

But as it turned out, she was content to let things stay as they were. His mother's furniture was just fine, comfortable, old pieces of overstuffed sensibility. She'd spend the rest of her days there with Frank sitting on a chair that had belonged to his mother, with her feet on a small stool covered in his mother's handiwork.

Ellen transferred her needs to Frank within days after the wedding.

"Dada," she'd yell from her bedroom. He'd get up out of bed and open her door to find her standing in the crib with her arms out.

"It might be time for a big-girl bed," he'd say.

"No, no big-girl bed." Ellen stayed in the crib until she was four.

"It's not right," Margaret said. "We should force her." Frank frowned.

"If you think it's important, I guess we could try it."

“Don’t you? It’s not seemly that a grown child should sleep in a crib.

“Maggie, she’s only four. She feels safe in it, so I say if you’re all right with it, let ‘er be.”

Margaret looked at her daughter, how tall and lanky she was for a four-year-old, her vocabulary incredible. *Why’d she still need to sleep in a crib?*

“Do you want to try your big-girl bed tonight?” she asked.

Ellen looked over at it. It was low to the floor, made up like every little girl’s dream bed with lacy pink satin and piled with stuffed animals. The child shook her head and pointed to the crib.

“I’ll stay in the crib,” Ellen said, determined. Margaret sighed.

“But why? You can’t even stretch out in it anymore.”

“I like the crib,” she said, her mouth set.

“Well, I guess that’s that, for now,” Frank said, frowning. He knew that Margaret was capable of latching on to something like a dog with a bone, and he didn’t want the crib to become one of her obsessive issues. He looked at her standing in the child’s room with her hands on her hips.

“I think we need to use some bribery here,” Margaret said. Frank’s ears perked up. He wasn’t beyond using a little reward system.

“Now you’re talkin’,” he said. “What’ch you got in mind, Mother?” She looked at Ellen who was standing partially behind Frank. Toys and dolls wouldn’t do it for her. Although they never came out and said it, Ellen was a tomboy.

“I’m thinkin’ it’s time for a bike. Not a tricycle, but a real two-wheeler. With trainers.” Ellen came out from behind Frank.

“A bike? I’d like a bike.”

“But will you leave your crib for a bike?” Margaret asked firmly. “We want you to sleep in a big-girl bed and get the bike in return.” Ellen didn’t have to ponder it; she’d wanted a bike for a while but her parents thought she was too young. But if she was old enough to sleep in a big-girl bed, she was old enough to ride a bike.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll leave the crib.” She looked over at the old crib longingly. She’d never felt safer than when she was in her crib. Her memories really started in earnest when she was three. Frank kissing her goodnight, gently lowering her onto the soft mattress, covering her with a fuzzy blanket was the strongest recollection.

“Good night, little one. Sleep tight.” He said the same thing every night until she repeated it.

“You sleep tight, too.” When Margaret went away, Ellen never missed her. Frank did all the nurturing, and Margaret was glad to relinquish it to him; the first two years of Ellen’s life had drained her of needing her child again. As long as she was safe and cared for, the little Margaret had to give seemed to be enough.

It didn’t take long after the wedding for the couple and their child to form a tight bond that resisted any interaction with the outside world. Margaret seemed happy to stay on the property. When she wanted to get outside to stretch her legs, Frank noted that she was content to walk within the boundaries of their yard. She rarely wanted to go into town, but when she did, she’d drive in with Frank and he would drop her off at the café where she’d sit and drink coffee all morning, talking to Mary. Even that relationship had changed. Frank encouraged his wife to invite Mary over if she missed her, but Margaret just shook her head.

“We were never really friends,” she said. “Mary needed me more than I needed her.” Now, after the wedding, Mary’s voyeurism was out of control. Mary was hungry for stories of their wedding night, but Margaret would only smile a slow grin and shake her head.

“That’s private,” she said. But Mary wouldn’t take no for an answer.



“You did do it though, right?” The red was creeping up Mary’s neck onto her cheeks.

“Of course,” Margaret said. “I will admit that much.” But she kept that sly smile on her face and just shook her head when Mary whispered, “*Was it good?*”

“It’s none of your business,” Margaret answered. “And if you keep asking, I’ll leave.”

She was dead serious. During that month before the wedding, just as Margaret was getting comfortable with Mary, confiding in her, going where she’d never gone before with anyone else, Mary wanted Margaret for more than friendship. They were sitting in her private living room late one night; long after Ellen had gone to sleep, working on a bottle of wine. It was warm and cozy in the room with the dim lights and the radio on low. Margaret put her head back on the couch and closed her eyes for a moment and just as she was going to allow herself to doze in an alcohol haze, she felt the couch cushion depress next to her as Mary leaned over to kiss her on the mouth. Margaret had never kissed a woman. Mary’s mouth was soft, smelling of wine and lilacs. Sighing, Margaret relaxed into the couch, and then she thought of Frank. Sitting up, she pushed Mary away.

“No, I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to...but I thought it was mutual,” Mary complained.

“I was minding my own business. It was never mutual.”

“You didn’t resist!” Mary said.

“Keep your voice down Mary. I don’t want to scare Ellen. I’m drunk. You started kissing me. That’s the end of the story. I’m gettin’ married in two weeks and I’m sure Frank wouldn’t understand. Let’s just let it go.” Mary started to cry, pacing back and forth.

“I don’t get it. You’d just arrived and bang! He’s asking you to get married.”

“What don’t you get?” she asked, adjusting her clothing. “I never even flirted with the man.”

“I’ve been here all along, and he never so much as looked in my direction. You show up and I finally have a friend, and he sweeps in like a vulture.”

“Are you jealous of *him*?” Margaret asked, unbelieving.

“Yes! Yes, I’m jealous of him. We clicked right away, you and me. And he ruined it. He can offer you more than I can,” she said, crying. Margaret reached out for her hand.

“Mary, Mary. You have to believe me when I tell you that you were never even an option for me, at least not as anything more than a friend. If that sounds harsh, well I’m sorry.” Mary stormed out of the room while Margaret struggled to get up and get into her room before Mary came back.

Drunk for sure, she didn’t feel like she’d done anything wrong. Mary came on to *her*. Thinking of Mary’s age, twenty-six, ten years younger than she was. Frank would never believe it if she told him what had happened. Love between women was something Frank wouldn’t understand; he was so innocent. Nothing must come between Frank and her, nothing. Frank was their savior. No matter what happened, Frank would love Ellen and take care of her.

After the wedding, life with Frank fell into a pleasant routine without Mary. Margaret kept house for him, but he did the cooking and organizing. Ellen loved him with all of her heart, and Margaret was pleased with her foresight of having gotten lost in front of his garage. Ellen started school, and with her gone all day, and nothing to occupy her time, Margaret started to deteriorate. Slowly at first, so that Frank almost didn’t notice, she stopped taking care of herself. Beautiful Margaret, who put so much into their romance, surprising him with her *knowledge* of what pleased a man that he’d have to remind himself that she’d had a child with someone whom he didn’t know.

The wedding night was beautiful; after Ellen went to sleep, Frank turned the radio on and reached for her, leading her into a slow dance.

“How’d you learn?” she asked, her head on his chest. “You’re really good at this.”

“School dances, I guess,” he replied, grinning. “They say I have natural rhythm.”

“Who says it? All your women?” she asked, giggling.

“You know better than that,” he replied softly, kissing the top of her head.

“I guess we never talked about your past, the women you’ve been with. You know all about me,” she said, a little haughty lilt to her voice.

“I know what I need to know. For starters, you’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You’re a good mother. I love you and your child. What else is there?”

“Well, do you have any old girlfriends lurking who might resent me?” He pulled back from her.

“You ask me that on our wedding night?” he gave a loud laugh and she grinned. “Nope. None. Well I did have a girlfriend in high school, but she’s married with two kids now, so she won’t bother you.”

“How serious was it?”

“I guess serious,” he said. “We slept with each other, if that’s what you mean. And what good did it do? No good. I’m sorry for it now.”

“I’m not,” she answered. “I didn’t want to be tainted while you’re pure as snow.” He looked into her eyes and started laughing.

“You are not tainted, not by a long shot.” He pulled her closely and they rocked together as the music played softly. She intertwined her fingers into his and stretched up to reach his mouth. He bent down to return the kiss, and they started their wedding night swaying in an embrace with Johnny Rivers singing in the background.

Frank would always remember the way Margaret looked that night. When she’d stopped caring about him and Ellen, almost forgetting they’d existed; he’d remember their wedding night. He’d used the hallway bathroom to give her some privacy, and when he came back into their bedroom, she was stretched out on his bed; on top of the bedspread the lady at Sears helped him pick out, naked. He’d never seen such a beautiful body. Later, he’d rationalize that he loved her, she could’ve had a beard and he’d think the same thing. Those early days of bliss would sustain him through the next years, of her diminishing lucidity and increasing craziness.

While Margaret was losing her mind, Frank and Ellen fell in love, the father she never had and the daughter he’d always worship. There was a mutual respect and understanding as in a true father/daughter relationship, they *chose* to be father and daughter. It wasn’t forced upon them, or a product of anything. He wanted to be her father and she wanted to be his daughter. It was simple logic.

They discovered similar qualities about each other that surprised them because there was no shared genetic material. A phrase Ellen often heard was, “You look so much like your father!” Maybe through living together with little other input, Ellen took on many of Frank’s inflections in speech, and mannerisms. And they shared the love of dancing, from the time she was a little girl, watching Margaret dance with Frank, Ellen was enchanted by ballroom dancing. On Halloween, she wasn’t a princess or a queen like other little girls; she was a dancer.

Dancing beautifully together at parties and community picnics, other fathers and daughters and mothers and sons tried to imitate the McPhersons. The principal asked Frank and Ellen to lead the first dance at the ninth grade graduation party because they made it look so easy. “It’ll get more people out on the floor if they think they can look as smooth as you two.”

Frank took Ellen shopping for the dress she would wear to the dance. Taking the armload of dresses on hangers they’d picked out together into the dressing room, she tried one after another until she walked out of the dressing room in a white cotton pique.

“That’s the one, sister,” Frank said. She looked over her shoulder in the mirror and then stood this way and that, frowning.

“You think so Frank? Oh, I’m not sure.” Her uncertainty was coming from the neckline; but she didn’t feel comfortable calling attention to it in front of her genteel stepfather.

“What’s yer problem with it then?”

“I think it might be a little too grown up for me.” He turned beet red, seeing right away what she was eluding too.

“Okay, I gotcha. Yep, you may be right. Try another then, we got all day.” She giggled; he meant just the opposite.

“I’ll be right out.” She went back and took the white dress off, choosing a pale blue cotton shirtwaist dress with a full skirt. She came out of the dressing room and spun around, the skirt lifting in the air, showing off her blue jeans. “What about this?” He had his hand on his chin, looking at her, making twirling gestures with his hands to get her to move this way and that.

“That might be it, by golly,” he said. “You look like a princess in it, sister. What’d you think?” She stood still for a moment in the mirror.

“This is it. You know, I thought of Mother there for a moment. Wonder what she’d say if she could see me in this dress.” Frank smiled at her.

“She’d be so proud of you; I bet she’d just be grinnin’ ear to ear.”

“I think so, too,” Ellen said. “I feel like she’s tellin’ us this is the one.” He nodded, happy that she was getting some psychic direction. Or that her own intuition was kicking in.

“Let’s git goin’ if we’re havin’ dinner out tonight. We got the drive home and all.”

She took the dress off, unconsciously smiling. They’d shop for shoes on the weekend; that was something she could get in Seymour. And underthings were never a problem because Frank saved all of Margaret’s for her and she was slowly growing up to fit into them. The shoes and clothes were still too big, but it wouldn’t be long before she’d have the entire wardrobe to wear.

When the weekend for the dance arrived, Ellen dressed quickly so she could help Frank. “Let me iron your shirt,” she said, fidgeting. “It’ll give me something to do.” He laughed, pulling the iron away from her grasp.

“I won’t have my daughter ironing my clothes,” he said firmly. “Sit a bit and keep me company.” He put the shirtsleeve on the board first while Ellen sat carefully on the kitchen chair so as to not wrinkle her dress.

“I’ve got Mother’s slip on,” she said. “We better go through her things; I thought I saw a moth on the floor of your closet.”

“You can have whatever you want of her stuff and then we can get rid of what you don’t want,” he said. “You know how styles go around in circles. Maybe someday it will be worth somethin’ to someone.”

“You mean like take it to the thrift store? Never, Frank. Can’t you see Mary sneaking over there as soon as word got out that Margaret MacPherson’s clothes have just arrived?” Frank let out a chuckle.

“Never thought of that, sorry. You’re right, again.” There was something obscene, almost worshipful about the way Mary Cook spoke of Margaret.

“But maybe we can find a way to preserve them, you know. For my own girls,” she said, looking at him shyly. So, she was thinking of her future already.

The ninth grade graduation dance was a turning point for Frank and Ellen. After having stayed under the radar, watching them float so smoothly over the dance floor gave the people of the village something more to talk about than just the words of Mary. The simple-minded people whispering ugly

lies about the father/daughter team now had real ammunition, while normal people were in awe of their talent. It put them on the map.





ALAN JOHNSON FORGOT about Margaret Fisher six months after arriving in Galveston, after catching the eye of exotic dancer, Janelle at the Bensalem Gentleman's Club. He'd been going there nightly for weeks, trying to get the attention of any dancer who would look his way. Finally, on a Friday night in November, Janelle noticed Alan when he sat at the front row table every night, drinking something tan in a glass and never sticking more than a wrinkled dollar bill in her G-string.

"Who's the loser in the front row?" Melanie asked Janelle. "Looks like he's getting ready to shove his bar tab in my bra."

Janelle laughed. "I got a buck. It's all he ever gives out. But I think he's kinda cute."

"Yuck," Melanie said. "You can have him."

Janelle was tired. She was thirty-eight to Melanie's twenty. The Bensalem was her last gig; no other legitimate club in town would let a girl older than twenty-five get up on the stage. The clubs on the other side of town hired tips-only dancers, girls whose faces and figures destroyed by drugs or booze looked just fine at closing time. The Bensalem was a step up from those places for the working man. When Janelle started dancing twenty years ago, she was looking for a meal ticket, but he never showed up. Alan was eager, almost pathetic in the yearning written all over his face. She was ready to call it quits and she needed supplemental income. He was the only one interested.

"Wait for me at closing," she said softly, squatting in front of him. "I'm off at two." He nodded at her, mouth hanging open. She stood back up maintaining eye contact with him as she moved on to the next guy. Alan watched her slowly walk along the edge of the stage, running her hands down her body and turning first one way and then the next, glancing over at Alan when she could and smiling sweetly at him.

Even Galveston could be cold in November after the sun went down, but Alan waited outside for Janelle as she asked him to, freezing in his shirtsleeves. He took a last drag and threw his cigarette on the ground, grinding it with his heel when she opened the door, putting her coat on. "God it's freezing out here," she said, looking at his bare arms. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," he said. "My car's right over there." He pointed down the block. "Do you want to meet somewhere or are you okay about leaving with me?" She thought he was being very considerate.

"I can leave with you," she said, gesturing over her shoulder to the building. "They know who I'm with." They walked in silence to his car. She was ready to sleep with him if she had to.

"Where's your place?" He asked.

"I rent a room in the East End," she answered, looking at him concerned. "I know it sounds strange, but my landlady doesn't allow men in the rooms."

"Oh, well, I can see the wisdom of that. For safety sake," he said. "My place isn't in the best neighborhood." He looked concerned. "I don't keep the neatest place, either."

"I don't care about that," she said. "Do you have any food?"

He did, having just shopped. And Alan liked to cook, too. So their first date involved cleaning his kitchen so he could fix her breakfast, a shower for her and sleep on his couch.

At noon the next morning, she woke up to the sound of a key turning in a lock as Alan came home for lunch. "I figured you might need to go home to get ready for work."

"Yeah, I guess I'd better," she said, sitting up.

"I'll make you some coffee now," he said. "But I thought, if you'd like, you can pack a bag and come back here tonight."

She looked around his living room, at the piles of papers and dusty furniture. It needed cleaning, but it wasn't bad for the crappy neighborhood it was in.

"Okay, I guess I'd like that, if you're sure."

"We can be roommates unless something else develops," he replied with a smile. So that's how he forgot about Margaret.

Moving in together, they played house for almost a month until she discovered photographs of beautiful Margaret Fisher. It had taken them a few days to work their way back to the bedroom, and a few weeks for Janelle to grow tired of the squalor of his messy apartment. It was during a cleaning spree she came across an envelope filled with colored photos of a naked woman. Alan forgot he had the photographs; his version of artistic poses using a Polaroid. The images could have been random, taken by anyone, but Alan the ego-maniac had to make sure he was in several of them, laying on the bed next to the woman, holding the camera arms length to get both faces in the frame, as well as one perky breast. Nagging Alan about Margaret, she was jealous and suspicious.

"She's someone from the past," Alan said. "Haven't seen her since I moved to Galveston."

"How long were you together?" Janelle asked. She was standing at the stove, debating whether or not to distract him with egg frying, or throw the pan in his face.

"Not long," Alan said, trying to remember exact dates. "Less than a year."

"Why'd you split up?"

"I moved here and she wanted to stay in Saint Augustine." He was lying, but he didn't want to admit he'd borrowed money from Margaret to run away. He'd lied to Margaret, too. There had never been a better job, or corporate begging him to head up the sales team. The bill collectors and loan sharks were closing in on him, and he was in so deep he had to leave.

When Janelle grew tired of Alan's lies, Becky the secretary moved in, and when she moved out, Cynthia the dental hygienist moved in and so on for ten more years. Alan didn't think about Margaret again until he lost his job.

Car sales plummeted and the dealership folded during an economic downturn and hard working, generous Margaret popped into his thoughts. The only number he had for her was one that she'd had disconnected when she was supposed to be coming to join him. Then she'd called one night, leaving a message at the boarding house, that she was going to be delayed.

"You got a person to person call from Seymour last night," the landlord said. "Margaret has car trouble and won't be here till next week."

"Seymour? Where the heck is Seymour?"

"Some place in Alabama, I reckon." She never arrived, and he figured she went back to Saint Augustine after all.

Now, years later, with no other options, he had nothing to lose by heading back to Florida, the town of Seymour forgotten. But when he arrived in Saint Augustine, there wasn't anyone left who knew Margaret. He went to her aunt's house, but the woman had died. Tracking down her friends was impossible because he'd never met any.

Remembering where Margaret worked, Alan walked around the building, finding a directory posted on the wall next to the elevators. A maintenance man walked by and Alan caught his attention.

"Can you tell me what happened to Hartland?" Alan asked. "An old girlfriend worked there and I'm trying to look her up. I don't see it listed here."

"Hartland sold out to Reynolds a while back. I worked in Hartland offices."

“Do you remember Margaret Fisher? She was in the pool. About five six, a hundred ten pounds, auburn hair and blue eyes.” He told the man about waiting for Margaret to show up in Galveston.

“She’ be hard to forget,” he said when Alan questioned him.

“She *was* a looker,” Alan said, feeding his memory. “Do you remember when she left?”

“She got throw’d out like all of ‘em. How late you say she was?”

“Thirteen years,” Alan answered, frowning.

“Yep, it be around thirteen years. She had a baby, a little girl it was. The boss let her bring the baby to work with her.”

Alan reeled. A baby? “You sure about this?” Alan turned away to hide his face. Margaret never mentioned a baby, didn’t even hint of one. Maybe it wasn’t his. He turned to the man. “Do you remember when she had the baby?” He screwed up his face and looked at the ceiling.

“No, but the child was walkin’ along side her when she left. I’d say she was two or three years,” the man said. Alan thought about this for a moment; he’d left Saint Augustine fifteen years earlier so she must have been pregnant. It made him angry that she didn’t tell him. He didn’t like sneaks, forgetting he’d taken her money and lied to her, his part in the end of their relationship, how he took off for Texas leaving her high and dry. How would he ever find her now? Where was Margaret Fisher?

No money for a private investigator, before the time of internet searches and online family trees, the only research tool Alan had was attached to his body. Deliberating, he guessed he needed to find out more about the birth of Margaret’s baby to determine if it was his. The only place he could think of to get the information was the hospital in Saint Augustine.

Hanging around the coffee shop adjacent to the local hospital, Alan met Noelle after a week of diligently going there for breakfast. She was a big girl, five more pounds and she’d be chubby. Her hair caught his eye, shiny auburn, almost plum; she wore it in a long braid down her back. The opportunity to approach her would come about after seeing her there three days in a row. That day, on a mission to get coffee for her co-workers, Alan was sitting at table near the cash-register when she came in to the shop.

“I’ll take four regular, two black and a decafe,” she said to the waitress. Turning to sit down while she waited, Alan quickly pulled a chair out from his table for her.

“Join me,” he said. “Saw you here yesterday.” Not sure if he was serious, or if she even wanted to sit by him, she paused. “Please. Join me.”

Hesitantly, she pulled the chair out a little further and sat down. “Thanks,” she said. “My feet are killing me.”

“Nurses are always on their feet,” Alan said, noting she was in a navy blue scrub suit.

“I’m not a nurse,” she replied, holding out her hand to shake and holding up her hospital identification card. “Noelle. Noelle Carson. Housekeeping.”

He made small talk to get her to relax, but he could tell it might not be as easy as he hoped. She was so shy, her face expressionless except for a mean mouth, the corners turned down. He wondered if she smiled if she’d be more attractive, but the more he said the more awkward their conversation got, her defensiveness growing. Studying her face, he could see makeup skillfully applied hid the ravages of acne or maybe something worse. Several bandages were stuck to her arms. Housekeeping must be dangerous work, he thought.

Noelle didn’t catch on that Alan was trying to engage her. Getting through life was exhausting for her; just as she would have something approaching success, some Lothario would come along to disrupt her equilibrium and she’d have to start back at square one. Subtlety wouldn’t work with her



due to the huge wall of defense she had up. Redoubling his efforts, he increased the charm. Alan was so handsome and so engaging with his compelling story, she decided to let her guard down, just a little. He chipped away at her resistance with chatter and compliments but nothing worked. Until he mentioned Margaret.

Somehow, hearing about another woman put her at ease. If Margaret had a baby at that facility fifteen years ago, there would be a record of it somewhere. Telling more lies, he fabricated a story about being away at war, not sure what war was going on at the time but he thought it was something in the Persian Gulf, and that he'd just discovered his girlfriend at the time had had a baby while he was gone.

"I have to find her if I can. She and her mother disappeared into thin air."

"Oh how sad," Noelle said, understanding the pain of having lost a child after losing custody of her son fifteen years ago. His father took him back to Mexico and she never saw the baby again. She didn't share this with Alan, although the parallels between them were amazing.

"I don't even know the baby's name. She's not a baby any more," he said, bowing his head. "I don't even know if they're alive."

"What about her friends?"

"Margaret didn't have many," he said. "It's been so long ago, I don't remember any names."

"Gosh, it seems pretty hopeless," Noelle replied, softly, not used to offering encouraging words. "Do you know who her doctors were?"

Alan shook his head. He remembered he was supposed to have been overseas. "We'd just started to date when I got orders. I'd only met her aunt, and she's dead now."

"I just had an idea. Why can't you go to admissions and find out if she had the baby here?"

"They won't give me that information because we weren't married."

"What about getting an attorney?" She was on the path he wanted, hopeful, thinking of ideas.

"I don't have the money for an attorney, Noelle. I barely have enough to pay my rent this week." He'd rented a room in town with the last money he had. "I'm looking for work, but until I find something, I've just got unemployment." If she was wondering why a man his age didn't have any money set aside, she wasn't saying. Grabbing her hand, he laid it on.

"You're my lucky star," he said, smiling. "I feel like we were meant to be together, the first person I talked to when I arrived. I have a good feeling about us." He was putting it on thick, but she was lonely, and he hoped, desperate. She smiled and it changed her appearance, for which he was grateful.

"That's so sweet of you, Alan. I wonder if there isn't a way I can find out something for you?" He feigned surprise. From their first meeting, partial honesty about his reason for being in Saint Augustine would make the request for snooping seem less like he was using her to gain access to hospital records.

"In what way?" he asked. "You mean by asking around at the hospital?"

She was looking off, chewing on the inside of her mouth. "I know some of the women from medical records," she said. "My cousin is the receptionist in the department." Not showing much interest, like his heart rate didn't just increase exponentially, he nodded his head.

"Gosh I wonder if they'd help."

"It couldn't hurt to ask, I guess," she said uncertainly. Rather than rouse her suspicions, he'd ask her to dinner.

"Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?" He'd avoid any mention of lost children and disappearing girlfriends, the Persian Gulf and Army service. He'd never even held a gun.

She frowned. “*You* want to have dinner with *me*,” she said cynically. It just didn’t feel right. He was too handsome. “Why?”

“Why? Because I do. I think you’re pretty and interesting. Isn’t that enough? We’ve had coffee everyday. Now, let’s have dinner.” His flattery hit its mark because as she felt better about herself, she smiled more, which changed the shape of her face. She was almost pretty.

Alan was eager to start a relationship with her, albeit a strange one, so he could better take advantage of her connections. Locating her apartment the first time wasn’t easy; in a dark neighborhood outside of Saint Augustine, he had to navigate behind an abandoned factory, reaching a dead end at a chain link gate. Backing up, he found the street, little more than an alley, and turned into it, looking for her building. Checking his appearance in the rearview mirror first, he was then careful to look around the area before he unlocked to get out. After he knocked, he looked over his shoulder again nervously before she answered. She was surprised he didn’t just beep the horn for her.

“Nice neighborhood,” he let slip out. But she didn’t take offense, chuckling.

“I like the rent.”

“You look nice,” he said finally looking at her. He was relieved, not having seen Noelle in anything other than scrubs he wasn’t sure what she’d wear. They went to a seafood restaurant he remembered being fancy years before, but seemed to have fallen on hard time.

“I’ve always wanted to eat here and now I hope we’re not too late,” he said, worried.

“It’s fine,” Noelle said. “They stopped having entertainment about five years ago. But I hear the food is still good.” Alan made the effort getting to know Noelle, but wondered about his ability to take it to the next level. He didn’t see her becoming a scout for him unless he slept with her, and that might take some effort.

Noticing odd wounds on her legs and arms, almost too precise, Alan began to worry they were self-inflicted, but didn’t want to call attention to them. There was definitely something not quite *right* about Noelle, but he decided to let it go. Her value was in the facts she could gather.

The following week, he moved into her cramped apartment. Interspersing talk of their relationship with hints that he’d be going back to Galveston some day, he was trying to soften the blow for when he did take off again. “When I go back to Texas,” was a frequent phrase. But Noelle wasn’t listening, hearing only “I love you, I want you, I need you,” when they had sex, always with the lights off. She was in love with Alan and would do anything for him, anything at all.

“I’d even kill for you,” she said one night in the throws of passion.

“It’ll never come to that!” he replied. “Where’d you get a notion like that?” He rolled off her, frightened and disgusted.

Getting up and adjusting her clothes, Noelle fidgeted with something on her nightstand. “Chill Alan, it’s just a figure of speech. Talk about a mood buster.”

“I’ve got to admit it was a shocking thing to hear while in the middle of...well you know.”

“You can say it out loud, Alan. *Sex*. It was the middle of sex.”

Unable to contain his aversion, he got out of bed and went into the bathroom, locking the door. Something would have to happen soon because he didn’t know how much longer he could playact. Noelle was simply peculiar.





ON MONDAY OF THE WEEK before the stranger spied on Ellen, an envelope with a New York return address was in the stack of mail Jessie passed over to Frank. “Looks like one of them TV producers heard about you and the girl and yer dancin’.” Frank looked at her, confused, rifling through the pile.

“This is the dance hall in Beauregard,” he said, waving the envelope at her. “Must be the New York headquarters on the return address.”

“Here, open up.” Jessie passed him a letter opener, wanting him to find out what it contained before he left the post office. He’d never share it with her otherwise.

He used the opener and pulled out a photocopy of a newspaper article; the city paper downriver got wind of Ellen and Frank dancing at the ninth grade graduation when someone sent in a picture. No one in the village saw it yet or they’d have plastered the article all over the beauty shop and café, and someone would have surely brought a paper into the garage.

“Bother,” he grumbled, frowning.

“What is it?” Jessie asked, craning her neck to see. Frank unfolded it, reading the letter that accompanied the article out loud.

“Dear Mr. McPherson. The Phillip Anderson Dance Academy is a nationally recognized school of dance.” *Hardly a TV producer.* “Our representative will be in your area soon and we would like to take the opportunity to speak with you about up-coming competitions.’ There’s a phone number to call.” He looked up at Jessie.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he said. But she just laughed.

“No worries, I got better things to do around here,” she said.

“You go do ‘em then,” Frank replied, but laughed. “See you tomorrow.” He nodded his head and she laughed back.

“Yep, tomorrow it is,” Jessie said and as soon as he was out the door, she picked up the phone to call Mary over at the café.

The talk of the town was the first dance at the ninth grade graduation dance. The lucky witnesses passed tissues around as the lovely young girl and her devoted father floated across the floor, bringing observers to tears. “She was born to dance,” Miss Logan, the owner of the beauty parlor said, wiping her eyes.

“And they’re not even related,” Margo Portland, the local nurse practitioner whispered. “Like two peas in a different pod.” Mary, also standing in the school gymnasium watching the dancers, frowned at the distorted expression.

“What’s that supposed to mean? It doesn’t make any sense, Margo. It’s like sayin’ dance partners gotta be related to dance well together. Seems to me it would be just the opposite.”

“Well, I don’t care,” Margo said wistfully. “He’s so handsome and she’s so cute. Some lucky woman will inherit that beautiful family... now that his wife is gone.”

“That’s an awful thing to say, Margo,” Mary burst out. “Jesus, show some sensitivity.”

“Why? You planning on moving in on him?” Miss Logan asked. “Little bird said you already did.”

Looking at Mary with a critical eye, at her city haircut and dye job, Miss Logan’s Beauty Salon wasn’t good enough for her. The beginnings of crow’s feet and jowls displayed on an otherwise

attractive face belied that time was marching on, even for the popular Mary Cook. *Misdirected snobbery comin' from a waitress*, Miss Logan thought. Mary was aging and not well, at that.

"This stupid conversation started because Margo called Frank and Ellen *two peas in a different pod*. What the hell does that have to do with dancing?"

"So now you're a dance expert," Miss Logan said, sniffing. Margo leaned over to Mary standing on Miss Logan's other side.

"Your jealousy is showing, Mary," Margo said, grinning, egging her on. But she was serious.

"What? Of you? That's a load of crap," Mary said. "Shut your mouth, Margo Portland." Mary and Margo were two of the single women in town who'd vied for Frank McPherson's attention before Margaret's car broke down and she drifted into his life. Now that she was dead, Mary would start haunting him again.

"Not of me, you idiot. Of Ellen," Margo hissed. "It's written all over your face, just so you know."

"Why would I be jealous of a fifteen year old child?"

"You're a story teller, Mary," Miss Logan whispered. "I heard 'em. You got a filthy mind."

"I never said anything," Mary murmured. But it wasn't the time nor the place to talk about gossip she'd started, so rather than stay there engaging the women, she walked away.

While Frank and Ellen were gliding across the floor, they were whispering to each other about Mary, too. "Momma said she had cooties," Ellen said. "I think she was right."

"As wrong as it might be to say such a thing, I'm thinkin' I got to agree with you," Frank said, frowning. "She's looking over here right now."

"I see it," Ellen said. "That's my point. Watch yourself, Frank. She's trouble." The implication was clear; Ellen knew Mary was on the hunt.

"I got no interest in her whatsoever," Frank said. "None. Never."

"I'd be okay with it," Ellen said softly. "As long as it weren't Mary. I like Miss Portland, though. She might be someone. It's not right that you're alone."

"Remember, your mamma's only been gone a few months," Frank replied. "It just seems like forever." Ellen put her head on his chest.

"It *has* been forever," she said sadly. He held her a little tighter; the only time they touched was when they danced. What she said was the truth; Margaret hadn't been there for her daughter once she'd lost her mind.

"I don't need no other," Frank said tenderly. "At least not today." He looked down at her and smiled, kissing her hair. He didn't think about other women. Working, taking care of Ellen and enjoying each day; those things filled his life and made it satisfying.

"What about Margo?" Ellen asked, pressing. "I like her a lot."

"Really sister, I don't need any of 'um right now."

The words were out of his mouth when Mary tapped on Ellen's shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?" Not wanting to be rude, Ellen mumbled, "No" and moved away from Frank, but he pulled her closer to him.

"I do mind. This is Ellen's special day, Mary." He swirled her away, leaving Mary in the middle of the dance floor alone, with the eyes of the town burning into her.





RUNNING A ROOMING HOUSE and working at the café kept Mary busy for part of the day. In the afternoon, she tried to relax or take a nap. But when the sun went down, Mary got restless. Wanting a husband and family before it was too late, the driving force behind her social life was facilitating the opportunity to meet a man. Mary hadn't given up on Frank, his disinterest only increased her desire. She wasn't going to wait around for him though, and sunset triggered her need for companionship. "What am I sitting around here for?" she asked the empty room. Her closet was full of alluring outfits, and she'd dress to the nines with one goal and that was not to sleep alone that night. None of the one-night stands ever amounted to anything though, so she decided to try to snag Frank yet one more time, the rebuff at the dance still fresh in her mind but not humiliating enough to stop her.

Since he never went out at after work, holing up in that cottage with the girl, she'd make an excuse to stop at the garage on her way out before he closed. She'd walk around the block so she didn't have to pass Miss Logan's Beauty Salon, it obvious to Miss Logan why Mary was visiting the garage. Frank saw her coming and moaned; the woman wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Since you don't have one, I know you're not here to get your car repaired," he said, frowning. But Mary just laughed.

"Frank, come out with me. We'll have fun. I've seen you dance with Ellen; we can go to Beauregard to the dance hall. No one from Seymour will know you're there. Come on, please?"

When Margaret was still alive, it was the best excuse he had to reject her advances. "I'm a married man, Mary. I'm not going out with you, ever." Once he started, he was often unable to stop. "I thought you were Margaret's friend. She'd be crushed if she knew you were doin' this."

He'd made excuses so as not to hurt her feelings when the fact that his wife was still alive wasn't enough; Ellen's sitter had to get home, he was tired, he had work to do around the house.

Then, she used Ellen to get at him.

"Your girl needs a momma, Frank. I've known her since the first day they arrived in Seymour. I can do for her what you can't. What will you do when she becomes a woman? She'll need a momma then." But he wouldn't budge.

Incensed that he was still loyal to Margaret, Mary exploded. "How'd she know? Unless you told her, she'd be none the wiser. And my feeling is that she wouldn't give a damn, Frank. Not a god-damn." After Margaret died, he had to be brutal.

"I'm not interested, Mary. Is that clear enough for ya? Now go on home and leave me alone. Have some self-respect for durn sake."

Livid, Mary stamped off, forgetting to cross the street, passing the salon with Miss Logan shaking her head in disgust and pity.

In ten years, Mary visited Margaret once a week. She made the twenty mile round bus trip to Hallowsbrook. Being with Margaret was like old times, like the first time at the café when she and Ellen came into town.

Bringing along coffee in cardboard cups for every visit, they'd sit in Margaret's private room and whisper like conspirators, Mary sharing gossip from town and Margaret news she'd picked up eavesdropping on the nurses. When the coffee was gone, they'd walk the grounds together, reminiscing, talking about their fake futures. Margaret spoke of going back to work in the city in an

insurance office, which clothes she'd buy, who'd she hire to watch little Ellen, and then bigger Ellen, and finally, teenaged Ellen. Mary talked about her wedding, who she'd ask to stand up for her.

"Margaret, you would be the matron of honor."

"Oh, that's a terrible sounding title," she said, moaning. "I don't want to be the matron of anything. Let me be the maid." She watched Mary fiddling with something on her bedside table. "Who are you planning on marrying, anyway?"

"No one, yet. I wish Frank had a brother, though."

"If you wait long enough, I'll be dead and then you can have the real thing instead of wishin' for a brother."

"Don't say that! Frank's just a friend. And you'll live a long time."

Margaret looked at her out of the corner of her eye. She wondered if Mary was bothering Frank since she'd been locked away, the way Mary was bothering *her*. She didn't try *every* visit, but Margaret could tell when an assault was coming.

"No, I don't want to," she'd say pushing her away. "What if a nurse walks in?" or "What would Frank say? He'd be so hurt."

"Let's be together, Margaret, I miss you," she cried. "No one will ever know. Why do you care if Frank's hurt or not? It's his fault you're in here." Mary heard the gossip about Frank making the choice, deciding not to fight the courts for his wife's freedom in return for keeping her child.

"How's it his fault?" she'd ask. But Mary didn't tell her.

Once the conversation rolled around to Frank, it would decelerate, and Margaret would withdrawal. She did *not* want to talk about Frank to Mary. Nothing had changed from the days she was free, living at home and Mary a voyeur.

"I guess you probably need to head for Seymour," she said when she wanted Mary to go, or straight out, "It's time for you to leave, Mary. I'm getting tired."

Finally, Margaret stopped speaking to Mary, same as she had to her family.

"If you aren't going to talk to me, I guess there's no point in my coming all this way," Mary said. Margaret tossed her head, but she didn't say a word, and Mary, unable to stay away from her would still come every week, or more often, stopping for carryout coffee on the way just like she always had.

Slowly deteriorating, schizophrenic episodes of longer duration were replacing the short periods of normalcy, and visitors could never be sure what they'd be faced with; the lucid, sweet and talkative Margaret, or the suspicious, hostile, mumbling Margaret. Even the sweet Margaret was sneaky and if they didn't watch carefully, stole knives off patient trays or hoarded her medication.

"Be sure to watch your back," the nurses warned one another. Margaret could be violent, too, lashing out at the nurses who resorted to restraining her. In time, the drug side effects took a toll on her, and she became lethargic and finally, somnolent. It was during these times that Frank felt most helpless. He and Ellen would sit at her bedside and wait for her to wake up. Aware they were in her room, she would ignore them or play possum.

"Your family was here all afternoon," the nurse said. "You missed seeing your husband and daughter. He is so handsome and she's so cute."

"What do I care?" she drawled. "They mean nothing to me. He's not even her father." The nurses were appalled; the staff witnessed the love and tenderness between the father and daughter, and they told Margaret as often as they remembered to that she was a lucky woman to have such a caring man for a husband.



“You really don’t know how lucky you are, Margaret. I’ve seen patients whose husband’s bring the girlfriend along. You might want to try a little harder to stay awake when Frank visits.” Margaret started laughing.

“You are clueless,” Margaret retorted. “I wish the man *would* move on with his life. Do you think I enjoy the two of them coming here in their dress-up clothes, waiting for me to perform? It’s bad enough that I’m here and not seeing my daughter growing up.” She turned her back and lay back down. “I wish I was dead.”

The nurse left the room, but she recorded her conversation with Margaret. It was the first time she’d mentioned death. And then, as though contemplating how selfish she’d been, as if she had any control over her behavior, Margaret’s mental state made a complete turn around. The nursing staff wrote it was as if the drugs she’d been getting for years suddenly started to work.

Claiming she felt better, more aware and in touch than she had in years, Margaret told Margo, her nurse practitioner, that she wanted to get better so she could go home. She wanted to raise Ellen. “I feel like my friend, Mary is just chompin’ at the bit for me to give up the ghost so she can make a move on my family.” So if that was what was motivating Margaret, they would use it, reminding her how much her family loved her.

Frank and Ellen were stunned. “You’ve become such a lovely young woman,” Margaret told Ellen. “I’m so proud you’re my daughter.”

And to Frank, “I can never thank you enough for the father you’ve been to her.” They were thrilled with what was happening, agreeing it was time to petition the county when word reached them she was dead. Margaret had made such a startling improvement that her death was completely unexpected. Reams of paper with facts were filed away, just in case the family decided to sue. But Frank and Ellen had those last words of praise from Margaret.

The funeral planning was drudgery. Ellen and Frank went through Margaret’s clothes, trying to choose a dress for her to wear in the casket. Finally deciding on her wedding dress although it was much too small, it didn’t have to fasten down the back. Makeup applied skillfully and her hair just so, she looked like the young, beautiful, sane Margaret Frank first met.





MEDICAL RECORDS IN Saint Augustine belonging to patient Margaret Ann Fisher were waiting for discovery. Already scanned onto microfilm, the canisters gathered dust on rows of metal shelving along with the records of thousands of other patients, none as sought after as Margaret and Ellen Fisher. Noelle worked quickly, worried that unless she produced evidence for Alan he'd be on his way back to Texas. Not meaning to, she'd fallen in love with him. His pompous hot-air-bag personality was just the opposite of her pathologically shy, hesitant timidity. Whatever she could do to get him to stick around, she'd do. After their discussion about Margaret, a friend in medical records gave her copies of microfiche of all the deliveries that took place the nine months after Alan left for Galveston. In the basement of the library, they divided the film manually scanning each roll. After four hours, Alan found it.

"Here it is!" He yelled. Noelle got up from her chair and moved closer to him so she could peek in the eyepiece.

"Margaret Fisher, aged thirty-two," she read. Alan gasped.

"Thirty-two? No way," he announced. "She was younger than me. Keep reading. I don't think I can, I'm so nervous."

"It's her address. 85 Oak Lane, Saint Augustine. Secretary, Hartland Insurance." She skimmed unimportant facts.

"Okay, are you ready?" She pulled back from the eyepiece and looked at him.

"I don't know if I am or not," he said nervously.

"Well, you better make up your mind, because once you know for sure about having a child, it will change your life." Alan wasn't sure how Noelle would know about such things since she'd never mentioned having a child.

"All right. Read," he said.

"Okay, here goes. Live birth of a six pound, eight ounce female at two pm." She leaned back to look at him again and he was pale, sweat on his forehead. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. He thought, *I've been a selfish asshole all my life and now when I'm preparing to take advantage of yet another woman, I discover I have a kid. What the hell?* Before he opened his mouth, he came back to his senses. "Keep reading."

"There's not much more here, just what they did to her, and her date of discharge. It looks like she only stayed a day."

"Is there a name?" he asked. "For the baby?" Noelle turned the knob on the side of the machine as she scrolled through the film.

"Ellen Marie," she said. "Fisher. Ellen Marie Fisher." Alan was numb. He never thought of having his own kid. Now, here was this thing; he had a daughter. He looked off into space and tried to figure out how old she'd be.

"When was this?"

Noelle repeated the date. "She was fifteen in April." Alan turned to look at her.

"I have a fifteen-year-old daughter?" he asked, incredulous. His face was twisted, the handsome Alan reduced to the distressed Alan, all cockiness and ego swept away. "How the hell is that possible? That bitch! Why didn't she tell me?" Noelle grabbed his shoulder.

“Shush,” she whispered. “You left for the Persing Golf, remember?” Alan did remember; he left with Margaret’s ten grand. Capable of feeling shame, that did it for him.

“Is there any more to see? Because if there isn’t, I want to get out of here.” She bent over and looked in the viewer, scrolling through more documents.

“Nope, looks like it was a normal birth and she left the next day.” He pushed away from the table, eager to be in a place where he was free to explode.

“Now what the hell am I going to do? She’s nowhere around here. We’ve looked.” Noelle resisted telling him to grow up.

“Be patient, Alan,” she said soothingly, desperate. “I’ll think of something.”

The next morning, Noelle left for work and Alan set out on foot, walking to Margaret’s old neighborhood again. He didn’t know what to do or how to begin searching for her. When he reached the house, Margaret’s landlady was in front pulling weeds out of the flower bed.

Alan cleared his throat to give her a warning he was behind her on the sidewalk. She turned, shielding her eyes from the morning sun. “All full,” she said. “Expectin’ a vacancy next Friday, if you kin wait that long.”

“I came to ask about one of your former tenants.” He reached out his hand to shake, but instead she took it trying to get out of the crouching position and grunted, using it to pull her body up.

“Who might that be?” she asked, wiping her gloved hands over her dress.

“Margaret Fisher,” he said. She screwed her face up and looked over her shoulder, and then back, giving him the stink eye.

“That was a long time ago,” she answered. He launched right in with the facts and his lies, no reason to keep back a thing because it would give him more clout. A child always made a big difference in a sob story. She nodded her head.

“Ay, she did have a baby. Moved from a big apartment right there,” she pointed to the front first floor, “to a studio up on top. ‘To save money,’ she told me. She sold all her furniture. I bought a few pieces myself. ‘That table belonged to my mother,’ she said. I can show you if you want.” Alan was trying to stay calm.

“When did she leave?” he didn’t want to rush the woman, but needed to ask the questions as they came to him. The landlady screwed up her face again in thought.

“I don’t remember exactly,” she answered. “But the little girl been walkin’ for a long while already. And talking. She was talking real good.” Alan tried to remember the exact date that Margaret had contacted him about moving to Galveston. It was in late spring, thirteen years before. The little girl, little Ellen Marie, would have been about two, talking and walking.

“Why’d they leave?” She screwed her face up again.

“Let me think. She got family somewhere out west, I’m pretty sure that’s what she said. It’s been so long my memory can’t be sure. She sold all her stuff again, what she collected since having the baby and all. I do remember that. We made a deal that I’d hold on to a few things for her and if it didn’t work out and she’d be back, she’d get it. But I never heard from her again.” Alan was afraid to walk away from the landlady because he might remember to ask something.

“If I think of anything else, do you mind if I come back?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “And the same with me. How can I get in touch with you if I remember anything?”

“You got a pen?” Alan asked. She waved him to the porch.

“Wait here while I get one,” she said, pulling herself up the steps by the handrail. She went inside and returned with a pen and paper. He recited Noelle’s phone number.

“Anything you think of, don’t hesitate to call me,” he said. “And thank you very much.” He tipped an imaginary hat as he walked down the path from her house. He didn’t know anymore more than he did before he approached her, but she confirmed that Margaret left Florida for Texas thirteen years ago with a two-year-old daughter.

Noelle knew he was struggling with the new information that he had a child, but that was no reason for him not to look for a job, too. She handed him a section of the classified ads, possible jobs circled. “You need to keep looking, even with unemployment. The payments are apt to stop if they find out you aren’t going on interviews.” The next morning, Noelle left for work at five and he left Florida for good, driving toward Texas with one thought; try to find out what had happened to Margaret and his daughter thirteen years ago.





ELLEN WAS SORTING THROUGH a bucket of bolts in the garage when Frank walked through the door with the mail. “We made the city paper last Friday,” he said, digging through the pile. Pulling out the envelope from the Phillip Anderson Dance Studio, Inc. he passed it over to her. Frowning she delicately took the folded paper out of the envelope.

“Oh boy, this is an awful picture of me,” she complained, holding it up. “Look at how skinny my legs are. I should have worn nylon stockings. I’m too old for anklets.” She handed the paper off to her stepfather and they looked at the picture together.

“But it’s a good picture of you, I think. We make a fine lookin’ dance team, Frank.” She started to laugh.

“Your legs look fine,” Frank said. “But my paunch.” He clicked his tongue and they laughed together. “We’ll never be satisfied.”

“No, I don’t guess we will,” Ellen said.

“Do you have any desire to take dance lessons?” Frank asked.

“We already dance nice,” she said. “Keep that for my scrapbook, but no other reason.” He folded the article up and threw the envelope in the trash, Phillip Anderson forgotten.

While Frank went about repairing the cars that lined up outside of the garage and Ellen turned to her fiction novel, flipping through the pages to find her place, Alan Johnson pulled into the Overlook Drive-in in Mobile for lunch. He’d been on the road since Noelle had left for work that morning. It was getting hot already, too hot to eat in the car. The air conditioning hit his face when he entered. “Sit where you want,” a man in a white apron said. He slid onto the first stool at the counter although he had the whole place to himself. Pulling the greasy menu from the holder, he flipped through it and decided quickly.

“Grilled cheese and a Coke,” he said to the waitress, poised with her ticket book in her hand.

“Pickles and chips?”

“Just chips,” he said, glancing over at a booth under the window; a folded paper on the bench seat forgotten by the last patron. “Mind if I take a look at that paper?”

“Help yerself,” she said.

“Afraid I’ll fall asleep while I’m eatin’ if I don’t have something to read,” he said.

“Been drivin’ a long time?” she asked, putting a glass filled with ice down on the counter in front of him. She got a bottle opener out and popped the cap off a bottle of Coca Cola.

“Since daybreak,” he answered. “Got my wife off to work and headed west.” As planned, the wife reference would either shut her up if there were ideas of a possible connection, or not faze her if she was just being talkative.

“Where you comin’ from?” she asked, turning to look at the greasy wall clock. “Lord, that’s six hours worth of drivin’.”

“Saint Augustine,” he said, stifling a yawn. A bell rung and she turned to the shelf, his sandwich was waiting under a red heat lamp.

“Here you go,” she said, sliding it to him. “Mobile your destination?” Alan looked at her sideways. “I ask ‘cause we get a lot a travelers headin’ to New Orleans.”

“In that general direction,” he answered. “You got any tips for travelers?”

“Just be careful at the next intersection,” she warned. “We get people in here for lunch who make the wrong turn and then they’re back at dinnertime after wastin’ a couple a’ hours drivin’ around.”

“Okay, I’ll be careful,” he said. “Where’d they end up?”

She pointed over her shoulder. “Upriver. Towns up north. A lot of ‘em in Seymour.” Alan froze, hearing the name again after thirteen years, Margaret leaving the message for him that her car broke down in Seymour.

The bell rang and she turned to get another lunch order. Alan bit into the sandwich, the grilled bread crispy with butter on the outside, the cheese oozing. He reached for the paper, unfolding it on the counter leaving greasy fingerprints. It was Friday’s paper, old local news, but not to him. He read while he chewed, about unemployment and a murder downtown, rising food prices and the weather. Nothing important registered, even as he skimmed over the picture of a young girl and her father, dancing together at her graduation. *Ellen Fisher and her stepfather, Frank McPherson, dance partners at Longbow Middle School Ninth Grade Graduation.* The significance of what he read wouldn’t hit him until later, having already forgotten the baby’s name.

The infamous wrong road was a two-lane highway, dotted with abandoned buildings and small gas stations and an occasional road sign pointing to towns east and west. He imagined Margaret on the same road, not realizing she was lost at first, with a small child in the backseat. Driving north for an hour, he pulled into a gas station to call Noelle before she left work. She’d have to monitor her words and the time she kept him on the phone would be limited, unlike a call to her apartment.

“Where are you?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

“I’m going to stay here for the night,” he said, ignoring her question. “I took a detour from the main highway, and there’s a string of small towns that I want to check out.”

“Alan, it sounds like a waste of your time. It’s like a wild goose chase.” Something about her tone struck a cord; she was bossing him and he couldn’t abide by it. But he needed Noelle *and* her money if this turned out to be what she was prophesying; a wild goose chase and he had to return to Saint Augustine.

“Yes, well it’s all I’ve got right now.” He told her what the waitress at the restaurant said about people often taking a wrong turn, heading to the towns north, the familiar sounding name of Seymour. All he wanted to do was hang up on Noelle. He tried to remember the circumstances of Margaret calling him the last time; her car had broken down on a Friday and she would see him the next week. Did he hear from her again once she was on the road? He recognized that he’d used her like he was using Noelle, taking her money with no intention of paying it back. No wonder she didn’t tell him there was a child; he couldn’t be trusted. “I better hang up. It’s getting late and I need to find a place to stay.” Noelle was reluctant to let him go, she could hear the tension in his voice, the change when she criticized him.

“It’s not that I don’t think you’ll find her,” she said. “Just that it’s so unlikely.” There was silence on the other end of the line, but she could hear him breathing.

“Think of someway to find the child,” he said. “I’m hanging up now.” She reluctantly said goodbye, realizing after that she didn’t have any more information about him than his name. If he didn’t call her again, she wouldn’t have a clue where to find him.

“Wait!” she yelled, but it was too late. He’d already hung up.

Alan got back in his car and continued north. A sign for Beauregard, *Pop. 12,000*, larger than the other signs scattered along the road, directed him to make a right turn. It looked promising, the small shacks he passed switched to larger homes with well-kept lawns guiding him into town. The road led to a bridge across the river and on the other side of the river the houses changed again, this time into



brick apartment buildings and older, Victorian homes, some with elaborate signs in front announcing rooms for rent. It was getting late, the sun starting down its course, casting shadows and bathing what was in its path in golden light. Pulling into the driveway of the least pretentious of the houses, he got out his wallet to count his cash. His last unemployment check was seventy dollars and he had half of it left, along with a new credit card with a five hundred dollar limit from which he'd taken one hundred dollars. He'd better make it last. Not bothering to lock his car, he got his bag out of the backseat and walked around to the front door of the house. A large, hand painted sign said this house was Towering Pines. He looked upward and sure enough, towering above the high peaked roof were pine trees. The house had a deep porch with shabby but inviting seating interspersed with tea tables running the length of the house. A large window next to the door revealed a lighted desk at which a young woman sat reading. Alan knocked on the door and the woman looked up at him, put her book down and walked to the door.

"Can I help you?" she asked, unsmiling.

"I need a room for the night," he said. "Maybe longer." She stepped aside so he could pass through. The house was dark, the only light coming from the desk lamp.

"Ten dollars cash a night includes breakfast. If you want dinner, it's another five a day." He looked down at the floor. It was more than he wanted to pay but didn't think he'd find anywhere cheaper. She added, "Or fifty a week, paid in advance." Taking five tens out of his wallet, the place could be his command center. If he didn't discover anything in a week, he'd go back to Saint Augustine.

"Okay, I'll stay a week, to start," he said, looking at her for the first time. She was not as attractive up close, one of those women of indeterminate age, but she might be older than he thought; maybe more like thirty than twenty. "This your folks place?" She looked up at him, surprised.

"No," she said sharply. "Mine. Why do you ask?" He scrambled, trying to cover his faux pas.

"I'm sorry," he replied quickly. "I'm impressed, that's all. This is a lovely town and an impressive house." He didn't add what he was thinking. *I can't even afford to rent a room let alone own a house.*

"Beauregard is a great little town," she said, relaxing.

"What's the industry here?" She looked at him curiously.

"The *mental* hospital," she answered, amazed. "I thought everyone knew that." His original plan was to be honest about why he was there, looking for Margaret and his child. But his *nature* was to sneak around. Common sense caught up with him and he changed his mind.

"I'm not from these parts," he said, scrambling again. "In addition to the mental hospital; any commerce? I'm looking for a job." She turned to a stack of paper behind the desk and handed it to him.

"There are a few small places around, some hiring, too." He nodded his head to her.

"Thank you very much," he said.

"Your room's at the top of the stairs, to the right. Just three others here now; Mr. Rosen, on this floor, Emil in the lower level, and Miss Logan above the garage. Miss Logan owns the beauty shop in Seymour. On Sunday's she'll cut your hair free if you buy her lunch."

"Who's talking about me?" an attractive, middle-aged woman walked into the room from the back of the house.

"When'd you get home?" the owner asked. She looked at Alan. "I'm Cate by the way. This is Miss Logan."

“Just now,” she answered, sticking her hand out to shake Alan’s. “Well, you’re tall.” Alan burst out laughing.

“I guess I am to some people,” he said. He was anxious to get started looking around town before the sun was down, but forced himself to relax and listen to their banter.

“Can I make tea?” Miss Logan asked Cate. “The salon was steady all day and I’m famished but too tired for dinner.”

“I’ll make it,” she answered. “That’s the reason for tea time. Will you have tea, Mr. Johnson?”

“Okay,” he said, fighting the urge to look at his watch. “Where’s your salon again?”

“Seymour,” Miss Logan answered. “It’s upriver, a raggedy little town with one café, my salon, a garage and a crappy grocery store.” Cate laughed out loud.

“Seymour’s not that bad,” she said. “It’s just too far from Mobile. If you want to hop on a plane, you need to go to Mobile. Need a big department store? Mobile again.”

“I’m there everyday,” Miss Logan replied. “It’s got a small town mentality. Beauregard is more convenient to Mobile and it’s just nicer. I wish my shop was here.”

“Don’t let that get around,” Cate said.

“What do you mean by the small town mentality?” Alan asked. He didn’t really care, but was trying to be polite. He was back at *Seymour*. That name would haunt him.

“Entitlement,” Miss Logan said. “The old timers think they should be making the decisions for everyone.” A look came over her face, and she looked at Alan out of the corner of her eye.

“If you ever go there, watch out for the single-women,” Miss Logan said. Cate gasped.

“Oh my God yes, he’d be a huge hit,” she said. Alan frowned, but he was secretly pleased.

“What do you mean?” he asked, playing dumb.

“No single men in town,” Miss Logan said, hinting.

“Unless you count the baggers at the grocery store,” Cate replied.

“You mean the unwashed bearded fellows?” Miss Logan asked. “They don’t count, unless you’re Mary.” Cate gasped again.

“I don’t think even Mary would be hard up enough to go on a date with a bagger, Miss Logan!”

“Who’s Mary?” Alan asked.

“If you stick around long enough, you’ll meet her,” Cate said. “She’s a regular here in town, goes to the clubs and bars. There’s no place to hang out in Seymour, not for young single women.”

“Mary is not young,” Miss Logan said, sniffing. “She’s well into her thirties.” They looked at Alan, inquiringly.

“Forty-five,” he answered, laughing. “Is that too old?”

“No, it’s perfect,” Cate said, nodding toward Miss Logan. “You’ll have a huge range of pickins if you don’t mind ladies a few years older than you are.”

“Geez, thanks a lot! Besides, he might be married,” Miss Logan said. Both sets of eyes riveted on his face, hopeful the answer would be *no*. Alan was a rogue, always on the lookout for another pretty face, but he had a mission there along the river, and he wanted to try to put his best foot forward. People might be more willing to help him locate Margaret and her daughter if they thought they’d been married.

“Yes, I’m married,” he said. “But we’re separated.” Hopeful stares turned to compassionate.

“Oh, we’re sorry,” Cate said.

“Don’t be,” Alan said. “It was amicable and happened a long time ago. I’d like to move on with my life, maybe find a job here.” He flushed, angry that he’d said so much. Because of his big mouth, someday he might have to admit that he hadn’t seen his child in years. With his lie about being

married, he opened another can of worms. What kind of a father was he that he'd let his child out of his sight? He quickly changed the subject.

"So tell me about you both?" he said, not caring at all. He took a sip of tea and it had grown cold and tasteless. He put the cup back down.

"Cate you go first," Miss Logan prompted. "He's already heard about me."

"There's nothing to tell," she said smiling. "I spend my days making repairs on this place and cleaning the rooms."

"You must meet a lot of interesting people," Alan said, smiling. "And serve them tea in the afternoon." Cate's looks were growing on him. She was attractive in a plain, athletic way. He was guessing her age to be closer to forty now that he was talking to her. She'd be a good one to have in his cache if it rolled around to that. If he grew desperate again.

"Yes, I guess I do," Cate replied. Miss Logan smiled a broad, happy smile. She'd love a romance right under her nose if it couldn't happen for her.

"If you're looking for work, you must be planning on staying here for a while," Miss Logan said. The subject thrown back on him, he kept backing himself into a corner. Not really wanting a job, he just needed to keep looking to keep the unemployment check coming. But this wasn't information he wanted the world to know. His old ways of wanting to be front of center were not working for him this afternoon.

"We'll see how things go." He stood up and extended his hand, eager to get away from teatime before he said something too revealing again. "Thank you both for a fascinating afternoon. I think I'll go to my room and prepare for the evening." Miss Logan gave him her hand first.

"How long are you staying?" she asked.

"He paid for a week," Cate said. "We have seven days to drill him for more information." But she said it teasingly.

"I'll go back to my car and get my bags," he said. Noelle popped into his mind. He wasn't going to go back to Saint Augustine, but he wasn't going to let her know.





AFTER SUNSET, ALAN Johnson left the boarding house to walk along the riverfront. Restaurants and shops stayed open late, and the streets outside of pubs and cafés were crowded with bistro tables and chairs. Those lucky enough to get seating after an hour's wait were eating and drinking outdoors, people watching. Alan was in a quandary. He knew all he had to do was ask and someone was bound to know where Margaret was. It was while he was strolling along, that the name Ellen Fisher hit him. Ellen Marie. Ellen Marie Fisher. Ellen Fisher and her stepfather; the newspaper at the Overlook Drive-in. *Ellen Fisher and her stepfather, Frank McPherson, dance partners at Longbow Middle School Ninth Grade Graduation.* His heart was thumping in his chest.

Pushing his way through the crowded streets, he stopped at an open drug store and went inside, asking for a phone. It was at the back of the store, and he went in, shutting the folding door behind him. It was hot in the booth, but he didn't mind it, the sweat beading on his upper lip as he thumbed through the Clarke County phone book. He came to McPherson, grateful his memory didn't fail him. He pointed to the first names and went down the list; Albert, Cosmos, Benjamin, David, Enid, Frank. Step-father, Frank McPherson. He saw the address and tried to memorize it. Putting down the book, he opened up the folding door.

"You gotta map of the area?" he asked the pharmacist. The man dug around behind the counter and came up with a tattered map.

"You can go in the back room if you need to spread that out," the man said. Alan thanked him, nervous about being so conspicuous. Checking the index of towns, he found Seymour, the address smack dab on the river. It looked easy enough to get to from Beauregard if he just went upriver ten miles. He'd have to figure out how to get through that wood; Comstock Forest, a green area that extended from the address to a large tan area called Hallowsbrook.

"What's Hallowsbrook?" he asked, bringing the map back to the pharmacist.

"Why it's the state hospital," he said. "One of the few left in the country. For the criminally insane."

"Is that right?" Alan asked, intrigued. "Thanks for the use of the map."

"My pleasure." Alan walked back to the boarding house, and when he got there, he decided he was going to go to Seymour and find Ellen. He might not approach her, but he wanted to know where she was. He didn't want to call, either. What would he say?

At Towering Pines, he didn't go inside. Cate wouldn't know he'd come back unless she looked out and saw that his car was gone. He remembered the way to the edge of town and the state hospital according to the map. It was a winding road through what appeared to be a lovely, although poorly lit neighborhood. Reaching the hospital, he parked his car outside the gates at the river. He was going to creep along the banks past the forest. Dark woods didn't bother him, but river creatures did, so in the places where fallen logs obstructed his path or marshy areas ruined his shoes he cursed, sorry he hadn't changed them to a pair of sneakers. After an hour of bushwhacking through the black woods, he reached a clearing.

He saw her right away. The house was modest; a small cottage in the clearing and a young girl on the porch with her feet up on the step, her head resting on her knees. He watched her for at least ten minutes, and then suddenly she sprung up and ran into the house, yelling "Frank."

Alan turned back and trudged as quickly as he could back to his car, covering the miles in less than an hour this time. He drove to Cate's, happy there wasn't anyone to see his return, just in case trespassing was a crime. His shoes were dry by the time he'd arrived, and he took them off and slapped them together to rid them of the sand that clung to the soles. He tiptoed up to his room and it wasn't until he shut the door and leaned against it that he realized he was breathing hard, frightened. He'd seen his daughter. Ellen Fisher.

The next morning, he woke up as soon as he smelled coffee. Miss Logan and a rangy looking character by the name of Emil Magda were sitting at the large rectangular table, having coffee and scrambled eggs and toast.

"We help ourselves for breakfast," Miss Logan said. "Scrambled egg casserole with bacon and toast this mornin'. Cate does good by us in the food department." Alan nodded and went to the sideboard. There was a stainless steel pan with a can of Sterno under it. Seemed like overkill for so few people, but he supposed it kept her from having to serve everyone separately. Next to a bowl of fruit salad stood a toaster and a loaf of white bread. He decided the more he could eat at the house, the less money he'd have to spend on food, so he put two pieces of bread in the toaster and heaped up the eggs and fruit. He pulled a chair out next to Miss Logan.

"Emil Magda, meet Alan," Miss Logan said. "Emil here works maintenance down at the state mental hospital." Alan looked over at the man; was he a man? It was difficult to tell, he was very slender, and appeared to be tall, with shoulder length, thick wavy hair and brown eyes with long eyelashes, like a cow. Alan looked at the man's chest; he might have small breasts under his clothes. Wearing a standard khaki short-sleeved work shirt with a pocket protector in the pocket, he also had dark-rimmed glasses and dirty fingernails. His hands confirmed his gender for Alan; no woman would go around with fingernails like that, even if she were a grease monkey. It made him sick to watch the man eat, scooping up eggs with a knife and toast instead of using a fork. He nodded in Emil's direction after the introduction but didn't try to engage him and he didn't seem interested in Alan, either, *thank God*.

Alan anxiously waited for the man to finish and go to work if that's where he was headed, so he could find a way to get Miss Logan to talk about Seymour. Surely if she was a hairdresser in the town of Seymour, she'd know of the Fisher women. Or was it Margaret McPherson?

Miss Logan took a carafe of coffee off a trivet in front of her and poured a cup. "You want coffee, Emil?" He shook his head.

"Gotta get going to work," he said, pushing his chair from the table.

He put his plate and napkin in a bin for dirty dishes and left without saying goodbye. Alan slowly exhaled. The guy gave him the creeps.

"Coffee for you?" she asked Alan and he nodded, pushing his cup toward her.

"Do you work today?" he asked. She nodded her head.

"Yep, goin' in a moment. Sleepy old Seymour, the women there need to get their hair done just like the big city dwellers do."

She had no way of knowing that a sheriff's car would zoom through town on its way to Frank's that morning, looking at footprints in the sand at the river's edge and that she was talking to the very culprit.

"What do the women in town do for a livin'?" he asked. "Doesn't seem like much industry there."

"No, that's true. But we have the café and they hire two waitresses who've been there twenty years. Mary and June. And of course, the grocery; they got two women workin' the cash registers. Over at the clinic, Margo is the nurse practitioner. And that leaves the Post Office and Jessie the

postmistress. No one else hiring but me, and my beauticians come from other places, just like I do.” She smiled at Alan. “And you know what? They’re all single. Not a married one among em’, not a one. What do you suppose that stems from?”

“You must have a lot of bachelors,” he said, amused.

“Well, we got the baggers at the grocery; most of them homeless, too, or live in a trailer home down in Mobile and take the bus in everyday, and then of course, there’s Frank. But I doubt if Frank will give any of the gals in Seymour the time of day. He never did before his wife showed up and now she’s gone, it don’t look like he’s much interested again.”

Margaret was gone? Alan’s heart skipped a beat. He wondered before why the picture didn’t mention a mother. And the little girl yelled for “Frank,” not *Mom* when he frightened her last night.

“What happened to his wife?”

Alan tried not to seem too interested, or too eager, but it made no difference to Miss Logan because she launched right in.

“Oh, that’s such a sad story. I remember the day Margaret came to Seymour. She had the kind of looks that make everyone; man, woman and dog stop and take notice. The car she was drivin, an old beat up thing, died right in front of Frank’s garage.”

“Why’d she come to Seymour?” Alan interrupted.

“Evidently, she was on her way to some place in Texas and got lost. Travelers make a wrong turn back in Mobile and end up in Seymour, but Margaret was the first I knew of that stayed. Anyway, she had a little one with her, so Frank had her to wait over in the café across the street from his garage. If you ever visit the town, you best try the pie at the café. Any kind is delicious. My favorite is the cherry.” She sipped her coffee and Alan waited.

“I will definitely try the pie,” Alan replied patiently. “What happened next?”

“Frank needed a part for her car so he couldn’t get it fixed for a few days. Mary, the waitress I told you about at the café, also rents rooms in her house and arranged for Margaret and the little girl to stay there. Over that weekend she and Frank fell in love and she never left Seymour.”

Hearing this, Alan became livid. *It took one weekend for that whore of a woman to hook the only single guy in town.* He struggled to slow his breathing down so Miss Logan would keep talking; he wanted to yell at her but knew he wouldn’t get much more out of her if he did.

“When did they get married?” Alan asked softly, his pulse pounding in his throat.

“They waited a month. The town talked regardless. Frank was a bachelor and didn’t date much at all that we could see after high school.” She leaned closer and whispered. “There was even talk that he might be, you know, *sweet.*”

Disgusted Alan ignored her. Getting her to talk about what was happening in Frank and Margaret’s lives now might anger Miss Logan once the truth about him came out, but it was a risk he was willing to take.

“Their marriage has lasted all these years, so that mustn’t be an issue,” he stated, trying to get down to business.

“Oh yes, that’s true. They were happily married until she took sick. Spent the last ten years of her life in the mental hospital, right up until she died last March.” The wind sucked out of Alan’s lungs, he gasped, but Miss Logan didn’t notice and continued talking. “They were only together those few years and then the judge committed her to Hallowsbrook. Me and the rest of the people thought it was premature; it didn’t seem like they’d given her much time to clean up her act. But the judge threatened Frank, or so the story goes. Either allow the commitment to stay in place or lose the girl.”

Alan thought of what it would mean for a man to have to care for a small child all those years. He remembered Ellen's scream for Frank in the dark. He was her source of protection when Alan didn't even know she existed. Strange feelings of jealousy were trying to work to the surface, but he wasn't going to pretend he was something he wasn't. He might not have been involved in the kid's life even if he'd known about her when she was an infant, thinking back to a time when it was so easy to take the woman's money and skip out on her. She'd pleaded with him and he wondered now if it was because she knew she was pregnant. The janitor back in Saint Augustine said she'd lost her job; she must have felt desperate. At the time, if he was honest with himself it wouldn't have mattered.

He felt differently now. *Margaret was dead and the kid was his flesh and blood, maybe. He had to know. If she wasn't his, he'd be fine with it. But she might be.* There were new tests, blood tests that could determine almost one hundred percent if a child was a man's own. He read the paper, he knew about such things. Getting to the point of demanding such a test had to be navigated with finesse. It would mean approaching Frank McPherson. Miss Logan could fill in the blanks and make it possible for him to sound like he knew what he was looking for when the time came.

"How'd Margaret act that got her into trouble? Was it something Frank knew from the get-go? Or did it take him by surprise?"

"Oh no, no one knew about it. She was insane. Mary said she saw right away, but it wasn't her business. Now Mary is a busy body, so you can't be sure to trust what she says. I myself didn't see anything untoward. Right after the wedding, they stayed isolated out at Frank's place. He did all the shopping and what have you, Margaret stayed home with the child and did the garden. The garden is fabulous, by the way; you need a treat for the eye, go out to Frank and Ellen's and see it for yerself." Alan stifled a yawn; he'd have to keep steering Miss Logan back to the story.

"So when *could* Frank tell she was sick?" Miss Logan looked at him strangely.

"She was mental, not sick. If I remember correctly, she kept takin' off. He'd have to enlist the aid of the sheriff's office from time to time and they usually found her within an hour. But the last time she was gone over a period of days and the judge thought that was enough reason to lock her away for good. She'd already had thirty day stints and they'd give her drugs and electric shock." Alan reeled and this time she noticed. "Yep, you heard me. Even that wasn't enough."

As much as his curiosity was peaked, he'd heard all he could bear. He was a man, not a monster. He did have feelings of a sort for the woman at one time. Imagining her being kooky enough to have to be electrocuted made him feel awful. But he had one more question.

"How'd she die?" He was almost afraid to ask, but his curiosity got the best of him.

"No one knows," Miss Logan said. But then she leaned in and whispered. "Mary, Miss Busy Body, visited Margaret every week. She was the only one allowed to go in. She said she took her own life."

"She *killed* herself?" Alan asked, horrified.

"That's what it means," Miss Logan replied. "She was perfectly fine one day and dead the next."

"How? How'd she do it?"

She shook her head. "No idea. Don't even know if it's true. There was something not right between Mary and Margaret, you ask me."

Once again, she'd managed to shock him. Appalled Alan stood up. He'd heard enough out of her. He wanted to run away, to tell her she was disgusting, but the thought came to him that he better keep Miss Logan on his side in case of more pressing matters, like paternity questions. The Margaret Fisher he knew wouldn't answer the door without full makeup on; he didn't see her committing suicide.



She was looking at him from the corner of her eye. "You seem pretty upset for not knowin' the family." He decided to keep his ruse under cover for now.

"Well it was an awful story, Miss Logan. I beg your pardon if I'm upset by it. I cannot imagine what the poor husband must have felt, getting that news."

"Tell you the truth; they didn't make much of it. The funeral was simple; no one spoke on her behalf except Frank. Mary was the only other person who knew her well enough to say anything, and they didn't invite her to speak." Miss Logan leaned in again. "I thought it very strange that they put her in her wedding dress, too. You could see the side seams running along the front of her bodice; the dress was so small. It was a crime Frank didn't get her something more appropriate to lay in. Being a hairdresser and all, I looked for evidence of the, um, suicide, but couldn't see anything. Crazy people go to such lurid lengths to end their lives, I thought for sure her wrists would be cut or her neck; something dramatic. But there wasn't nothin' to see."

Alan moved away from the table and nodded his head in her direction, but was afraid to open his mouth. She was awful; the little respect he had for Miss Logan vanished for the time being.

Quickly going up to his room, he wanted to think about Margaret for a bit before he drove into Seymour. After he called Noelle, he was going to go to the café for lunch and hopefully hook up with Mary, surely a better source of information about Margaret since she and Ellen had lived with her for a brief time and according to Miss Logan, knew Margaret.

He couldn't associate the Margaret who would kill herself with the one who was so generous and happy back in Saint Augustine. It didn't meld. Was she that good an actress? Or did his poor treatment of her, the taking of her money and abandoning her push her over the brink? Alan Johnson had just the kind of deluded ego that would make him think he was worthy of driving a woman insane.

"Poor Margaret," he said out loud. "I'm sorry." He sat on the edge of the bed and thought about what he'd done with his life, the people he'd used, the lies he'd told. It didn't feel like he had much choice to do otherwise, always with an excuse. There was still part of him disappointed because he couldn't get anything more from her, now that she was dead.

He got up and ran a comb through his hair. He could make a collect call from the phone in the hallway downstairs, but he wanted privacy when he talked to Noelle, so he decided to go back to the drug store. Thankfully, the dining room was empty when he walked past, Miss Logan on her way to Seymour. The sulfuric smell of breakfast egg casserole lingered.

"Have a nice day," Cate said, sitting at her desk, startling him. Annoyed, he forced a smile and said goodbye. He needed to keep it pleasant in case he ran into money problems. It looked like Cate's rooming house might have to be his address for a while.





THREE CARS WERE WAITING for service when Ellen and Frank arrived at the garage the next morning. “Oh boy,” he said. “Busy day ahead.”

“I’ll get the mail,” Ellen said.

“Careful crossing,” Frank said, distracted, nodding his head at the street.

Ellen looked both ways before stepping off the curb. Going into the post office was one of the things she liked least about coming into town with Frank, but never complained for it was such a simple thing to do. Jessie was annoying in that she was always looking for a story. When she handed the mail over to Ellen this time, Ellen didn’t even look at it.

Jessie couldn’t help herself. “You got somethin’ else from that dance academy,” she said nodding her head toward the pile. “I bet they want you two to dance in Beauregard.” Ellen paused, trying to decide if she should laugh it off or give in to Jessie’s curiosity and open the letter.

“You’ll be the first to hear if that’s what it is,” Ellen said respectfully, hurrying out the door. She waved and gave Jessie a little smile so the woman couldn’t complain to the rest of the village that Ellen had been rude.

As soon as she opened the door to the garage office, Frank called to her. “Now I need you to run over to the auto parts store. Are you okay with going?”

“Of course,” she answered, forgetting the letter from Phillip Anderson Dance Academy. The garage was busy all day, and it wasn’t until they were getting ready to leave and Frank scooped up the pile of mail that Ellen remembered the letter.

“Oh! Frank I forgot. We heard from that dance place again,” she said as they walked to the truck.

“The academy?” he replied, snickering. “Such a grand name for a ballroom next to a pool hall. Read it to me if you want.”

She carefully tore the envelope open. “Dear Mr. McPherson. You and Miss Ellen are cordially invited to attend our June Extravaganza. Prizes will be awarded for the following categories...” The invitation listed the possible entries. Ellen looked over at Frank as he drove. There was a slight grin on his lips.

“What’d you think?” she asked. “It might be fun. Something different.” She imagined getting dressed up again and twirling around the dance floor, how good it made her feel to know they danced well together and that people admired them. In Beauregard, onlookers would be strangers, not the gossipers of Seymour. Picking up the letter, she started to read again. “Prize for the couple who wins First Place will receive Five Thousand Dollars. Fireworks will follow the dance.”

“If we won First Place, I’d make my own fireworks! Do you want to go, sister?” He was smiling now, pleased that she was asking something for herself, a rarity.

“I think I might,” she answered hesitatingly. “I can wear my dress from graduation.”

“Oh, I think a new dress is in order. This will be our first real dance in the city.” Not that Beauregard was a city. “It won’t make you sad now, will it?”

“You mean Hallowsbrook and all?” Ellen asked and Frank nodded. “Nope, I don’t even think of it, tell you the truth. When I do every so often, I just get mad at her. But that’s all. Not sad, not even sorry. Just mad.” Frank reached out for Ellen’s hand. They weren’t used to touching or gestures of love unless they were dancing. The squeeze of his hand had the immediate affect of comforting her.

“Okay then, it’s a done deal. We go to Beauregard for the June Extravaganza. I might wear my hula girl tie, if you talk me into it.”

Ellen began to giggle, covering her face with her hands. “Oh no, please Frank, not that tie!”

“You talked me into it!” Frank laughed. Reaching the house, they got out of the truck, happy to be home.

Once inside, Frank asked her to start dinner for him tonight. “I’ve got a call to make. I’ll just take a minute.” He’d removed a package of chicken from the freezer before they left for the garage that morning. Measuring flour into a bowl, she added salt and pepper and mixed it with a spoon, straining to hear what he was saying, but his voice was so low and he was speaking so softly, there was no point. She’d make fried chicken. The chicken preparation occupied her so that when he came to her, she jumped.

“Sorry for scarin’ you,” he said. He picked up a fork and pierced the chicken with it but it was too tough. Trying not to laugh, she’d fried a stewing chicken. “Sister, I think we might have a time eatin’ this, no offense.” She paused and looked at the pan with the pieces bubbling in the hot oil.

“What’d I do, Frank?” Ellen’s hands dropped to her side, and the look of defeat was too much for Frank, so he hugged her to his chest, stroking her hair.

“That’s a stewer’ you got there, that’s all. Cook it up good and crisp and we might be able to get our teeth in into it.” He couldn’t help himself; he started to laugh as he released her, putting his arm around her shoulder. They looked at the pan of chicken and laughed out loud.

“Leave dinner,” he said. “Let’s dance.” She held his hand as he led her into the living room. Putting the radio on, and as smoothly as if they were at a ballroom, Ellen fell into his arms and they started to sway to the music, singing along with the words.

From the field to the south side of the house near the riverbank, the embrace appeared more passionate than paternal, the angle was just *wrong*, so that the observer, cowering in the tall grasses, blood pressure building would make sure to spread whispers about the stepfather and his stepdaughter and their inappropriate touching around town.

• • • •

THE NEXT DAY WAS ANOTHER busy day at the garage. One customer after another brought their cars in for Frank, so that neither father nor daughter noticed groups of women standing at the edge of the building, looking inside at Ellen, or even the baggers whispering. After the stewing chicken mishap of the night before, they decided to cook dinner together from now on. At five, Frank came into the office.

“Bout that time, sister,” he said. On the way home, they talked excitedly about the dance in Beauregard, talking about what Ellen would wear.

“I think something with a circle skirt would be nice, something that will twirl,” Ellen said.

“We need to make sure it matches my hula girl tie,” Frank said, laughing as he turned into the driveway.

“I don’t think that’s possible, Frank,” Ellen said happily, getting out of the car. It wasn’t until she reached the porch and as was customary, looked off to the side of the house where the gardens were that she realized something was amiss.

“The peonies are gone.”

“They’ve just fallen over,” Frank said, distracted, unlocking the front door lock that was temperamental in the best of times. Ellen was looking around the yard, to the edge of the wood.

“No Frank, they’ve all been cut. Just the flower heads.” She yanked on his shirtsleeve until he stopped fussing with the lock and looked over to the flowerbeds. The peony bed was one Margaret planted the first year she moved into the house. Ellen tended the flowers with her until she left for Hallowsbrook. She knew the names of each hybrid, what their care involved, how to stake the stems to keep the flowers upright.

Frank looked up from the lock, frowning. “That’s impossible.” But Ellen was pointing at the cut stem ends, and Frank followed her finger with his eyes.

“You’re right,” he said, moving over to the edge of the porch, going back down the steps to the side of the house. “See anything else out of place? I’m callin’ the sheriff again.” Ellen followed him down the steps to the edge of the lawn where the annual flowerbeds started. Frank’s mother had gardens here, and then Margaret, and now Ellen and Frank.

“Oh,” she said sadly. “Look at what he’s done. All the roses, too.” Not a flower left; it was only mid summer. The garden was at its peak, everything in bloom, laying in wait for dog days, when the spent blooms would shrivel up and no amount of watering could make them return to the glory days of spring and early summer. *Whoever* had picked every flower head and bud. It was an ugly, green mess. Frank looked up at Ellen and took her by the shoulder, turning her around.

“He?”

“I suppose it was the man at the edge of the wood.”

Frank frowned, concerned. He couldn’t have her worrying about the stranger. If he in fact *was* responsible for the destruction of the garden, Frank himself would kill the man with his bare hands.

“Let’s let the sheriff figure it out, okay sister? You put this out of your head right now. We’ll plant more flowers until these plants bloom again.”

“It’ll be forever. He took the buds, too.” Frank scratched his head, not prepared to coax Ellen into good humor; he’d never seen her as distressed, even when her mother died.

“Let’s get inside and call the sheriff,” he said again, gently pushing her toward the house, wishing he’d made her go inside as soon as they got home. What if the perpetrator was lurking in the wood, observing them now? The thought sent chills down his arms.

Submitting to him, Ellen stumbled back into the house distraught. Why would anyone pick her flowers? It had to be personal. It wasn’t as if they lived in town and a passerby might take a pretty flower. No, this was deliberate. Someone had gone out of the way to upset her, the message of the culprit heard loud and clear; he was trying to frighten her. He guided Ellen into the chair that had been Margaret’s so he could make his call. She sat, listening to the droning of his voice, remembering when she was small, laying in bed at night and hearing that same voice followed by the light, musical voice of her mother, how safe it made her feel. She closed her eyes and imagined that sense of safety in the house now.

“They took a report, but there’s nothing can be done,” he said, jolting her out of a trance. “Send a car around every few hours is about it. I reckon we’d better take precautions with the house and truck at night. Make sure we lock the windows and keep the basement door bolted tight.

“You don’t think he’ll try to break in the house, do you Frank?”

“Oh no,” he answered, cursing himself for being so thoughtless. “Just being careful.”

“I was just thinking of momma, how nice it was when she was home. I think I miss her tonight.” Ellen laughed. “That’s a first.” Frank came over to her and kneeled in front of her, his hands on the arms of Margaret’s chair.

“I miss her, too, Ellen.

SALLY LOGAN LEFT FOR her salon soon after breakfast. The new boarder had spiced up her morning with his dashing good looks and interesting conversation, after no one else but Emil for a long time, and she hummed a child's cartoon song as she gathered her belongings, a new spring in her step walking toward the front hall.

"Someone's in a good mood," Cate said.

"It's nice having that handsome man around here after Emil and Mr. Rosen," she whispered.

"I hear you," Cate replied, loyalty preventing her from saying more.

"I wonder how long it will take Mary to discover he's here."

"Before the week is up?" Cate replied. Miss Logan let out a laugh.

"Jeez, that's even quicker than I was going to say. But you got it. Before the weekend."

"Have a nice day," Cate said. Miss Logan waved and opened the door to the porch, a blast of hot summer air hitting her in the face. The walk to the bus stop loomed ahead, but she concentrated on what lay before her. She loved her shop, albeit in the town of Seymour. The women who worked for her were her family, the customers from the town, her friends. Everyday was full of adventure. But she'd decided she was keeping Alan Johnson to herself. If his name eventually came up, it wouldn't be because she'd introduced it.

The air-conditioning on the bus wasn't working that morning. "Are you serious, Hal? It's ninety out there already."

"I'm sorry, Miss Logan, I'll have it looked at as soon as I get into Seymour."

"It's a travesty that the only garage for fifty miles is in godforsaken Seymour," she muttered under her breath.

"Sally Logan, I heard that!" Miss Logan looked behind her and Margo Portland was sitting two rows down.

"Now why on earth didn't I see you when I got in this hot tin can? Don't move," she said when Margo started to get up. "I'll come back to you." She was careful walking down the aisle as the bus turned the corner for the highway.

Margo slid over on the seat. "Why're you in Beauregard so early in the morning?" Miss Logan asked.

"I had files to take to Hallowsbrook and Frank's lookin' at my car."

"Gotcha," Miss Logan said. "I've got news. You have to swear you won't tell a soul. I'm not talkin' about it at the salon because I want to watch the scene unfold." She made a dramatic arc with her hand, forgetting the promise to herself that she wouldn't talk to anyone.

Margo laughed. "I hear you! There's nothing better than keeping a little bit back for yourself when there's a story to tell. Do you want to wait and let me find out on my own?" Miss Logan turned her head, shocked.

"You're kidding right? No! I'm bustin' to tell someone." She leaned in to whisper, although no one else was on the bus yet, Hal Baker was a known blabbermouth. "Cate got a new tenant and he's a looker. Tall, dark and handsome, goin' through a divorce, lookin' for work here." Although she'd love to take a shot at Alan Johnson, she was under no illusions; too old for him at nearing middle age. But she'd love it if Margo Portland landed him over Mary. Mary might be better looking, but she was not as smart and didn't have the personality Margo had. "I want you to get a crack at him before Mary does."

Margo leaned her head back in the seat and guffawed so loudly, Hal looked in the rearview mirror to make sure everything was okay. "I could never compete with her," Margo said, regaining composure. "I mean, look at her. She's stunning. Why didn't she do more with her life?"

“Her folks left her the house and I guess that little extra income sucked all her ambition up. She didn’t need to make much to get by,” Miss Logan said, sympathetically.

She didn’t add, *for someone with as much education as you have, you didn’t do you much better, now did you?* But she kept her mouth shut about it.

“Mary did okay by herself,” Miss Logan continued in her defense. “She certainly doesn’t let any grass grow under her feet.”

“She goes out all the time, weekdays *and* weekends, yet she never has a boyfriend. What’s that all about?”

A sly expression came over Miss Logan’s face. “Maybe not a *boyfriend*...” Margo looked at her, shocked.

“What are you saying, Sally Logan?”

“Oh don’t tell me you never heard the rumors,” she replied.

“I have no idea what on earth you are talking about,” Margo said emphatically. “None.”

“She goes both ways,” Miss Logan said, comically lifting her eyebrows up and down.

“That’s a lie,” Margo said. “It’s a bunch of gossips from your hair salon, jealous of her youth and beauty.”

“Now why’re *you* defending her?” Miss Logan said, exasperated. “We keep taking turns being loyal to her.”

Margo laughed again.

“We must be true friends, I guess. Mary is many things, but she’s no lesbian. I’d have gotten an inkling about it and there’s never been even a hint.”

“Maybe she’s just not attracted to you,” Miss Logan said, putting an end to the talk.

She knew for a fact that Mary went both ways because she’d come on to her. It wasn’t something she’d admit to Margo Portland though; keeping it to herself, often wondering what would have happened if she’d responded. It was material for nighttime fantasies.

The temperature in the bus rose as it bumped along, the women weary and sweating by the time they reached their destination in front of the post office. “Can you squeeze me in today? I just need a wash and blow-dry. The cut can wait.” Margo asked as they got off, waving goodbye to Hal. Miss Logan was grateful for Margo’s loyalty.

“Of course I can. When can you get away?”

“Around one, if that will work.”

“See you then,” Miss Logan said before she walked away.

Ellen watched the women getting off the bus from her garage office perch across the street. It was a familiar routine every morning; the men waiting to help customers with their grocery bags at the food store, Miss Logan coming to open up by ten, Mary walking across the street to start her shift at the café. The simple order of life in their village used to bring Ellen security; she was part of Seymour, her father was an important businessman, they were well thought of in town as far as she knew. But last night changed all that.

Coming home to her decimated garden so soon after the late night visitor frightened her caused something to shift, a sense of well-being exchanged with fear. Someone didn’t like her or Frank. A childlike confidence in which she felt she was the center of an adoring universe was replaced with anxiety. In her orderly way of thinking, Ellen tried to understand what possible reason someone would do what had been done to the garden; jealousy of Frank, anger over the unlikely possibility of a botched car repair, a classmate who suddenly no longer liked her. But the extent of the damage was such that her reasoning was flimsy. “Wonton destruction of property,” she heard Frank whisper to

Sheriff Dalton. Coming on top of the stranger who lingered at the edge of the forest, this was too much of a coincidence.



THE BOARDING HOUSE kept Cate Ashbury busy until noon daily. She was a fanatic about bed making and bathroom cleaning, going from room to room as soon as the boarder vacated even temporarily, just like at a hotel. “You should only have to do it once a week,” Miss Logan had advised. “Most boarding houses don’t even offer cleaning services; the tenant has to do it.

“Yes, and that’s how a house gets bugs. No thank you. I want to see what condition the room is in every day.”

After three years, Emil Magda had finally gotten it through his thick skull that he was going to keep his room neat or Cate would throw away everything that he left out. She couldn’t force him to bathe, but she did relocate him to a neat single in the basement when the others complained about his hygiene. Mr. Rosen was able to convince him to stay out of the dining room unless he bathed, and although there was some debate about his adherence to the request, he was less smelly than he’d been in the past.

Each evening, Cate prepared the breakfast items, making fruit salad, assembling casseroles or the muffin batter, starting the oatmeal in a slow cooker, filling the coffee pot and setting the buffet table. The next morning, all she had to do was pop the casserole into the oven along with the muffins and turn the coffee pot on. Occasionally, she put out little boxes of dried cereal and a tray of ready-made pastries, but the lodgers seemed to like the change.

Although it wasn’t formerly part of the rent, she started serving dinner, too. Unsure how well it would be received, she was shocked when the residents showed up promptly at six every night for their evening meal. Like breakfast, dinner had evolved so they could expect certain dishes on certain nights. No one complained and no one ever passed up a meal, so she must have been doing it right and she was able to increase the rent.

After she finished cleaning the private rooms, she dusted and vacuumed the rest of the house and started dinner. Once dinner was underway, for the rest of the day she’d sit in an overstuffed chair on the porch with her feet up on an ottoman, the latest best seller in her hands. But after Alan Johnson checked in, Cate couldn’t relax on the porch, worried he’d show up and see her being lazy. Changing her routine, after cleaning up the breakfast dishes, she went to her room and primped. Hair long and straw colored; normally, she wore it in a braid down the middle of her back. Wanting something different, she twisted it around her hand and pinned the bun in place, but that was *too* different, so she combed it into a ponytail. Applying pale lipstick on, and penciling her eyebrows in; small changes that made a big difference in her appearance and gave her self-confidence a huge boost. She didn’t do it until Miss Logan was gone for the day; she’d make a big deal out of it and embarrass Cate. Hardly used to it herself, she wanted to feel what it was like before she showed herself off to anyone, so she stayed in her room to read after putting a sign on the door for visitors to ring the bell, hopeful that by dinner tonight, she’d be comfortable enough to dine with Alan Johnson.

Mary overslept, again. Exhausted from partying the night before, she would pay for it today, in the way she felt *and* the way she looked. Sleeping through the alarm, she only woke up because the neighbor’s dog barked.

“Oh, Lord,” she picked up the clock and squinted at it, unable to see the hands unless she put her dime-store magnifying glasses on. “Jesus!” she screamed, hoping He’d help her get to work on time.



Since her shift started in fifteen minutes, there wasn't time for a shower or to do much more than brush her teeth. The makeup on her face from the night before would have to do with a little fresh powder and lipstick, her hair in a ponytail. Glad she'd taken the time to do laundry the weekend before; at least her uniform was crisp and bright white. Grabbing her purse, sprinting to work, she got there just in time.

"Not like you to come in without time for a cup of," June said. "I was beginning to get worried."

"I'm sorry," Mary said, stashing her purse under the counter. "I went out last night and didn't get home until two."

"That's okay. As you can see, it's dead around here this morning. How much longer do you think you can burn the candle at both ends?" June said, wrapping silverware bundles with paper napkins. "It's gotta catch up with you, don't it?"

"It has already," Mary said sadly. "Look at me." She stood with her hands out at her sides, turning around. "I'm a wreck. I lost more weight, and not in a good way. My hair is a mess, that cigarette I sneak every so often is starting to show on my face. I've got to pull it together."

"You still look better than I ever did," June said. "I meant playing around with your health, honey. Not the way you look. You're still the best looking gal here in town."

"Aw, you're so sweet, June. Thank you." They looked up as the bell on the door jingled, and Mary involuntarily gasped. "Woa!"

"You take this one," June whispered, giggling. Alan Johnson had arrived.

"Sit anywhere you wish," Mary said, and then to June, "Why today of all days do I have to feel like I've been rode hard and put up wet?"

"You look great, as usual. No worries."

"So what can I get you?" Mary said, handing Alan a menu. "Coffee?"

Pulling the chair out from under the table, he looked around the café and then up at Mary, who was smiling at him, more than curious. This one was grinning at him, and he took it just the way she meant him to take it; she was going to flirt. The sins of the previous night forgotten, Mary would jump back up on the horse that threw her.

"What do I want? I guess it's too early for a drink," he said.

"No it's not. How about a Bloody Mary?" she asked, pointing to her nametag. Perking up at first when he realized she was *thee Mary* he was seeking, he grimaced and laughed, imagining the worst.

"Sorry, but that just sounds unappetizing. No offense. How about a shot of Kahlua in my coffee? I can build up to the vodka."

Mary laughed and nodded her head. "Okay. In the meantime, the french toast is to die for. They put a little rum in the egg wash."

"Thanks, but I've already had breakfast. I actually came here to see you." Mary stopped and turned back to the table.

"Me? Why?" Her heart did a little pitter-patter; was he a cop?

"Can you sit a few minutes and have a coffee with me?" She looked around the empty restaurant.

"I think that can be arranged," she said, trying to keep the flirtation out of her voice and failing. "I'll get your coffee and Kahlua." She turned to get the coffee and Alan watched her, trying to drum up interest and failing. *I must be getting old*, he thought. For the first time in his life, he was thinking about a woman with something other than his genitals and it was a little disconcerting. He looked around the café, at the antiquated cash register, and the linoleum topped tables and vinyl covered bar stools. It was a throwback to another time, one he wasn't crazy about. He hated anything old and

moldering, maybe because of having lived in poverty most of his life. Why purposely choose to live that way?

Mary walked toward him with two coffee mugs.

“Here you go. Kahlua on the house.” Alan picked up the mug and took a sip, the egg casserole sitting in his stomach like a lead weight.

“Oh, that’s good. Thank you.”

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” she asked, sitting down next to him.

Her body language was making him uncomfortable; that was another thing. Anyone else would sit across the table to talk, but Mary would cozy right up to a stranger.

“I heard an interesting story at breakfast this morning,” he said, deciding to tell the truth without revealing his secret. “It’s just a coincidence that I’m staying at the same boarding house as Miss Logan.”

“Oh! Are you visitin’ the area?”

“Yes, but I’m looking for a job, too.” He looked around the café and then at her to prove a point, which she didn’t miss. “If I’d known about Seymour, I would have stopped here, first.”

“I rent rooms,” she said, smiling.

“I heard after the fact. But I drove to Beauregard instead. Towering Pines. Miss Logan and I talked during breakfast. Somehow the conversation went from bachelors in town, to Frank in particular.”

“Oh yes. Frank. So you want to know about Frank?”

Alan decided that allowing Mary to lead the conversation was better than conjuring up some outrageous lie to get information.

“Sure, we can start with Frank. Why aren’t you and Frank together is the first question that crosses my mind,” he said, pulling out the charm. *Feed her ego, it can only help.*

Without asking why he wanted to know, Mary launched right in.

“I’ve known Frank since I was a kid. He was just never interested. It hasn’t been for lack of trying to get his attention, either.”

“Who’d he date?” Alan asked, thrilled the conversation had taken the turn it had so quickly.

Mary thought back to those early days. Younger than he was, she wasn’t familiar with the kids he graduated with. But the girl, she remembered *the girl*. In love with Frank since she started kindergarten, when Mary saw him with Beverly Majors the first time it made her physically ill. It was the first week of high school and she was lingering with friends after classes, watching the upperclassmen walking to their cars. Frank always had the best car. He and his dad would scour the countryside looking for a wreck, and then tow it back to Seymour where they’d spend months tinkering and searching for parts. In spite of having an enviable car collection, since high school Frank drove the most unpretentious vehicles.

“Oh, just some girl from his grade,” Mary said, unwilling to relive those days in case old wounds she worked hard to suppress might fester again.

“He went away to school after graduation. Studied engineering I think. He lived above the garage after college and when his papa died, he moved into the family home. It’s nothing much; a cottage on the river.”

The derision about the cottage shocked her; a hot flash cruised through her body. She’d have given anything to live in that modest cottage. She twisted around in her seat and pointed out a window behind a row of booths.

“His shop is right there,” she said. “That’s Frank’s garage.”

Alan was leery about asking more. He didn't want Mary to get suspicious; he wasn't sure himself what his next move would be. Jumping right in, telling her Margaret Fisher was his ex and Ellen was his kid, well that might sound easier, but something told him it wouldn't be, that he'd better be careful around the likes of Frank McPherson. The man probably carried a gun.

"So," he drawled, looking at Mary with a Cheshire grin. "What's there to do around here?"

Mary tilted her head and looked at him carefully. "You mean like for relaxation? Or employment?"

Alan laughed out loud. "Both. But I'm thinking relaxation. With you. Would you go out with me?"

Mary wasn't sure about Alan Johnson. He was very smooth. But there was something about him she didn't trust.

"I don't even know you."

"Miss Logan will vouch for me, I bet. Isn't that her salon across the street?"

Mary nodded her head. But the last thing she wanted was for Sally Logan to know she was going on a date with the new guy in town.

"I believe you. Now just to keep it straight, I like my private business to stay private, and if Miss Logan has your ear, she's got everyone else's in town, as well. If I go out with you, you have to promise me that it's our secret. That woman has got a nose on her like a blood hound."

Alan started to laugh; Miss Logan said the same thing about her. But he'd remembered other, nasty things Miss Logan had said during breakfast, things that rankled. She might be capable of being vicious.

"You have my word, no conversation regarding our date with Miss Logan."

"So, what time do you get off work? I'll come back and pick you up. What will we do? You never answered me about what our choices are."

"Dancing. Everyone dances here. There are ballrooms all over the county, and every bar has a cabaret license. But the best place is Phillip Anderson's in Beauregard. The dance floor is surrounded by dining booths like they had in the old days." Alan's heart sunk; it sounded expensive and he was nearly broke. She must have seen his expression change. "Oh, don't you like to dance?"

"I love to dance," he said enthusiastically. "It's not that at all. I'm embarrassed. I'm here, looking for work." Strangely, she brightened right up.

"Oh, I got it. That's why you were asking about Frank! For a job, correct?"

"Well, I have spent my life working around cars," he answered.

"The ballroom is very inexpensive. Admission is only five dollars a person or eight a couple. They make their money off lessons and food. We can eat at my place first anyway."

"Thank you for understanding," he said smiling. "I'd like to take you out for dinner tonight. Eight dollars won't break the bank." He pushed back his chair.

"What do I owe for the coffee? I have some errands to run, but I'll be back later to pick you up. What's your address?"

Mary wrote the number down on the back of a ticket, along with her phone number. "See that street?" she pointed to a corner with Miss Logan's on one side and the library on the other. "I'm half way down the block. Say about six tonight?"

He took the paper from her and folded it neatly, tucking it in his shirt pocket. "Okay, six it is." Reaching in his wallet, he took out his billfold but she put her hand up.

"On the house, remember?" The doorbells jingled and they looked up as an elderly couple came in for lunch. "See you later." She smiled and walked to the counter to pick up two menus.

"Wherever you want folks," she said.

Alan waved and left the café, the sultry heat hitting him after the air conditioning. The summer weather was just like Galveston; humid, miserable. He could feel the heat radiating off the sidewalk as he walked to the car, almost painful through his shoes. Frank's garage was right across the street. He paused at his car door, looking over at the building, the front office window sparkling clean, the silhouette of a young girl sitting with her nose in a book visible clear across the street. He walked around his car and back up the sidewalk and a few steps to the grocery store. A bevy of unkempt looking men stood around, some sitting on a bench waiting to help shoppers with their bags. Looking across the street again, he could clearly see her. It made him angry that she was sitting in full view of the men. Wanting to get a better look for himself, he walked a few feet out of view of the garage before he crossed the street, trying to come up with a reason to talk to her. His car hadn't had an oil change in months. That was as good an excuse as any.

The big garage door was closed against the noonday sun so he was unable to see Frank right away. Opening the door to the office, a blast of cold air greeted him, and a beautiful, young replica of Margaret Fisher looked up from her book. She didn't smile at him, but her expression was pleasant.

"May I help you?" she asked softly.

"I've gotta Olds out front. Well, across the street, actually." He pointed down to the café. "Needing an oil change and this looks like the place."

She looked at a handwritten list tapped to the counter. "Frank can fit you in about two. Will that work for you?"

"Frank bein'?" he asked.

Ellen frowned, pointing to the name *Frank* painted on the door.

When he still didn't seem to get it, she slid off the stool and walked over to a door separating the office from the garage. Opening the door, Frank looked up.

"Frank McPherson," she answered, nodding her head toward Frank.

Alan looked at him, strong and handsome, probably younger than he was by a few years, and flushed. "Okay, got it. Sorry."

Frank nodded his head in greeting toward Alan.

"Howdy, bringing my car back at two for an oil change."

Frank nodded again and turned back to the engine he was working on.

"See you at two," Frank said from behind the hood. The girl was back up on her stool, waiting.

"What's yer name, please."

"Alan Johnson," he said, watching her write it down in neat small letters. Hair fell forward when she looked down, thick waves of auburn shine. Eyelashes rested on her cheeks and a small nose had a smattering of freckles on the bridge. She defined adorable.

"Okay then, Mr. Johnson. See you at two." She looked up at him, but there was no recognition on her face. Alan couldn't help himself, studying her face for that few seconds; he saw that she had his eyes and his hairline, a slightly croaked widow's peak. "Anything else, sir?"

"No, that's all," he said. She waited and he knew that if he stayed for one moment longer she'd be uncomfortable, so he nodded his head and opened the door to leave.

"You can wait, if you want," she said, misinterpreting his interest. "The coffee is fresh." Alan closed the door again.

"Okay, that sounds great." He looked at his watch; it was only a half hour wait. "I'd like that. It's hot out there today."

"Are you from around here?" She came out from behind the counter to pour his coffee and Alan was relieved that she was dressed appropriately for a teenager in rolled up blue jeans and an ironed

cotton shirt, not provocatively at all like most young girls dressed nowadays. Hiding a grin, he thought it funny that he would suddenly change his opinion because she could be his daughter.

“No, from Texas actually. Just passing through.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please.” He stood next to her in the small space, watching her thin arms perform the maneuvers necessary to fix coffee and there was something so vulnerable about her with her thinness and her pale skin and freckles, he got choked up without warning. Quickly taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, he wiped his eyes before she turned around, but she avoided looking him in the eye and didn’t see the tears.

“Thank you,” he said when she handed it to him. He took a sip. What was making him so sad wasn’t that she didn’t know they could be related, but if they were, what a horrible example he’d be for her. He had nothing to give her, no means of support. He didn’t even have a job. What would be the point of upsetting her life with Frank McPherson? If he did, it would be pure selfishness. But he longed to know her, now that he knew of her. He felt compelled to find out what he could about her, while something in him said to put the coffee cup down, make excuses and leave, never to return. But it was too late.

The door to the garage opened and a striking figure of a man stepped up into the office and extended his hand. “You can bring your car around now if you’re ready. The last job didn’t take as long as ’spected.”

“Okay, will do,” he said. “Thank you for the coffee, miss.” He nodded at Ellen and she smiled a small smile at him before he left to cross the street for the car.

“Oh look! There’s that handsome guy I was telling you about!” Miss Logan was working on Margo Portland’s hairdo when Alan left the café that afternoon. The women leaned forward, watching him walk in front of the grocery store, pause, and then walk across the street.

“He’s moving to Beauregard?” When Miss Logan said the new guy was handsome, Margo figured she meant *Seymour handsome*; that was any man who was clean shaven, wore a t-shirt under his overhauls, kept his stringy hair in a ponytail and had most of his teeth. This man was *city handsome*, black hair cut short, pressed pants, crisp white shirt.

“Well, he’s lookin’ for work,” Miss Logan answered.

“You weren’t kidding. He’s a looker alright.”

“I’m telling you, I can’t wait to get home tonight and have dinner with him,” Miss Logan admitted. “Even if it is Cate Ashbury’s cooking.” Margo laughed.

“I’m tempted to invite myself to come along,” she replied.

“You’re welcome to,” Miss Logan said. “Eat first, though. Let see, I think tonight is roast chicken and that’s usually pretty good so you might be safe to come hungry.”

“I was just teasing,” Margo said. “Can’t wait to get back to my place and put my feet up after work.” *In case Boyd Dalton, the sheriff comes by.*

Alan waited in the heat while the oil in his car was changed, preferring to suffer than to put Ellen on the spot. Remorse filled his chest; he was sorry he treated Margaret so badly; sorry he used her and took her money. Sorry he was such a failure. It was all too late to do anything about.

Frank opened the door to the sidewalk. “Your car’s ready, sir,” he said, holding the door open for Alan to pass. “Ellen here will ring up your bill.”

He wrote some figures down on a piece of paper and slid it over to her. “That’ll be fifteen dollars,” she said. Forgetting about his cash problem, Alan pulled out the credit card and handed it over to her. Ellen looked up him, apologetic. “Oh, I’m sorry. We don’t do credit cards.”

“Oh! Sorry, here, no problem.” He took fifteen dollars out of his wallet, cursing himself for not being more careful. No more spur of the moment purchases.

“Town talk says you’re lookin’ for work,” Frank said. “Hope I heard right and ain’t speakin’ out of turn.” Alan was speechless for a moment. *Who’d he tell? Miss Logan? Cate? Mary? And already the news that he was looking for work made its way to this man?*

“I guess news travels fast in small towns,” he answered, smiling. No point in being irritated. “I don’t have any car repair experience though if you have an opening. Sales are my specialty.”

“Is that right? Paul over at the auto parts store has an opening for a counter person. You want I can put a word in for you.” Alan tried not to show his disgust at the thought of the environment of parts. The parts department at the dealership was considered beneath the salesman because they weren’t paid on commission. Alan couldn’t imagine being an hourly worker again. Feeling like he’d been backed into a corner, Alan once again decided he had nothing to lose by just going with the flow.

“Well that would be mighty generous of you,” Alan replied, letting it go. Frank reached for paper and pen.

“I’ll give Paul a call and let him know you’ll be stopping by there this afternoon.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

“Here are your keys,” Frank said, passing them off. Alan took the keys, wanting to get out before they engaged him again. “Don’t forget yer car.”

He turned around and looked at Frank, who was pointing at the garage.

“Oh, right. Excited about the job lead, I guess.” Frank nodded his head and held the door to the garage open, waiting for Alan to pass by.

When the car was out of the garage, Frank shut the overhead door.

“Anything else comin’ in today?” He leaned over Ellen’s shoulder to read the schedule and then walked over to the window, watching Alan Johnson drive away, failing to stop at Paul’s Auto Supply.

“Looks like a tune up at three, and that’s it for the day unless a breakdown comes in. I guess I could go home and start dinner,” Ellen said. Frank turned to her, thinking of the stranger at the edge of the wood, the decimated garden.

“Stay here, sister, will you? I got a feelin’ about a breakdown coming in. I know, crazy, but just in case.” Ellen laughed, and nodded her head.

“Okay. I’m glad cause I just got to a good part in my book,” she said, holding it up so he could see the cover, a beautiful couple in a passionate embrace. He laughed and nodded his head, going back into the garage to clean up from the oil change and get ready for the tune up, knowing Ellen was safe with him.





DINNER WAS READY. CATE had everything set out on the sideboard, the chicken carved, potatoes mashed to perfection, hot rolls, corn on the cob. Miss Logan, although preoccupied with something she'd seen earlier that evening, tried not to allow the distraction interfere with her anticipation of having dinner with Alan. Dressed in her most alluring hostess pajamas, she didn't notice that Cate, too had taken extra care with her appearance and was wearing something other than the usual chambray shirt and jeans.

"Gosh, I don't think we should wait too much longer," Cate said, looking at her watch. Mr. Rosen folded the evening paper and put it on the table to the side of his plate.

"Who is this man that has all the women in my house in a dither?"

"If you'd come down for breakfast, you'd have seen," Miss Logan said, disappointed, tucking her napkin in her shirt before standing up. "I'm gettin' some food. It's clear he's not comin' so no point in letting everything get cold. This looks wonderful, by the way. Margo Portland almost came down here to eat with us so she could meet Mr. Johnson."

Cate stood off to the side, wiping the lipstick off her mouth with a paper napkin. "Yeah, well it's a good thing she didn't waste her time. I guess I shouldn't have expected him because he didn't pay for dinner. I guess it's my fault."

"Are we going to eat or not?" Emil asked.

"Get up for goodness sake," Miss Logan reprimanded, out of sorts. "You want someone to serve you?" The tenants lined up silently to get their food. Next to the heated pans on a cut glass cake plate stood a whipped cream frosted angel food cake covered in fresh strawberries.

"You went to a lot of trouble for us today, Cate," Mr. Rosen said. "I appreciate it. And I'm sorry I missed breakfast. I didn't feel well this morning, Sally Logan for your information. One of these days you'll find me dead in my bed and then you'll be sorry you were such a witch."

"I might be sorry I've been a witch, but I'll never be sorry I was a witch to you."

Laughter rang out, easing the tension in the room between the women, the disappointment slowly turning to anger. How dare he stand them up?

"Children, children," Cate admonished laughing. "Don't fight during dinner. Miss Logan, no one would dare call you a witch to your face."

"Gee, thanks, Cate. That really helped."

The banter continued through the meal, but both women would be up until after midnight, listening for the sound of a door opening and shutting that never came.

Alan Johnson snuck into the boarding house at four the previous afternoon, returning right after the encounter with Frank and Ellen McPherson. Cate wasn't at the desk, having fallen asleep in her room reading the book. He quickly changed his clothes and left without her discovering him, making it back into Seymour before Paul's Auto Supply closed.

The inside of the store was as depressing as Alan imagined it would be; badly lit, stacks of greasy boxes full of metal parts, serial numbers written in black oil pencil in bad handwriting. Rows of metal shelving stood so close together, a grown man could barely get through unless he walked sideways. The counter was covered with parts manuals, one for every car manufacturer. Rows of books from years past neatly lined the shelves at the end of the metal parts shelving, sharing the space with the owner's collection of vintage metal gadgets, having the look of a steampunk library. But the



coop de grace was the man behind the counter himself, the quintessential counter guy, thin bordering on anorexia, bad skin, bad teeth, fingers nicotine stained, hair in a brush cut, body contrasted contradictorily in a perfectly starched and ironed navy blue uniform looking more like a Boy Scout than a auto parts clerk.

“Help you, sir?” the man said. Alan noted that everyone in Seymour called a man sir. It was a little disconcerting because he was sure this guy was older than he was.

“Yes, I’m Alan Johnson. Frank at the garage said you might have an opening for a parts clerk.”

“That I do,” he said. “I’m Paul. Paul Sherman. Owner of Paul’s Auto Supply. You got experience in the industry?”

“Not in parts sir, that I do not. But I’ve been a salesmen in the auto industry for, well, for over thirty years now. Since high school.”

“*Car* salesman, is that right?” He drew out the *AR* in car, so that Alan wanted to laugh and it took all the self-control he had not to.

“Yes sir, car salesman.” The impulse to pronounce car the way Paul Sherman had was overpowering and Alan had to look down at the floor, pinching his hand as hard as he could to stop himself. “But I’m a fast learner. I know all about serial numbers so I think I could do a good job for you.”

Paul looked at him and scratched the back of his neck.

“Frank tells me you’re new in town. Have a date with Mary tonight. Is that right?”

Alan stepped back, shocked. Mary must have been the one to tell Frank he was job hunting then, not Miss Logan. He wanted to tell the man to mind his own fucking business, but he needed the job.

“Yes, sir.”

He gritted his teeth. *Why was he doing this? He didn’t want to work in a parts store, yet here he was, practically begging this prick for a job.*

“Look, Mr. Sherman, *sir*, can I have the job or not? I need to get over to Mary’s by six.” He thought that’d shut him up good and it worked.

“Okay, tomorrow morning at nine. I operate nine to five, Monday thru Friday, no holidays, no overtime, no weekends. Five-fifty per hour. Paid vacation after six months, no sick time but holidays that fall during the week are paid.”

Alan stuck his hand out to shake, a big mistake. “I’ll take it,” Alan said cringing.

He left quickly, hoping Mary would let him use her bathroom to wash his hands as soon as he got there. Paul Sherman’s hand left a trail of warm slime behind where he touched Alan. He was being obsessive, but didn’t care.

Mary’s house was easy to find, a smallish Cape Cod-type bungalow with a rambling addition off the back that looked like an afterthought. It was her personal apartment, which was separate from the rooms she rented to strangers. Parking in the driveway, he ran up to her porch and pounded on the door.

“Right on time,” she said, stepping aside. He was looking around agitatedly.

“Where’s the bathroom. I need to wash my hands right now.” Hesitating, Mary stepped away and pointed to a door at the back of the kitchen.

“In there,” she said. “You can use the kitchen sink if you want.” She didn’t really know this man and he was behaving bizarrely. “Is there a problem?”

“I’ll tell you in a second,” replied, stopping in the kitchen, turning the water on in the sink full blast so it sprayed the front of his shirt. Grabbing the dishwashing soap bottle, he squirted enough in the palm of his hand to do a load of dishes.

“What happened?” Mary asked, concerned. “Are you okay?”

It was obvious Alan was agitated and unable to control his response to whatever was happening. Her questions swirled in his head and he wanted to say the correct thing, not chastise her for blabbing to Frank. Certain his craziness was partly due to meeting Ellen, he pushed it down, it being something he was not going to discuss with Mary.

Vigorously scrubbing his hands like he was preparing to perform surgery, Alan doubted he was capable of pulling off any intrigue, emotions after meeting Ellen too close to the surface. His nature was to take advantage of people, not pretend to have meaningful relationships, but if he was going to reform, he had to address the betrayal of confidence with Mary. She handed him a towel to dry off his hands. “What happened?” she repeated.

“Let’s go in there,” he said, pointing to the living room. She walked ahead of him and that was when he noticed she’d changed out of her uniform. “You look nice.”

“Thank you. Now what’s going on? You’re making me nervous.” Alan was pacing, wanting to word this just right.

“It was my understanding you wanted to keep your *private life private*. Those were your exact words. Correct?”

“Correct.” But she knew what he was getting at, and he could tell he struck a nerve because she flushed, her tan complexion turning ruddy.

“I was taken by surprise to hear you’d told Frank we were having a date *and* that I needed a job.”

“Yes, well I am sorry about that. I see now that I was wrong. I shouldn’t have said anything to him. I guess I thought it would be helpful.” She was sitting on the edge of the couch, looking fetching in a strapless sundress, her knees uncovered, just a hint of cleavage. Looking at her defused his anger, causing him to lose his train of thought.

“Oh well, it’s over with.”

“What just happened? You looked like you were ready to explode.”

“Yeah, I think I have you to thank. Evidently, the only job in town is at the auto parts store. What’s with Paul Sherman? Now I’ve gotta *work* with the man. He touches me once and I’m outta there.”

Just thinking about the encounter agitated Alan again, and he started to pace. Mary put her hand up at her face as unobtrusively as she could and burst out laughing.

“Poopy Paul? There’s nothing wrong with him that a good scrub down wouldn’t cure.”

“And what about that uniform? He’s as polished as an admiral.”

“Air Force habits die hard, I guess. Listen, I’m sorry about everything. So you got the job? That’s good news, isn’t it?” Alan turned from her and started to pace again. The urge to get in his car and flee, maybe even return to Noelle, was strong. Noelle. He’d never called her. If he was going to turn over a new leaf, he should call her and end it, not leave her hanging.

“I guess it is if you don’t have to work with him. Mary, I have to make a call. Will you excuse me? I’ll run over to the grocery store. There’s a phone there.”

“You can call from my phone.” She pointed to the kitchen.

“It’s personal,” he explained. “I’d rather not go into it now.”

“Well, I’ll sit outside then. You don’t have to go back uptown.” She left the room before he could protest. What he was about to do was so foreign to him he hardly knew where to begin. Dialing the number, he felt sick to his stomach.

She answered on the first ring. “Alan, I’ve been so worried. I thought you’d get in touch before this.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm very sorry," he replied. "But I'm not coming back. I found a job and as soon as I get paid I'll send you a money order to cover whatever I owe you." There was silence for a moment.

"What the fuck are you talking about? I don't want your goddamned money! I thought we had something going. You said you love me!" He didn't know how to respond to her. They could go on and on. So he decided to end the call.

"Thank you for your help," he said. "I'm saying goodbye; so goodbye." And with that he hung up. He didn't feel great about it, but it was better than thinking about her waiting for him all the time. Now he could start fresh with... whomever.

Walking to the front door, he looked out at Mary sitting on the porch. She had nice hair, stylishly cut one length. At the café, she had it pulled into a ponytail but this afternoon, it was down around her shoulders. "Come back in. Thanks for the use of the phone." She got up from the porch and held onto the door he was holding for her.

"Is everything okay?"

"Well, yes and no. But I'm not ready to discuss it with you or anyone else yet. Is that okay? I mean, if it's not we can break our date and I won't bother you again. I just need time to take care of something, nothing sneaky, just private. Are you up for that?"

Mary wasn't used to men talking to her like this, caring what her opinion was, or asking her for something. They usually wanted only one thing and they took it and ran. This man might be interested enough that she'd have to sacrifice something. He was asking her to trust him and she had no idea with what.

"I think so. I'm not sure what you expect of me, but I guess I'm up for it. I mean, I hope you're worth it. I hope you think *I'm* worth it. We're just going dancing, right? For some reason, I'm getting pulled into your life and I wonder if that's what you want."

"Well, you helped me land a job, humble though it may be. If I have to be seen in a blue uniform I might not survive."

"Pretend you're a cop," she said, laughing. "Or in the Air Force. There's a base in Mobile." It made him laugh along with her, embarrassed.

"I think I'm going to insist I wear my own clothes."

"You can do that," she said. "By the way, I brought leftover beef roast home from the café so we can eat here. No need to go out and spend money neither of us has. I don't know why but being around you is making me think with a level head."

Alan frowned. "That, my dear is a new one. I don't believe I've ever had that effect on a woman before." But he laughed. "Maybe you'll change my luck."

"Maybe you'll change *my* luck!" she said.

"I appreciate the meal, too," he said. "But we can go out, now that I'm making the big bucks over at Paul's Auto Supply."

"I've got the food, so we should stay in and save your money until it starts to roll in again. What did you say you did in a former life? Something with cars, correct?"

"I sold them," he answered. "That's right. I'm a car salesman, or at least I used to be. I made an okay living at it until the market crashed. It's been a struggle these past months, years. Yep, it's been almost a year. They won't go on extending unemployment forever."

Mary waved him to follow her into the kitchen so she could start dinner. "So you came here to find a job?" He debated telling her the truth, but decided it was much too early.

"Yes, among other things. I had no idea I'd find one so soon. And not in Seymour."

She turned to him with a foil wrapped pack of beef. “How far in advance did you pay for your room?” It was a nervy thing to ask.

“Just a week. I can take the bus in with Miss Logan tomorrow.” Mary laughed out loud.

“Lovely. Fill her in on your latest dating escapade.”

“Is that all you’re worried about?” he asked, his voice husky, pulling her into an embrace. “You don’t *know* me. Why are you bothering?”

He’d taken her by surprise, no palpable chemistry between them until that very second. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “You’re handsome and funny, and I’m lonely. Is that enough fuel to start up a relationship?” Stroking her hair, he thought about what she’d said.

“In a romance novel, I’d be a scoundrel. I use women and don’t have a job. What more do you want to know? Wait, today I did make one change. I called a woman; I owe you for a long distance call by the way; I told her I wasn’t coming back. It hurt her, but at least now she can move on and not wait for my eventual return.”

“So are you saying you have women all over the country?”

“Well, no, not exactly. There was the one in Florida. I think the women in Texas know by now I’m not coming back there anytime soon. No point in opening up old wounds to apologize.” She laughed. He was waving his own red flag and she was ignoring it.

“Are you going to leave here in the night, too? Break my heart someday?”

“No, I don’t think so. I mean I might break your heart, but I won’t be leaving here. I’ve got reason to stay.”

“And you’re not ready to share it with me yet, right?”

“Right. You learn fast.”

“Oh golly, I really don’t,” she said, sighing. “Let’s eat.”

Sitting in her cramped apartment with the phone in her hand, Noelle wasn’t sure what had just happened. Sadness that he’d rudely ended their relationship so soon after leaving to find his daughter welled up in her chest and she started to weep. “Why? We were so good together!” All of the drivel he whispered while he made love to her came back; sweet words that melted her heart, made her feel alive and loved for the first time in her life. He did things to her body that no man had ever taken the time to do before, and her passion scared her, yodeling screams of pleasure. When she’d finish, he’d be smiling at her.

“Good, huh?” he’d whisper in her ear. Shuddering now, her hands over her face she burst into tears.

Because of it, her love for him was unlike anything she’d had before. She hadn’t cared that he was unemployed, that he ate her food and slept in her bed, used up all her gas and never offered to fill the tank while his own car sat idle. Lying in bed alone, the heat of a Florida night scorched her sore throat, the result of screaming. It would sink in after midnight; a man had taken advantage of her, again.

Instead of placing her anger on Alan right away, visions of her little son’s tiny face, stolen from her when he was just a few months old, materialized, shimmering like an apparition. She shook her head to get it to go away, the pain overwhelming, but it persisted, and left growing rage in its wake.

Fury that would fester until it was overpowering, offered itself up like a sacrifice. The next day it would fuel her; make it possible for her to go to work so she could fulfill her financial obligations. It would also nourish her creative mind, envisioning fantasies about how she’d get even with Alan, making him a scapegoat for the loss of her son years before. The ideas flowed like honey, cloying and slow moving. Becoming obsessed with Alan, the pain of his betrayal unbearable, a new goal was to

find out where he was. But first, needs she'd buried while he was available to her came to the surface.

Work was torture. As soon as she got home, taking a sharp knife out of the kitchen silverware drawer, she sat at the table, pulling her navy scrub shirt up and very carefully whittled the letter A in the soft flesh of her belly. Warm blood flowing down into her waistband and between her legs diluted the pain, temporarily transferring the fantasies of what she'd do to Alan, to herself.





CATE AND MISS LOGAN tried to keep it light during dinner, but it was obvious to them both that they'd looked forward to seeing Alan again all day and when he didn't show up, they were not only angry with him, they were disappointed. "Can my life be so friggin empty that a stranger has that strong of an effect on me?" Miss Logan admitted. "I better do something about that."

"Me, too," Cate said. "I even put my eyebrows on." Miss Logan burst out laughing.

"Look at me! I haven't had this thing on in twenty years," she said, pulling the fabric of her palazzo pants out at the sides. "It's almost back in style. Oh what the hell.

The next morning at breakfast, the women were back to normal. And there was no Alan again. "So, Prince Charming didn't come home last night."

"I wouldn't know," Cate said, lying. "He could come down the stairs any minute."

"Well, don't hold your breath," Miss Logan said. "I hope he's not laying dead somewhere."

"I'm alive and well," Mr. Rosen said, walking into the dining room.

"We weren't talking about you," Miss Logan said. "Although my next question was going to be where in God's name *is* that old man this mornin'?"

"You're new obsession didn't show up after all," he said, unfolding the paper. "I heard Sally run to the window every time a car passed by."

"You're an ass Rosen; I never did any such thing," Miss Logan replied. Cate was in the corner, drinking coffee and had to swallow a mouth full before she spewed it all over the dining room.

"Cate, with all due respect I heard *you* up all night, too. Now I can't wait to meet this man to see what charms he embodies."

"Maybe you could learn a thing or two from him," Miss Logan said, high-fiving with Cate.

"I'm not sure your man can teach someone of my repute much," he said, but laughed. "What's for breakfast?"

"Cold cereal and toast," Emil said forlorn, wrinkling his nose. "I'm used to a hot breakfast."

"Then move to a house that has a sous chef in the kitchen," Cate snapped.

"Cold cereal's fine," Mr. Rosen replied quickly.

The sounds of cutlery clinking against china and coffee poured echoed through the hallway as Alan tiptoed up to his room. He wanted to shower and shave before he started his new job.

"Listen. I hear water running. There's someone else in the house," Emil said. Everyone paused, coffee cups to lips and spoons in the air.

"It's the savior," Mr. Rosen said. "Hallelujah! We can get back to normal now." Fifteen minutes later, Emil Magda off to work and Miss Logan, unusually quiet that morning about to leave for her salon, Alan came down the stairs, bothered when he saw the door to the dining room open. There was no way he could avoid a confrontation.

"Well, good morning," he said, jovially.

"You missed Emil," Miss Logan said, smirking. "He just left for work."

"Pity," Alan said, relieved.

"Alan Johnson," he said, offering his hand to the only man in the room.

"Meet Mr. Rosen," Miss Logan said.

"Ben Rosen. Pleased to meet you. Cold cereal for breakfast today." Cate gave him the evil eye.

"Coffee?"

“Yes, please,” he said, pulling out the chair next to Miss Logan.

“So! We missed you at dinner last night,” she said. “Roast chicken. One of our favorites here at Towering Pines.”

“I am sorry about that. Got a job in Seymour and ended up coming back down here to dance with Miss Cook.” He purposely let that last bit out, without Mary’s approval.

“Miss Cook as in *Mary Cook*?”

“You got it,” he answered. “Met up at the café for lunch and hit it off right away. Got my oil changed at Frank’s and he told me about the job opportunity at Paul’s Auto Supply.”

“Wait,” Cate said. “You took a job with Paul?” There was a look of horror clearly etched on her face and not in a good way. Miss Logan was even taken aback.

“I don’t believe it,” she said.

“Yes, well beggars can’t be choosers and I needed something right away,” he answered.

“Surely Mr. Rosen here can assist you in finding somethin’ more in tune with your skills,” Miss Logan said emphatically.

“I don’t have any skills,” he said. “I’m a car salesman. That doesn’t prepare you for much of anything else.” The guests around the table thought about what he’d said. A handsome, personable man had spent his life earning his living selling cars and was now behind an auto parts counter.

“There are several high-end dealerships here in Beauregard,” Cate said. “Why not apply to one of them. We’d all give you a reference.” Heads nodded, encouraging him.

“I’m not kidding when I say that you practically have to have a bachelor’s degree to get hired. I was grandfathered in before the requirements became so tough to meet.” No one said anything, shaking their heads in unison. *A bachelor’s degree? Ridiculous.*

“It’ll be fine. Something else might turn up in the meantime, and I won’t be worried about my unemployment benefits running out.” Silence came over the group as they pondered what it would be like to be unemployed.

“So where’d you dance?” It was Cate this time, sad that Mary had already sunk her claw into him.

“Phillip Anderson’s. It was great. I’d forgotten how much fun it is to ballroom dance.”

“Mary’s quite a dancer, too,” Miss Logan said. “Where’d you sleep?”

“Sally!” Cate yelled, slapping her on the shoulder. “Mind your own business.”

“That’s okay. I want you to know the truth so there will be no reason to *gossip*.” He said this giving Miss Logan a penetrating gaze.

“I rented a room from Mary. I had my own cozy room right off the kitchen and was in my own bed, *alone* by midnight.”

“I guess you’d need to move in closer to the auto parts store,” Cate said.

“Yes, I probably will do that, although I know Miss Logan buses in every day, I would like to be closer to work. But thank you so much for having me here.” He pushed away from the table. “I have to be there by nine, so I better get going. Have a wonderful day, everyone.”

“I think I’ll drop in on you today,” Miss Logan said. “Make you uncomfortable on your first day of work.” Everyone laughed, including Alan.

“And I can give you a refund if you want to stay up in Seymour,” Cate said.

“Well that is very kind of you. I think I’ll take you up on your offer.” He jumped at it before she changed her mind, following her to the reception desk. “I’ll run up and get my suitcase.”

So that was that. Alan had established himself in Seymour, had made a good impression on everyone, and already had a job and a girlfriend. With these needs met, he could sit back and wait for



something to happen with Frank and Ellen because he wasn't in a position to make it happen for himself.





ON ALAN JOHNSON'S FIRST day in town, he'd returned to ask Paul Sherman for the job. Ellen and Frank were leaving for home together. Tired, she put her head back against the seat of the truck. Frank put her bike in back and had a sudden thought about running into the grocery store before they left for home. "We need a few things and I don't want to wait until Saturday when everyone else is doin' the same thing." She closed her eyes for just a second and suddenly opened them to find that new man, the one who'd come into the garage earlier that day for an oil change, standing in front of the truck, staring at her. Opening her book, she put her head down and pretended to read, but the hair went up on her arms the way it did the night the stranger was lurking at the edge of the wood. He was standing the same way, with his hip slung off to the side, tall and lanky. It scared her so she began to shake. When she looked up again, he was opening the door to the parts store and Frank was walking across the street with a brown paper bag of grocery items in his arms. He put them in back with her bike.

"That was the new man in town," he said. "Come to see about a job, I bet. Glad he took me up on it after all."

"Frank, hurry up and let's get home. I need to tell you something," she said softly.

"What is it sister? You look like you seen a ghost."

"I don't want t' say nothing till we get outta town." She was afraid he might get out of the truck and try to pummel the man, and then what would become of her? Unexpectedly, she thought of how alone she'd be in the world if anything ever happened to Frank. He was all she had. He looked at her concerned, but didn't press; starting up the engine and driving toward their place by the river.

"Okay, tell me will you?"

"That man, Frank. That new man. I caught him lookin' at me and it gave me the creeps, just like the stranger. I think it's him. I think he's the one."

Anger cruising through his body at what she'd said, Frank thought a moment before speaking. She couldn't see the man because it was dark at the edge of the wood. "What was it that makes you think he's the stranger?"

"He stood the same way, kinda with his right foot turned out so he was straight but his hips went off to the side, sort a sultry." She said the last slowly, embarrassed. "I've been reading romance novels."

"Gotcha. That all?"

"No, he's tall and lanky like that man. I guess I didn't notice in the garage because you was standing next to him at one point and sorta dwarfed him." Frank looked out his side window, smiling. She'd never referred to his appearance before. "I'm scared Frank!"

Quickly pulling over to the side of the road, he grabbed her hand. "Sister, I sooner kill the son of a bitch than you be scared for one second. You got that? You are safe with me, I promise you." He patted his hip. "I got my side arm here, don't forget."

"That's another thing, Frank. If anythin' happens to you. I'm alone. I got no one but you. Something happens to you and I'm an orphan, or worse. You best take care of yourself, please. Please! Promise, you won't do nothin' foolish, like run him over with the car or shoot him." Her wellbeing in the case of his death had never entered his thoughts before this minute. What *would* become of her if he was put in jail or died? She was right; they had no one but each other. The thought was sickening. He took

deep breaths of the hot afternoon air, feeling the sun entering his body with the oxygen, strengthening him, increasing his reasoning.

“I promise I won’t break the law. I promise you, sister. Look at me,” he said, gently taking her chin in his hand, turning her head to look at him.

Even when her mother took sick, she wasn’t this distraught. He got up so close to her face she could smell his breath; even after all day in the garage was fresh smelling due to the mints he always had in his mouth.

“Tell me you understand what I’m sayin’ girl.”

“Oh Frank, I understand!”

And she threw her arms around him and burrowed her face in his shoulder, just as the evening bus to Beauregard passed, Miss Sally Logan observing them out of the window, shocked at what she thought she saw and would eventually tell the world.

• • • •

THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER Alan moved out of Cate’s boarding house and started his new job, and Mary got up on time thanks to her new boarder, and Miss Logan got on the bus to Seymour again, Frank and Ellen made their way into town for another day at the garage.

“Feel better today?” Frank asked at breakfast. He’d made her a favorite, waffles topped with fruit and heavy cream whipped into froth.

“I guess,” she said, stirring her coffee and then licking the spoon. “Every time I look at that garden, it makes me sick.”

“Well this weekend we’ll see about puttin’ new annuals in. There’s nothin’ can be done about the perennials,” Frank said, and then continuing with his version of an Irish accent, “But we can have that ‘spot o’ color’ like the ad says.” Ellen burst out laughing.

“Okay, that will help.” They loaded up the truck, leaving the bike behind this time. There was no sense in pretending she’d ride it home until something shifted. For now, as long as there was someone out there who wanted to frighten her, the bike was out of commission.

“You feel okay about gettin’ the mail again today, sister?”

“I can do that,” Ellen said, jumping down out of the truck.

“Watch the street,” Frank said. New perils may lie in wait, but the old ones were just as dangerous.

Jessie was watching from her perch behind the counter. Already gossip had hit her ears, hateful, horrid stories of Frank and Ellen holding each other at the side of the road. All it took was one telephone call during a lonely night to get a bunch of biddies up in arms. The same kind of sleigh bells, which graced the door of the garage, hung off the back of the Post Office door.

“Good morning, Miss McPherson,” she said. “Got your mail right here.” She passed over the bundle to Ellen who smiled her customary, dismissive smile. “Got something from that Dance Academy again.” Ellen looked up at her, wide-eyed.

“Thank you,” she answered, hurrying to get out before Jessie could pry anymore. Frank was on the phone writing in the scheduling book when she returned. After Frank hung up the phone, she handed the bundle over to him.

“Jessie said that dance studio wrote us again.”

“Bother,” Frank grumbled. But Ellen felt a little excitement at the idea as he tore the envelope open, but passed the letter on to her with a grin. “You best read.” She hesitated, her eyes skimming the words, and he could see a little excitement building.

“Dear Mr. McPherson, Our popular June Extravaganza is filling up quickly. Although you did not respond to our previous invitation, we would like to extend it to you once again.” Her eyes stayed on the letter, moving across the paper.

“We should probably go,” he said, pretending. It would be good for her to have the dance to look forward to.

“Thank you Frank,” she said softly, aware it wasn’t something he would normally care to do. “I do appreciate it.” He patted her hand.

“We’d better practice,” he said. “If we plan on *bein’ awarded one of ten prizes.*” Ellen did a little jump up and down, clapping her hands.

“Not here in the garage, of course,” Ellen replied, laughing, the boogieman of the previous afternoon long forgotten.

“Glad someone’s havin’ a good day,” Paul Sherman said, coming in off the street. His voice competed with the bells attached to the door, Frank and Ellen laughing together when Paul looked up at the bells and stuck his tongue out.

“You’re in a fine mood,” Frank said.

“I got problems. My new man won’t wear a uniform. I got someone at the counter lookin’ like he stepped out of a fashion magazine. I’ll be the laughing stock.” Frank scratched his head, trying to hide his smile while Ellen picked up her book again pretending to read.

“Your new man being the man I sent over yesterday?”

“You got it.”

“Sorry he’s causin’ you issues, Paul. Give ‘em the ax.”

Paul looked at him as if the idea had never occurred to him. “You mean fire ‘em after an hour?”

“Yep, you got it. You made it part of the employment requirements, right? That he wear a uniform?” Now it was Paul’s turn to scratch his head.

“No sir, I don’t believe I did.”

“Well, I don’t think it makes too much difference.”

Luckily, the first customer of the day arrived and Frank and Ellen got busy starting their workday. Word got around quickly that Paul’s Auto Supply had a new employee; a very handsome, well-dressed, *single* man, and business picked up just as fast. It was too easy for the wife *or* the working girl to stop by and get oil and windshield cleaner from Paul rather than driving all the way to Beauregard or Mobile and have the privilege of saying hello to Alan in the process. By the end of the week, Paul forgot all about the uniform.





LIFE WAS TURNING AROUND for Alan Johnson. He'd never felt so positive *or* so honest. Working at Paul's gave him the opportunity to see Ellen everyday. He wanted to confront Frank soon because it wasn't fair to either of them for him to keep his suspicions to himself. It would seem like he was sneaking around if he allowed it to go on for too long.

Mary was still in the dark and he'd made the decision to keep it from her until he told the McPherson's. But he wanted to know more about Margaret, first. It would help him to know if she'd bad mouthed him or if Ellen knew anything about him. He could bring up Margaret to Mary without actually saying her name by repeating what Miss Logan told him about Frank being a widow. Hopefully, she wouldn't get suspicious.

It was early in the evening, before dinner, but they were already in bed together. It was during the first week he'd worked at Paul's, his routine falling into place. Staying at Mary's was more convenient than he'd imagined; he didn't even have to move his car. Just walk up a block and turn left and there was work. Paul was patient with him after he recovered from the day of the uniform confrontation. It was easy to cross-reference parts with the books. A college kid did the packing and shipping and Paul did the deliveries. Counter business had picked up so much that Paul needed Alan more than he'd thought. On those first evenings after work, he'd walk back to Mary's and she'd already be home, dinner on the table. And although he was renting a room from her, it was just a matter of time before he'd be in her bed. Getting annoyed because it was taking him so long to make a pass, Mary took matters into her own hands and met him at the door in a negligee, naked underneath.

One night, after they'd had sex, he was resting on his back with his eyes closed while she twiddled a strand of his hair when the opportunity arose to start talking about Frank.

"I never thanked you for telling Frank I needed a job," he said. "It's worked out well."

"No, you never did. You were angry with me," she replied.

"Sorry, no malice intended."

"What'd you think of Frank and his kid?" He'd heard a hint of derision in her voice and opened up an eye to look at her, but she seemed peaceful enough.

"They seem like a very nice family," Alan said, surprised he was feeling defensive. If anything, he should loath Frank.

"Ha! I think they have a very strange relationship." Alan got up on his side to face her.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. "They appeared to be very loving and normal." Not that he'd know what normal was if it slapped him in the face.

"You know Ellen isn't his kid, right?" Mary asked.

Alan debated for a quick second. Did Miss Logan tell him that?

"No, I didn't know. Who's her father?" Alan replied.

As quick as if he'd flipped a light switch, Mary recognized something she'd forgotten from years past.

"No one knows, except....his name is Alan. Oh my God, I just remembered that Margaret, that's Frank's wife, Ellen's mother, told me his name is Alan. 'Alan's okay,' she said. Wow, what a coincidence."

Mary had leaned back and was looking at him intently.

"Lot of men named Alan," he said, hoping that was the extent of what Margaret had told her.

No matter what, he was not divulging the truth until the McPherson's knew. There was just no way in hell.

"What happened to her?" Alan asked.

Mary was getting up from the bed.

"Who?" she asked, confused.

Alan laid back down and started to laugh. "Margaret. Frank's wife. You okay?" he asked.

Mary laughed. "Yes, just a little discombobulated."

"What happened to Frank's wife?"

"She died," Mary said. "Word is she kilt herself over at Hallowsbrook."

Even though Alan heard that story, the words still stabbed him in the chest when she repeated them.

"That must have been awful for the family," he said. But Mary smirked.

"Just between you and me, it was a blessing. It had to be a relief for Frank, too. His life already revolved around takin' care of her kid, at least now he didn't have to carry the stigma of having a crazy woman for a wife, and trust me, she was nuts."

No angel himself, Alan was still appalled at the attitude of the women he'd encountered. First Miss Logan and now Mary. It must be an Alabama thing, or maybe they were glad Frank was free so they could have a shot at him.

"How'd she do it?" Alan asked softly, not really wanting to know, but thinking for the first time that this was the mother of his child they were talking about, not some insane stranger.

Mary slipped on underpants and dug through her drawer for a bra. Putting her arms through the straps, she struggled to get the thing hooked. "I don't know. We were never told and you couldn't see any marks on her body."

Alan watched her dress, feeling compassion for her, not because she wasn't attractive; she was very nice looking. But she was getting older, hearing her biological clock ticking, and he was sure, hoping he was the answer.

"I wonder why someone wasn't watching out for her, some nurse. Is it that easy for a patient to take her own life? I wonder if they'll sue. How'd the daughter take it?"

Mary stopped and looked at him, the expression on her face unreadable. Worried he might have asked one too many questions, he waited.

"You couldn't tell there'd been a loss, doesn't that explain it? It was like, oh well, another day. I was embarrassed for Margaret, to tell you the truth."

"How long was she put away? I mean in Hallowsbrook?" Mary turned to her dresser, her head down so although Alan tried to read her expression, she was hiding it from view.

"For a long time. Since Ellen was in kindergarten. So let's see, she's fifteen now. So ten years."

"So she just died?" Alan said, sitting up.

He knew that, Miss Logan had told him, but hearing it again, after meeting Ellen and Frank, the reality that they'd just had a horrible loss a short time ago made it more heartbreaking. *Margaret, I'm sorry.*

"In March. So not *just*. Like I said, she'd been away for so long that it wasn't that different for everyone. There was no longer a patient we had to visit. That was the biggest change."

"Did *you* visit her?"

"Yes," Mary said shortly. "This conversation is a bummer! We just made love and now were talking about Margaret. I'm ready for a change."



“Okay, no problem,” Alan replied, but he didn’t miss the look Mary was giving him, the corners of her mouth turned down, starting at him intently. And he wanted to know about the visits to Hallowsbrook. “I just asked because of Frank getting me the job and all.”

He watched her dressing, bending over to put her slacks on, mouth set; something had upset her, or angered her. Experience with women taught him that unless he really wanted to know, it was best to leave those uncertainties alone. However, if he was going to find out more about Margaret, he realized he was going to have to do a little ass-kissing.

He got up out of bed, naked. “Come here. I can see you’re upset. What just happened? We were having a great conversation.” He took her in his arms and could feel her relaxing under his care. He rubbed her back and finding her bra, unhooked it.

“What are you doing?” she murmured, smiling.

“Do you need to ask?” Leading her back to the bed, he set her down on the edge and started to unbutton her pants. He’d do it to her again, give her a lot of attention, and then maybe she’d talk more about Margaret. It was an exhausting way to get information, and getting more difficult the older he got.

“I’m sorry I got all pissy with you,” she said.

“What happened? You must be upset about Margaret being gone.” The expression on her face changed again, this time he was certain of it. But she was struggling to overcome whatever it was.

“I was upset. When she came here, I helped her out. I gave her a place to stay. She was my friend. And when they put her away, I was the only outsider the family allowed to visit her. I loved Margaret, Alan. I loved her more than I’d ever loved a friend before. She was like a sister to me, but more. To see her check out like that, well it was hard, I won’t deny it.” Mary wasn’t telling the whole truth yet because it was too difficult to dredge up those feeling and he wouldn’t understand, anyway. Men were like voyeurs; they wanted details that titillated, but weren’t interested in the rest. “Me and Margaret had a connection that was more than friendship. Of course it hurt when she left.”

“Did you play a part in helping out Frank with Ellen?”

“You mean, like a substitute mother? No. Well at first I did when she’d go away for a short stay. But not when she was committed. He wouldn’t allow it and Ellen didn’t want it. To this day, she barely will make eye contact with me. Frankly, I think whatever is going on over there is disgusting.”

“You can’t be serious,” Alan said.

“I am very serious. It’s gotten worse since Margaret died.”

“Those are some pretty drastic accusations to make.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“I haven’t made them to anyone but you,” she said.

It wasn’t exactly true. She shared her suspicions with Miss Logan as well as Jessie Brewer. They agreed that things didn’t look right over at the McPherson’s.

“A little bit too much togetherness,” Jessie said. “You ask me, the child should a’ been removed from the home the minute the mother was committed.”

“Where would she have gone?” Mary asked.

“She never told no one about the dad, ‘cept maybe Frank for all we know, and he never says nothin’,” Jessie answered. “You ask me, someone should *a*’ forced him to come clean. Get the *real* dad involved.”

“You ever see those two dance together? God Lord, it is beautiful,” Miss Logan said, feeling guilty. “They fit together like a hand and glove, gliding around the dance floor in perfect time. It is a sight to behold.”

“That’s another thing,” Mary said. “What’s with the father and daughter dancing? Where do they do it? At home, alone? It’s not right.”

“You’re jealous,” Miss Logan said. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again.”

• • • •

BUT AFTER SEEING THE familiar truck pulled over with the father and daughter embracing, appearing to kiss, Miss Logan was no longer certain Mary’s allegations were due to jealousy.

That night at dinner, she was out of sorts. She’d peered out the window of the salon all week, watching every move Ellen and Frank made and there was never anything out of line. She saw them talk and laugh, watched Frank as he watched Ellen crossing the street to pick up the mail like the concerned father always did. One thing out of the ordinary was that Ellen no longer rode her bike home at four like she used to do the previous weeks after school was out. “Why doesn’t Ellen ride her bike home anymore?” she asked Margo Portland, finally in for that haircut.

“Boyd told me they had trespassers out at the cottage. Twice. I bet Frank’s afraid to let her ride anymore.”

Miss Logan stopped cutting Margo’s hair, scissors and comb poised over her head, looking at her in the mirror.

“Boyd Dalton told you that?”

“Yes, and if you tell anyone, I swear to God Sally Logan, not only will I never speak to you again, I’ll tell everyone I got ringworm from your combs.”

Miss Logan pushed her in the back.

“I’ll sue your ass, you lie about my place. Since when do you talk to Boyd?”

“He comes into the clinic,” Margo said. “Just like any patient does. And that’s privileged, too.”

“And he just happened to tell you about going out to Frank’s.”

“That’s right, Sally. That’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.” But Miss Logan was not convinced.

“I think you’re seeing him and trying to keep it on the QT.”

“Out of all the people in the world, you are the last one I would tell if I was seeing our revered married sheriff.”

“Well, are you?” Miss Logan spun Margo around in the chair. “Why’s your face all red?”

“Yes, I’m seeing him!” Margo cried furious with herself for being so weak. Now everyone in town would know and it would just be a matter of time before Boyd heard it and would break it off before his wife, an absolute moron of a woman found out.

“Oh, my *God*,” Miss Logan said, shaking her head. “But I can see why he would stray. His wife is awful. She’s involved with every Girl Scout, Boy Scout, 4H, fund raising crap there is. She even teaches Sunday School over at the Methodist Church. And you are so sweet. I can absolutely see why Boyd would go for you.”

“You can?”

“Of course, I can. How long have we known each other?” Miss Logan stopped cutting again and was standing with both hands on her hips, scissors dangerously pointed out to the side.

“Forever. Since we were kids.”

“Well, you were a kid and I was old enough to babysit you. But my point is that I really do care for you Margo. You’re one of my true friends. I actually have a worry that I need to talk to you about. You bein’ a healthcare professional and all.” Relieved that the topic was changed, Margo encouraged her to speak up.

“There’s nothing we can’t share, obviously,” she said.

“Well, I was on the bus, you see, so I can’t say what I saw was well, exactly what I *thought* I saw. And others have been talkin’ about it. Jessie and Mary.” Margo rolled her eyeballs.

“Sally, those two are the worst story tellers. I wouldn’t believe a thing either one said.”

“Well, here’s the thing. I listened to what they said, and then I saw.”

“What is it?”

“Talkin’ about Frank and Ellen,” Miss Logan said, putting her hands down again. Margo looked up at her, frowning.

“Saying what?”

“Well, you know,” she whispered. “That things ain’t right over there since Margaret died and all.”

“How do you mean?” Margo *thought* she knew what her friend was driving at, but wanted her to say it out loud. Because if it was what she thought Miss Logan was trying to say, she’d have to report it. She could lose her nursing license for keeping quiet about an accusation like that. It was child endangerment.

“Frank and Ellen.”

“Sally, what about them? You have to say it to me. I’m not guessing.”

“Well, I saw them together.” Margo looked up at her again. Miss Logan paused, deliberating. “They were parked in that truck of Frank’s. At the side of the road. I was in the bus, passing by, and they was turned to each other, her arms around his neck. They looked like they was kissin’.” Margo turned back to looking out of the window. The idea that Frank and Ellen were in any kind of perverse relationship was completely improbable. But now that Miss Logan had put the idea out into the universe, Margo had to act. She’d have to tell Boyd as the sheriff, not as her lover.

“Is that it? Was there anything else?”

“Mary claims to have seen them together the other night. Claims she was walking down by the river and just happened upon Frank’s cottage and they was in the living room in an embrace. She said they were standing together, kissing.”

“I don’t believe it,” Margo said, furious.

“I didn’t either,” Miss Logan said, passionately. “That is until I seen with my own eyes.” She put the comb and scissors down. “You ain’t going ta say anything, are you?”

“Sally, I have to now. I’m a registered nurse. You’ve just made an accusation of child endangerment. Ellen could be at risk if what you are saying is true. It has to be investigated. I think it’s nothing, that it’s innocent, but we won’t know until Boyd looks into it.”

“Boyd? Oh my God, Boyd?”

“He’s the sheriff, for Christ’s sake. Who did you think I was going to tell? Pastor Marks?”

“Oh this is terrible. Now Frank is going to be angry with me.”

“He won’t know, and if you’re smart, you’ll stop passing that awful story Mary is telling around. Nip it in the bud, Sally Logan. There’s a lot at stake here. And will you please finish cutting my hair?”

Hands shaking, angry at herself for being such a gossip, Miss Logan picked up the scissor and comb again and slowly and carefully finished cutting Margo Portland’s hair.





AFTER GETTING ONE OF the worst haircuts she'd ever had, Margo left Miss Logan's Beauty Salon in a quandary. She needed to act right away, just in case Ellen really was in danger. It sounded perfectly innocent to her, but if it wasn't and something happened to Ellen, she'd never forgive herself. It was safer to make the call to Boyd from work rather than her house; she went back to the office. She hated being in the office alone, it was depressing in the daylight. Shutting the shades, locking the door, her palms were sweating as she dialed his number. Dispatch would put her call through to the house and hopefully his wife, Carol wouldn't answer.

"Seymour dispatch," the officer said.

"This is Margo Portland from the medical office calling for the sheriff. I have to report a possible case of child abuse."

"Hold on Miss Portland and I'll ring his number for you." A few seconds later, Boyd answered.

"What's going on?"

"I was in Miss Logan's this evening and got an earful. I'll tell you what was said and you can take it from there."

"Okay, I'm listening." Margo detailed everything Miss Logan told her, and added what she'd said about Jessie Brewer and Mary Cook, as well. "And I just remembered at the ninth grade dance, Mary alluding to there being something inappropriate going on between father and daughter." There was silence on the other end of the line. Finally, he spoke.

"You realize this is all bull shit right?"

"Oh, I know that," Margo answered. "It's too bad for Frank. Miss Logan told me and now I'm passing it on to you."

"Shit rolls down hill," Boyd said.

"And in this case, you're at the bottom of the hill. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll take a ride over to the cottage tonight and talk to Frank."

"Okay, well I'm sorry."

Then whispering into the phone, Boyd arranged to see her later. "I'll come around after I'm finished."

"Okay," she said, knowing it was wrong, sorry she ever said she'd get her hair cut after work.

Boyd went back into the kitchen where his family was gathered for dinner. "I've got to go out for a bit," he said. "Riding out to the McPherson place."

"Again?" Carol Dalton said. "Margo Portland going to be there?"

"No, not this time," he said, kissing her cheek. "You're welcome to come if you want."

"I'll pass. Say hi to Frank for me," she said, hiding her middle finger extended in the folds of her apron. That piece of shit was going to see Margo sometime that night, she was sure of it. But there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

"Hey," he said when he got out in the hall. "Come here a minute." She thought maybe he was going to hug her, but he had something else in mind.

"What is it?"

"You ever hear any gossip about Frank and Ellen?"

Carol looked into his eyes and she could see that he was serious, and what he was referring to.

“Like real gossip? Or just crap. ‘Something’s not right over at Frank’s...’ that sort of thing?” Their daughters were good friends of Ellen’s.

“Right, that sort of thing.”

“Well, yes. But it *is* crap, you know that and I know that. He loves that kid as if she was his own. I can’t imagine him doing anything to her anymore than I could hurt my own kids. Or you. It’s inconceivable.”

“That’s what I think. But the accusation has been made and now I have to follow up on it. I hate this part of the job.”

“Ellen’s been coming over here and the girls over to the cottage since they were in kindergarten. I’d have picked up on it if there was something going on.” She reached up and kissed him again.

“Sorry about the comment about Margo.” He frowned and turned away, but he didn’t deny it. *Oh God I hope he doesn’t leave me for her.*

Driving through the village after dinner always depressed Boyd. The streets were dead after five. He was born and raised in Seymour and had watched the steady decline of the town for the past twenty years. Decline wasn’t the right term. The town wasn’t declining so much as it wasn’t growing. After the shopping district, he drove through a small residential neighborhood and the further he went from town, the sparser the housing got. Reaching Frank’s he always thought the same thing; he’d like to have a little piece of land out here by the river. It was too expensive now. The big field next to Frank’s was for sale and one day a rich person was going to buy it and build one of those McMansions on the river.

The lights from Frank’s house penetrated the dusk while the sun started its decent. Shutting the lights off to the car, Boyd wanted to sneak up and catch them doing something wrong, maybe kissing in the front window. But instead, he saw a family scene with Frank sitting in his recliner, reading the paper and Ellen on the couch, her nose in a book. The TV was off and there was music playing; he wondered when the last time his wife turned the TV off and suggested their kids pick up a book. Maybe he’d take the lead.

Their front door was open, so he slammed the car door hard, hoping they’d hear. Frank put the paper down and walked to the door. “Howdy, Frank,” he said. “Sorry to come out here unannounced.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Something happened yesterday and I want to talk to you about it. It’s got my girl here a bit upset.”

“You want to chat outdoors?” Boyd asked.

“If you don’t mind, I think it best,” Frank answered. “El, I’ll be out here with Sheriff Dalton.” Boyd saw her nod, but not react.

“Walk with me a ways, would you?” Boyd followed Frank away from the house.

“You got my curiosity going, sir,” Boyd said. Frank snickered and waved him further from the house.

“We was leavin’ the garage for home last evening. I run into the grocery and when I come back, my girl is beside herself. This new man in town, you meet up with him yet? I got him a job at Paul’s. Anyway, she swears he’s the stranger who lurked at the edge of the wood last week. The same height and stands a certain way most don’t stand, she said.

“She was so upset, she flipped out and you know as well as any my girl is not an attention seeker. I had to pull the truck over and try to calm her down.”

Boyd immediately saw the connection; the truck at the side of the road, the hysterical girl being comforted by her father. He wondered if this wasn’t what Miss Logan saw on her way home from work on the bus.

Boyd got his notepad out. "You say you got the man a job? How'd that come about? Just curious." Frank told him about Mary dating the man and calling over to the garage asking the favor. "What's his name?" Frank gave him the details, which he wrote down.

"So now what brings you out here?" Frank asked. Boyd shook his head.

"You won't believe this, sir."

He explained about the allegation that had been made, and that he thought the embrace the informer had witnessed was the one that Frank had just told him about.

Completely taken aback by the accusation, Frank was stunned. "I would never, *ever* harm my girl in any way. The thought of doing anything that might hurt her makes me sick to my stomach. We never touch each other except when we're dancin'. Now you say this garbage, I might have to rethink us going to a dance contest we was invited to attend."

"Don't do that, Frank. Please. I'm sure we can clear this up. I wish I could just drop it, but I have to file a report. My superiors will look it over and I'm sure it will be a closed case tomorrow."

"Oh Lord God you got to call it a case? I gotta bad feeling about this." Boyd put his hand up on Frank's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry. But don't get all worked up. Let's take it slow. I'll be in touch when I have something to tell you. Do you hear what I'm saying, Frank?" He slowly nodded his head.

But it wasn't okay. The next day, the county offices converged upon Seymour. Social services, The Division of Child Safety, made their first visit to the garage on Main Street, initiating the beginning of Frank and Ellen's nightmare. Two tired looking women drove up in a dusty car with government plates. One was tall and thin and the other was short and chubby. They were dressed as if they'd come to clean house, like women who have given up trying to look even marginally attractive.

"Mr. McPherson, we just want to question the girl about the events of the past few days. You're welcome to stay in the room when we do so, but you aren't allowed to answer for her or interrupt." Frank was speechless. *What would they do to him if he interrupted? Shoot him?*

"If you'll excuse us please, I'm takin' my daughter into the garage to speak to her privately." Ellen was terrified, and he could see it in her eyes, cursing himself for not speaking about it to her as soon as Boyd left the night before.

The social workers looked at each other. What were they going to do? Call the sheriff?

"Okay, go ahead. But don't leave."

Frank whipped around.

"What'll you do if I do? You better have a warrant for my arrest."

He nodded his head to her and Ellen got up off her stool to follow him into the garage, looking at the women as she left the office. Frank stood aside for her to go before him and the smell of the oil and the familiar space choked her up.

"What's going on?" she asked. "What are they going to ask me?"

Frank was embarrassed before her, it was not their usual conversation to talk of intimate things.

"Someone told Sheriff Dalton that you and I was kissin' at the side of the road the other night. That's all. You tell those two everything and be honest. We ain't got nothin' to hide."

He nodded back at the door and she turned to go back into the office. The social workers watched the brief exchange, watched the man speak and the look of distress on the girl's face and deduced they were in collusion.

The questioning was quick because they'd made their minds up that the man had threatened the young girl. "Are you afraid of your step-father?"

Visibly shrinking away from the women, horrified, she answered, "Of course not!"

“Just now, in the garage, did your step-father tell you to lie to us about what has happened between the two you?”

“No. He told me to be honest with you about everything.”

“Has your step-father touched you inappropriately?” Ellen cringed again.

“That’s disgusting! Who ever said a thing like that about him?”

“Please just answer the question,” the tall one said.

“No, never. Frank hardly ever even hugs me. That’s disgusting,” she repeated. Frank was doing a slow burn in the corner, sorry he didn’t demand to have his lawyer present.

“That’s enough,” he said. “I want our lawyer here, or I want you to arrest me, but you’re not talkin’ to my child more today.”

At home that evening, dinner was a solemn affair. “I’m not really hungry,” Ellen said, elbows on the table and head in her hands.

“Me neither, but we gotta eat. You’re already thin as you can be. You don’t want me to get smaller than the new man in town, right?”

Ellen looked at him and started to giggle; he was standing with his arms out at his sides, making bicep muscles. “No, I guess not.” The phone ringing interrupted their heart-to-heart. Frank picked it up, frowning, not wanting more news of any kind.

“It’s Boyd. Sorry to bother you during dinner, but I wanted to tell you as soon as possible, before you heard it from anyone else.” Frank’s heart was thumping in his chest. “The interview with Ellen today led the social workers to believe there is evidence that needs to be investigated further. I’m sorry, Frank.”

“I don’t get it. She denied everything they asked her.”

“Evidently, they felt she was under coercion.”

“Boyd, that’s utter nonsense. You have to believe me. The thought of what they are accusin’ me of makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Look, I know that. But what I think doesn’t matter now, although if it goes any further, I will definitely speak my opinion on your behalf.”

“So what happens now?”

“You need to show up at the courthouse tomorrow morning with Ellen’s adoption papers.” Involuntarily, Frank took a step back and gasped, scaring Ellen.

“I *got* no papers Boyd. This is Seymour. Who’d think that was even a necessity here?” A problem Margaret hadn’t foreseen; Frank never adopted Ellen.

“I’m no lawyer, but you have no legal rights now that Margaret’s dead and if the courts wanted to, they could take Ellen away from you and make a stranger her guardian.”

“What do I do now?”

“You get a lawyer fast.”

They said goodbye and Frank hung the phone up on the wall. He glanced around the room, at the simple furnishing in his childhood home, trying to glean comfort from it as he had in the past.

Frank had never given up on anything in his entire life, but that evening, with Ellen sitting at the kitchen table in their familiar kitchen, watching him carefully with a frightened look on her face, and the sheriff forecasting horrific consequences because of his naiveté, Frank was ready to give up. He choked back an unfamiliar sensation that turned out to be a sob.







NEWS TRAVELS FAST IN a small town, and Frank and Ellen's crisis was news. That it was the result of stupidity and gossip didn't seem to matter. The gentle man and his loving step-daughter were now fair game and even the baggers at the grocery were talking about it, pointing at the garage that had a hand-lettered note applied to the door with masking tape; *Frank's will be closed until further notice*. People strolling by stopped to read the note, and if they were uninformed, remarked about how sad it was, Frank's Garage had been there since Big Frank was alive and what a shame it would be if he never opened up again.

Those who were in on town gossip sneered at the sign, saying that such a one as Frank McPherson deserved to burn in hell after what he did to that little girl. Stories of bondage and other forms of darkness whispered about in the chairs at Miss Logan's Beauty Salon, in line at the post office, having lunch at the café and waiting to carry bags for patrons at the grocery store who carried the stories further, more often than not embellished in the worst possible way.

Alan Johnson was livid about what had transpired and made the decision to come forward while the pot was boiling over. Listening to Mary, he knew the torrid stories were a bunch of lies. He saw the love between his daughter and her stepfather the night he lurked outside of their property, hovering at the edge of a black wood like a Peeping Tom. Boyd Dalton sought him out first, opening the door to Paul's Auto Supply the day after confronting Boyd on the telephone.

"Ask your boss to take over the counter for a minute, will you please?" The sight of an officer of the law only confirmed what he was going to do; lay claim to Ellen as his daughter. Walking outside with the sheriff, Alan waited, not knowing what he was going to hear.

"You've been identified as a trespasser by the McPherson's. Can you explain why you'd be at their house at midnight?"

Alan looked at him carefully. He was making the assumption it had been him that night. There was a little game that needed to be played before he'd make an admission of guilt. "Night is pitch black around here. Especially down by the river. How can they be sure?"

"The girl says it was you, the way you stand and your stature. So are you denying it?"

"No sir," Alan said. "I have reason to believe Ellen McPherson is my daughter. I was in a relationship with Margaret Fisher fifteen years ago and I left Florida on a job transfer. We lost contact after that." It wasn't the entire truth, but he saw no reason to add more facts.

Boyd had removed his hat, scratching his head. "What makes you think she's yours?"

"Well look at her! But that's not all. I know Margaret wouldn't mess around, so the kid has to be mine. I got nothin' to gain by claiming she's my daughter." He pointed over his shoulder at the store. "This place is barely going to pay my room and board. I don't even want to interfere with Frank. I think he's doin' a fine job of raising her."

"Then why *are* you coming forward now?"

"Just explaining my presence in Frank's yard last week, that's all." Boyd thought how amazing fate was. Just at a time when it was possible Frank would be incarcerated and lose custody of Ellen, her birth father show's up. *Unbelievable*.

Boyd dismissed Alan. He'd follow up with arrangements for paternity testing, in its infancy at the time, but in a court of law a game changer.

Back behind the counter, Alan was shaking, sick to his stomach. The sheriff didn't say one way or the other, but Alan thought he believed him. Ellen was his daughter. Working through the day brought some relief from the anxiety that was plaguing him. The job was not as bad as he thought it would be, but living with Mary was turning out to be a nightmare. She was clingy and demanding and he thought she contributed to what was happening to Frank McPherson.

• • • •

FRANK AND ELLEN HAD an appointment to meet with his attorney, Ralph Scott in the morning. Frank made a special breakfast for Ellen, and they chose their clothes with care.

"I feel like we're headed to Hallowsbrook again," Ellen said.

"Yes, I was thinkin' the same thing." They drove into Beauregard in silence, arriving with time to spare. The attorney only needed to speak with Frank, sparing Ellen.

Although the situation didn't look good, he was confident that those who knew the two of them would vouch for Frank and charges wouldn't be forthcoming. "You need to open up the garage and get your life back to normal. Act as normal as possible. Go to Beauregard for June Extravaganza and dance in their dern contest if that's what it takes."

"Slow dancin' is the cause of all this trouble," Frank said. "I don't think we best take your advice in that department."

"Hold your head up in town, Frank. Now's not the time to back down." The intercom on his desk buzzed.

"Mr. Scott, Sheriff Dalton on line two." Ralph looked up at Frank and raised his eyebrows.

"Boyd, I got Frank McPherson here. You're on speaker phone." Boyd groaned; *Ralph you're such an ass.*

"Ah, this is not the news I want to give the man over the phone." Frank looked at Ralph.

"Well now you gotta say it, Boyd. Jesus Christ."

"What can it be that's worse than what we've got here?" Frank said.

"Frank, the new man in town. Alan Johnson. You know who I'm talking about, correct?"

"Yes, I know who he is. He's the one peerin' at Ellen in the middle of the night." Ralph Scott looked up at him and frowned.

"What are you getting at Boyd? We don't have all day here," Ralph said.

"I'm getting to that. Alan Johnson claims he could be Ellen's father. That's why he was out at the cottage the other night, just to see her. He claims he was Margaret's boyfriend in Florida fifteen years ago and was transferred to Galveston for a job. She was supposed to meet him and never showed up."

The words paralyzed Frank, choking his throat, numbing his hands. Ralph looked at him and could see he was distressed. "Did you know about this?" he asked gently.

"No," he sputtered. "I mean I knew there was someone else but not who or where. No one ever came forward claiming Ellen."

"What does he want?" Ralph asked.

"Nothing, just to know her. He admits he doesn't have anything to offer her. He'd like to have a paternity test to make sure she's really his child. Will you agree to that, Frank?" Ralph wanted him to take his time answering, holding up his hand to slow things down, but Frank disagreed.

"I want to know, too. Before this other thing gets worse. She's old enough to decide if she wants a relationship with a stranger. I got to *tell* her now."

“Will you agree for Ellen to get a blood test?” Boyd asked. “You only need to take her over to the clinic and Margo will draw the blood.” Frank nodded his head, but put his hands over his eyes, rubbing the disbelief out.

“He’s agreeing,” Ralph said. “As soon as we’re done here. Before you hang up, what’s going on with the child abuse allegation?”

“The ADA is deciding if we have enough evidence to issue an arrest warrant. I’m really sorry Frank.”

“Talk to him later, Boyd.” Ralph said, and hung up the phone. Frank stood up, having reached his limit.

“I gotta talk to my girl and then to the man with the claims. Why now? Why’d he wait? If he don’t want nothin’ from Ellen, why’d he bother?”

“Like Boyd said, Frank, he just wants to know her. Let’s pray that is really all there is because I can see things getting ugly and I want you to be prepared to fight.”

“You mean run with her?”

“No, no, not run. That wouldn’t work.” He looked at Frank and saw that he was dealing with a country boy, someone wholesome whose exposure to the seamier side of life was minimal, unless it was something he’d seen on TV.”

“What I mean is that I want you to be prepared to put everything you have into it.”

Frank might have been simple, but he wasn’t stupid. “You mean like my garage, my house, that sorta thing.” Ralph was rubbing his chin.

“Your time, too, Frank. You prepared for a fight?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” Frank said standing up, already defeated. He needed to talk to Ellen right away. He reached across the desk for Ralph’s hand to shake. “Thank you.”

“No problem, Frank. If anything comes across my desk today I’ll be in touch.” Frank looked at him carefully, but decided not to start the topic again. If he was arrested, his attorney would be ready. Ralph walked around his desk and put his hand on Frank’s back.

“I got a good feeling about this Frank, and I don’t toss that around lightly. It might take some work to get to the right place, but we’re both ready. Try not to worry too much. I know, easy for me to say.”

Frank smiled at him, but didn’t answer. He had only one thought and it was to talk to Ellen. Ralph reached around him and pulled the door open. He saw the girl sitting in his waiting room, and up until that moment, hadn’t realized how pretty she was, and alluring. Maybe it would be more difficult to defend Frank than he originally thought. After defending both the guilty and innocent over the years, Ralph could spot a liar. Watching Frank go to Ellen and take her hand, she looked up at him with so much trust, and faith that he would protect her, Ralph changed his mind again. His client was innocent.

“You ready to go sister?” Ellen nodded her head, letting him pull her up. “Should we go to lunch?” She shook her head.

“I think we should go to the garage,” she answered. Ralph chuckled.

“See, just like I said.”

“Well I guess that means *until further notice* is two hours later,” Frank replied, laughing. Things didn’t feel quite so desperate, yet.





THE FIRST PART OF THE day was busy at the parts counter, and Alan was getting used to the routine. He schmoozed with customers, filled their orders and made small talk with the women of town, and then in the afternoon he'd help pick orders for the next day's deliveries. Moving back into his own room at Mary's with the excuse that he didn't want to disturb her with his snoring, he was walking a fine line between keeping things civil with her and telling her he was leaving to move back to Cate's. It didn't take long before he regretted moving in with Mary so quickly, even as a tenant, forcing her to take money for the room so she couldn't accuse him of freeloading.

But on the day when Boyd Dalton told Frank and his attorney about Alan's claims, everything would change for him. Frank and Ellen returned to the garage and took the sign *closed until further notice* down. The occupants of the businesses up and down Main Street saw the sign go into the trashcan on the curb, watched as cars arrived for service pulling into the bays or waiting on the street. Ellen was silent, reading her book, thinking of the amazing story Frank had told her as they sat in the car outside of Ralph Scott's office.

"The stranger meant you no harm," he started out. They'd gotten into the car, but he didn't turn the key right away. "He wanted to see you with his own eyes because he has reasons to believe he might be your natural father." Frank looked straight ahead, waiting.

"What might those reasons be?" Ellen asked. Frank turned to her, embarrassed.

"He said he was dating your mother fifteen years ago and had to leave town. She was supposed to follow him but never showed up."

"So he come into town especially for me?" Trying not to smirk, she was disbelieving.

"That's what it sounds like. You have an objection to having a blood test? Just to be sure? Put my mind at rest and yours, too." Ellen thought about what he was asking of her. A pinprick and a look under a microscope could change the way she viewed her life. Was it even necessary?

"Can I at least think about this? It's all my decision, is that what you're sayin' Frank? I can have it or not."

Frank didn't want to admit he took it for granted it was something she had to do. Boyd asked if he would agree to it, not Ellen. Frank thought he had no say over what happened to Ellen. Maybe he needed to go back into the attorney's office. "Come with me, sister. We need to clarify a few things with Ralph Scott before we move forward." They got back out of the car and returned to the office. Frank explained what their concern was and the receptionist wrote everything down and left the room.

Ralph came out to the waiting room himself, shaking hands again. "You certainly aren't required to take the test," he said, addressing Ellen. "But it would probably be in your best interests to do so. Then, if it turns out Mr. Johnson, that is his name, correct? If it turns out he's mistaken, then you can be done with him."

"What gives him the idea that he's my father?" Ellen asked.

"Just that he was your mother's boyfriend fifteen years ago, and had to leave Florida. I'm sorry, Miss McPherson."

"It's Fisher," Ellen said, tossing her head.

"Um, right, sorry. Fisher." Frank smirked; she was no pushover.

"I guess we'll call Boyd when we get back to the garage," he said. "Come on, sister. Let's try to get out of here one more time." They walked back to the car without saying goodbye to Ralph again.

As the afternoon wore on and Frank took care of customers, Ellen was unable to focus on her book, trying to remember what Alan's face was like, his hair, what clothing he had on. He was tall, narrow through the shoulders and hips. When he handed her the money, she'd noticed his hands; nice hands that didn't work hard with pale pink fingernails. His hair was too black to be natural. She wasn't used to men who dyed their hair, and she smirked thinking about it.

"What's amusing you now?" Frank said coming through from the garage.

"I'm pretty sure the stranger dyes his hair," she said. Frank's hair was brown and always neat. He kept it short because it was easier being in the garage not to have to worry about hair getting in his eyes.

He looked at her. "I hardly know what to say to that. It must be the city way for men to fix their hair."

"Are you gonna say anything to him about it?"

"His hair?" Frank was stalling.

She laughed out loud. "No Frank, not his hair. About bein' my dad and all."

"I know. I'm just teasin you. I guess we need to call on Boyd first and see if he knows anything more about the man." Ellen took the phone off the wall and handed it to him. It was a black rotary phone with a short cord so he had to stand right at the desk while he talked, not wander away when he had to say something he didn't want her to hear.

"Right now?" he said, unsure whether what Boyd had to say was something they needed to know. Ellen was living proof Margaret had been with another man. But what if she was married to him? Although it might be positive for Ellen to have that information, it would mean he'd been a bigamist.

"Yes, please," she said. "Right now. I gotta know Frank. I wish we could talk to the man in person but I want to wait until we're sure. I mean, what if he's a windbag?"

"That he could be," Frank said softly. "I'll call Boyd." He dialed the number to the sheriff and dispatch said they'd have Boyd return the call. "Now we gotta sit around here and wait."

"I like it here," Ellen said. "Bein' at the garage this summer is one of the best times in my life."

"We gotta do something about that," he said, laughing. "A trip to the beach or a carnival, but not the smelly garage." The phone rang.

"Frank's Garage," he said.

"It's Boyd. What can I do for you?"

"Ellen wants to know why Mr. Johnson thinks she could be his daughter? What's his reasons?"

"Well, let me remember exactly what he said," Boyd replied, pausing. "He said he was in a relationship with Margaret Fisher and he left for a job transfer to Galveston and they lost touch. But he found out recently she'd had a baby after he left and he suspected the baby was his."

"That seems like a pretty flimsy reason to me," Frank said. Ellen strained to get closer to the ear piece, but Frank moved further away and frowned.

"I think it would be perfectly acceptable for the two of you to confront him yourself if you are comfortable with it. He said you were doing a fine job of raising her and he didn't want to interfere."

"It doesn't explain why he's comin' forward now," Frank said.

"I can't answer for him," Boyd said. "I'm sorry this is all coming on at once."

"Yeah, it does sort of make one think there might be a connection, doesn't it."

"I didn't mean it that way, Frank. I'm not privileged to reveal who made the accusations, but I can tell you it wasn't Johnson."

“Okay, well thanks anyway.” They said goodbye and hung up. Ellen was waiting for him to tell her what Boyd said. “We can talk to him ourselves.”

“That was his answer? Gosh, thanks a lot.”

“Yes, well he said the man doesn’t want to interfere, in so many words.”

“Then why bother coming forward? I guess I’m too young or too stupid to understand.” Frank reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. He dare not hug her in case someone was watching.

“Let’s go over to Paul’s and ask him ourselves.” He automatically locked up the garage to walk next door.

“Can’t believe I’m lockin’ up. Things sure have changed,” Frank said shaking his head.

“I see that,” Ellen replied. “Can’t be too careful now.”

Alan was going over an invoice and looked up when they walked in. Ellen had her eyes on him, trying to feel some kinship, but there was nothing. They might have shared a similar hairline, and his ears looked familiar. He was so lanky; Ellen had tried Margaret’s brassieres on and she was ample busted compared to the slender Ellen. Maybe she took after Alan Johnson’s women more than she took after her mother in that respect.

“We heard from the sheriff today. About your claim to be Ellen’s dad.”

“Let me clarify that,” Alan quickly said, looking to Ellen. “I believe I might be your father, but make no claim to it. I hope you’d be willing to take a test.”

“What makes you believe it?” Ellen asked. “What happened that made you think of me?”

“I was looking for your mother,” Alan said. “When I left Florida for Texas, she was supposed to follow me, but she never showed up. So when I got sacked I had the time to go lookin’ for her again and someone from her old work place told me she’d had a baby, that she’d lost her job and left Saint Augustine with you. The timing was right for you to be mine.”

“And you didn’t know she was gonna have a baby?”

“No, she didn’t tell me and then I left town. I borrowed money from her and never paid her back,” he answered, ashamed. Ellen thought about it for a moment before she continued on.

“Why’d you come lookin’ for me in Seymour?” Ellen asked, still unsatisfied. “How’d that come about?”

“It was serendipity,” he answered. “I stopped for lunch in Mobile and found this article.” He’d taken the newspaper article about the ninth-grade graduation dance from Mary, pulling it out of his pocket to show them. “Then I met Miss Logan at the boarding house. She started talking about your mother and I found out she’d died. I’m very sorry, by the way.

“I’m sorry I was snooping around your woods. Also, that I came here and didn’t introduce myself right away. I wasn’t sure it was really you.”

Having to navigate her manipulative mother, Ellen had a sense about people and it was telling her that Alan Johnson was somewhat the scoundrel who couldn’t be trusted completely. But he had nothing to gain as far as she could tell, by claiming her as his child.

“What’d you want from us?” Frank asked.

“Nothin’, I swear,” Alan replied, looking at Ellen again. “I don’t have anything to offer you, but I don’t want anything either. Just to know you, if you are my child. And if you don’t want to know me, well I’ll live with it.” Ellen looked at Frank and he could tell by her eyes she’d had enough.

“We’ll talk to the sheriff about what the next step should be then,” Frank said, putting out his hand to shake Alan’s outstretched. They turned and left the parts store and started walking to the truck.

“I guess I’ll take the test,” Ellen said. “It can’t hurt nothin’. But you know Frank that even if he’s my father, it don’t mean a thing to me. You’re my dad, always.”



“Thank you, sister. I appreciate it.” As they reached the truck, Frank just happened to look up at Miss Logan’s. She was standing in the window watching but she quickly turned away when she saw him looking over, not waving at him in acknowledgment, as she would have in the past. “Well, look at that. Miss Logan just turned her back on me. You suppose she’s listening to gossip?”

“Gossip probably originated with Miss Logan,” Ellen said smugly. “Know that she and Mary are closely related in the gossip department. Which one said it first might be up for debate. But it’s not very nice of me to say so, so I better be quiet.” It never occurred to Frank that it could have been Miss Logan who saw them hugging in the car until that second.

“You don’t say?” Frank said, staring at the salon. “I should stroll over there and have a little chat with her. What do you think?” Ellen looked over at the salon, at the smudged windows with the fading signage and the disintegrating brick work in front. Miss Logan was rather pathetic; not that old, but old enough, she didn’t have much of a life with her boarding house address and public transportation, her seedy building which stood next to the flawlessness of Frank’s Garage.

“No, I say let her be. If she was the instigator, it will come out soon enough. It will probably help her business.”

“I noticed business at the garage was next to a stampede today and we supposed to be closed,” Frank said, smiling. But Ellen was ready to move on, anger at Miss Logan and Alan Johnson, Boyd Dalton and her own mother surfacing again so that the few seconds of respite making fun of Miss Logan provided had passed.

“Let’s go to the clinic and get *it* over with,” Ellen said. “I feel sick to my stomach again.”

“I do, too. Although it don’t matter at all to me, I always knew you were another man’s child, Ellen. But it never made a bit of difference to me. Not one iota.”

He put the key in the ignition and the truck started up fine, so that he gunned it a little to give her a thrill like it used to when she was a small girl. It worked again and she laughed.

“You called me *dada* the first time we laid eyes on each other. Grabbed my hand and said it, so that your mother started to laugh. She told me right off that she wasn’t married to your father.”

“Why not, I wonder? It’s scandalous nowadays; it must have been horrible for her then.”

Ellen imagined her mother, alone, unwed. *If Alan was the father, did he flee? Why didn’t she bother to tell him? He said he owed her money. That she’d lost her job after a time. How desperate was she?*

“Poor mamma,” Ellen said. “No wonder she was off her rocker that far back.”

“She took wonderful care of you, sister. Your little dresses ironed as carefully as if she was fixin’ to wear them herself. Our first date you came with us. The drive-in movie. You sat between us and then fell asleep with your head in her lap and your feet up against me.”

“It was lucky she found someone like you, Frank.”

“I said the same thing about her. I was lucky to find someone like Margaret. Her breakin’ down in front of my garage, now that was a blessing. I don’t even want to think about what my life would be without you.”

He shook his head, trying to put the horrible thought out, and putting the truck into gear, they drove to the medical office in silence.

After the encounter with Frank and Ellen, Alan felt sick, as well. It was near closing anyway, so he simply told Paul he was leaving because he was ill. Taking his jacket off the coatrack, he left out the back door without saying goodbye to the packers. Head down, he walked as fast as he could to Mary’s boarding house. She’d be there waiting for him and he was dreading it, making the decision that if she crossed him, he was going back to Cate’s. But she was pleasant and happy, talking about

her day, pattering around the kitchen fixing dinner and he was able to hide his distress. Still not willing to share his suspicions about Ellen's paternity, he'd wait until their blood test results came back.

Relaxed with his elbows on the table, enjoying a glass of wine with Mary during dinner, he let his guard down for a moment forgetting whom he was talking to and it had an untoward effect on her.

"I spoke with Ellen and Frank before closing. Ellen is very sweet. What a great guy Frank is. I'm glad Margaret ran into him."

If he'd been looking at Mary when he said it, he'd have stopped right away. But he was gazing out the window at her back yard, with the dwarf fruit tree and the ratty chain link fencing.

"Your yard could be nice if you put a little effort into fixing it up."

Those last fateful words are what caused him to shut up and regret speaking, though she was livid long before.

"What do you mean; you're *glad Margaret ran into him*? Margaret who, Alan? Who are you speaking of? *My Margaret*?"

She'd gotten up from the table and started to pace, stopping right in front of him with a look of such disdain that he reared back, frightened she was going to haul off and pop him.

"Yes, *your* Margaret. Take it easy."

"Don't tell me to take it easy, Alan. Why do you care about Margaret? Why the sudden interest in Ellen and Frank?"

Lips trembling, Mary's face was flushed, but she had a pale ring around her mouth that frightened Alan; it was obvious she was seething mad.

"I'm not *suddenly* interested," he said, knowing he would regret it when and if the blood tests came back positive. "They just happened to stop by the store before closing is all."

He didn't mention that the confrontation actually made him ill.

"You know the sheriff is gathering evidence against him. Did you realize that, Alan? *Evidence that he's abusing Ellen*. I heard it today. Miss Logan blew the whistle on him when no else, me included had the courage." The look of triumph on her face shocked Alan. "He's a sleaze ball, Frank McPherson is. High and mighty Frank really nothing more than a low-life child molester."

Speechless, if it was true, and Ellen was his child, Frank was abusing *his* child. Without warning, he jumped on her, knocking her to the floor.

"What do you know, you whore! What are you saying? Who told you Frank was abusing Ellen, who?"

Her shirt bunched up in his hands, spittle hitting her in the face, in the eye as he screamed.

Once Mary caught her breath from the attack, she started to scream.

"Get off me!"

Arching her back and struggling, he was too strong for her, as an insane person gains strength in anger, Alan could kill her with his bare hands and told her so.

"I'll wring your neck if you don't tell me what you know!"

"Sally Logan saw them kissing at the side of the road," she yelled.

"You believe the lies that dried up old bitch is spreading all over? I thought you were smarter than that."

With strength she dredged up from some deep, attention-starved place, Mary Cook shoved him off her, but not before she slipped up, just to save her own skin.

"I saw it, too. I saw them standing in the living room out at the cottage on the river, kissing. It was disgusting, I tell you! *They're* disgusting."

She was panting, kneeling on the hard wooden floor, hands on her knees, choking for air.

“Why didn’t you tell the sheriff what you saw?” he said, rocking back on his heels.

“I didn’t want him to know I was out there,” she said, gasping for breath.

All Alan could think of was that his child might be in danger. It seemed so unlikely, because Frank and Ellen were so good together; you could just see their love and tenderness, nothing sexual or lurid at all. But he had to tell the sheriff this extra piece of news. If Mary did see what she said she saw, he had to act.

“You call me a whore? Ha!” she gasped. “She was kissing him back! She’s the whore. Ellen Fisher is the whore!”

Without thinking, he lifted up his hand and smacked her as hard as he could across the face, the whump! echoing through the living room to the kitchen, knocking her over. She put her hand up to her face, and at first she was going to laugh, but then she realized that her suspicions about him were true. He’d just confirmed it for her.

“You’re her *father*, you filthy pig, you! Ha! I knew it, I suspected it. *Get out of my house!*” She screamed.

Without wasting a second, he got up off the floor and walked into the bedroom off the kitchen to gather his belongings. He’d been living out of his suitcase so it wouldn’t take long. Sneaking up on him, when he turned, she was in the doorway, a grin on her face, hands behind her back.

“I fucked her, too.”

Not knowing what she was getting at, did she mean she slept with Frank behind Margaret’s back, or did she steal money from her, not thinking what she meant was what it *really meant*. Then he got it, and he laughed.

“In your *dreams*, Mary. A woman like Margaret wouldn’t give someone like you the time of *day*,” he said, snickering.

Mary flew at him screaming again, hitting him with both fists. Surprised, he grabbed her arms but she’d caught him off guard and he lost his balance, falling over on the bed. Tears running down her face, Alan saw the frustration and anger of hidden yearning and unrequited love.

“What! Were you in love with both of them? I figured Frank, but his wife, too? You’re a piece of work.”

“She loved me!” Mary screamed. “We loved each other, you piece of shit. You didn’t deserve someone like her.”

“I didn’t know she was pregnant,” he said, dodging her flaying hands. “It was fifteen years ago. I was just a kid.”

“That’s no excuse,” she spit out, getting off the bed.

A lump in her throat hurt from screaming. Leaving him in disgust, she went back to her own apartment and locked the door. She’d never admitted that she and Margaret had been lovers to anyone. It was so delicate, Margaret refusing to discuss it in their conversations afterward because it didn’t mean the same thing to her. But to Mary, it was everything, especially after Margaret began to slip. Seeing her deteriorate was more than Mary could stand after what Margaret meant to her.

Now that Alan knew, the beauty of it was cheapened, him knowing about it ruined it. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she lowered her face in her hands and started to sob in earnest, broken-hearted. All this time after her death, the finality of Margaret dying hit her in its fullest power, grief overwhelming her.

“Why didn’t I keep my mouth shut?”





WHILE ALAN JOHNSON moved out of Mary's house, heading to Beauregard to see if Cate would take him back, Frank and Ellen were at home after having her blood drawn by Margo at the clinic. Frank was putting another flat of petunias in the ground while Ellen made dinner; meatballs and spaghetti tonight. He insisted on doing the planting alone although it was something they'd done together in the past because having to be out there among the decimated peonies was too upsetting for her. They were trying to forget and move on. It would be easier to do once the garden was colorful again.

Knowing Alan Johnson was the stranger at the edge of the wood made Ellen feel a little safer; at least it wasn't someone meaning to do her harm. Now all they had to do was wait for a week to get the blood results back, and then they would decide what to do with the information. Dinner was almost ready; a cover over the simmering sauce would keep it from spattering all over as she went out to tell Frank. Squatting down, putting the last flower in, Frank's back was to the house. After doing battle at the lawyer's office and working all day in the hot garage, he was sweating in the dirt for her. A sense of peace and of love flowing over her, Ellen was convinced that no matter what the result of the blood test was, Frank would always be her father.

"Time to eat, Frank."

"That was fast." He rocked back on his heels, sniffing the air. "I can smell Italian out here."

"The flowers look very nice," she said softly, smiling. "Thank you for doin' this."

"No problem. Can't let a spoilsport ruin it for us."

"Is that all it was?" she asked, uncertain. "It feels like a lot more. It feels very personal. Spiteful."

Walking to the porch, he reached up to take his hat off and scratched his head.

"Only if you let it. Don't give nobody that kind of power over you."

He put his arm around her and they walked into the house together. Hanging his straw hat up on the peg behind the door, Frank looked around the living room as if he were seeing it for the first time in a while.

"You know, we got the same old furniture we had when my ma was alive. I think it's time we spruce it up around here. What do you say?"

Ellen followed his eyes, to the upholstered chair with the carved wooden arms that her mother once sat in and the footstool covered in petit point that Frank's mother had worked, where Margaret rested her feet, trim legs crossed at the ankles. Behind it were ancient maple bookshelves Frank senior built, filled with Margaret's books. Next to the brass floor lamp stood Frank's recliner where he sat to watch boxing on TV every Saturday night, drinking a beer or two. The right side of the couch was Ellen's territory, and on the step table next to it was a pile of books to read and a good reading lamp.

"I don't want to change it," she said passionately. "No thank you, Frank. Unless you really don't like it, I say leave it be. I've had enough change for one day if you don't mind. The house stayin' the same is one thing I can count on."

"Okay, just a suggestion on account of everything being so turned upside down I thought a little change inside might be in order."

They made small talk over dinner, but what kept surfacing was Ellen's fear. "I just don't feel like I can ever sit out on the porch again. Or stay home alone."

“All this only just happened,” Frank reminded her. “You might be expectin’ a bit much. But I have an idea. Let’s teach you to shoot a gun. We’ll set up a target out behind the garage. I got my old bale o’ hay and we just need to attach a target to it.”

“I’d like that,” she said, holding up her hand like it was a gun. “I dare anyone to pick my flowers. Bang, bang!”

“Ha! Nope, this isn’t for flower pickers. Shootin’ a gun is only if yer life is threatened.”

“Let’s do it soon,” she replied.

“We can do it tomorrow after work,” he said. “While we still have some light.” Ellen felt instant relief knowing she’d be able to protect herself, just in case.

Mary had an old-fashioned temper tantrum after Alan left. Knowing he was going back to Towering Pines didn’t help; Miss Logan would probably hear the whole story of their fight and it would end up being chair side conversation at the beauty salon. Thinking about it, the whispers at the café, even the baggers at Family-Owned gossiping about her, she tore the sheets off his bed and stomped on them for a few minutes before stuffing them in the washer, pouring in extra bleach. Next, she took the mug he’d used for the past week out to the concrete driveway to smash to bits with a shovel, working up a sweat.

“Mary Cook, you better sweep that up good so no visitors get a flat.” She looked at what she’d done and at her concerned neighbor who was watching her antics over the fence, but waved him off. A shard of glass wouldn’t flatten a tire. “He musta been a heartbreaker to make you so mad.”

“Peter go back into your house, please,” she said, bringing the shovel up over her head again for a final smash. A little piece of the mug hit her leg and she didn’t even feel it until she went back inside for a broom and noticed a slender thread of blood running down her calf. She grabbed a paper towel and pressed it against her leg, anger abating, sadness replacing it. If she’d known he was **THEE** Alan, the Alan of Ellen’s father, she’d never had gotten involved. But to be honest, she’d wondered, already entertaining the fantasy of telling Margaret, *IF* she’d still be alive. The scenario went through her head, going to the hospital, holding Margaret, stroking her back.

“Alan’s living with me; he’s sleeping in my bed at night. I couldn’t get Frank, but I could get Alan.” *But you couldn’t keep him*, she thought, anger welling up again. Margaret would say that, *I couldn’t keep him, but you couldn’t keep him, either*. Mary began to cry, the unfairness of it. She was alone, again.

• • • •

DRIVING TO BEAUREGARD, Alan remembered that he wanted to tell the sheriff what Mary said she saw in Frank’s living room. He didn’t believe it for a second, but telling was the right thing to do, the first step toward protecting his daughter, just in case. Pulling into the gas station on the way to Cate’s, there was a pay phone outside on the side of the building. He dialed the operator and asked for the sheriff. Dispatch came on. “I need to talk to the sheriff about a child maybe being in danger.” He stumbled over the words, so foreign to his tongue and doubts about the validity of Mary’s story making him regretful for having made the call in the first place.

“Hold the line please,” dispatch said. Alan looked down at the glass and gravel ground almost into dust, intermingling with busted black top.

“Sheriff Dalton,” a familiar voice said.

“Sheriff, this is Alan Johnson. Ellen Fisher’s father.” It was premature, but so what. “Mary Cook told me she was over at the McPherson place a few nights ago and witnessed a deplorable act

between Frank and my daughter. Now I don't believe it, but she says they were kissing, holding on to each other. Like lovers."

Boyd Dalton immediately thought of the destroyed garden. "Did she tell you what night it took place?"

"No sir, just that she was walkin' by the river. But like I said, I don't believe it, but I felt it was my duty to let you all know down there at the sheriff's office."

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson. I'll look into it." They said goodbye and Alan hung up and walked back to his car.

"I've got to get over to Seymour for a bit." Boyd stuck his head in the control room of the station before he headed out to Mary Cook's. He'd have an interview with her before the night was up.

• • • •

THE LIGHTS WERE ON in the dining room at Towering Pines. Alan hesitated, dreading a public admonishment from Cate and Miss Logan. He thought it might be in his favor to let them see him vulnerable since he needed something from Cate.

"I'm back," he said, announcing his arrival. But they'd watched him unloading his bag out of the front seat of the car, and were waiting expectedly, especially Miss Logan. When he glanced into the dining room, it was at a sea of smiling faces, not a wagging finger in sight.

"I see that," Cate said, getting up from her chair. "Come in and eat with us."

"Okay, I'd like that." He followed her back into the room, everyone watching, forks poised above plates. "You have a room available?" There was a stranger at the table, a lovely woman with blond hair wound into a twist in the back of her head, very 1940's.

"Yep, you can have your old room at the top of the stairs if you'd like," Cate said. "This is Miss Margo Portland, by the way." She nodded toward Margo who was smiling.

"Okay, I recognize you," Alan said. "You're over at the clinic." Margo nodded and smiled. Now that he'd revealed it to everyone, she was legally free to acknowledge him.

"My guest," Miss Logan said.

"Help yourself," Cate directed, pointing to the buffet. "Roast beef tonight." Alan took a plate and heaped on the food, not realizing how hungry he was.

"So what happened at Mary's?" Miss Logan said, launching right in.

"Sally, for God's sake, shut up!"

"That's okay, Cate. I might as well get everything out in the open. I believe I'm Ellen Fisher's father and Mary wasn't too happy about it." Margo and Miss Logan exchanged looks.

"I wondered why you were so interested in Margaret," Miss Logan said, smirking.

"Yes, and I am sorry about seemingly deceiving you," Alan said. "I knew when I was fishing for information that it might come down to this, you being annoyed, but I had to take the risk. *You* started talking about Margaret without me saying a thing. I blindly arrived here having seen only a newspaper article and a name. Everything fell into place. It's almost scary how easy it was; dumb luck."

The problems Miss Logan instigated by accusing Frank of passionately kissing Ellen were foremost in her mind.

"Are you going to do anything about the father messing with the girl?"

"Sally! Are you insane?" Margo yelled. "Honest to god, you are going to get your ass into hot water if you don't keep your damn mouth shut."

"I think it's a bunch of crap," Alan said. "But I'm sure the investigation will clear his name."

He didn't mention talking to Boyd Dalton earlier to tell him about Mary's accusation and Margo hadn't had her evening chat with Boyd, so she didn't know either. Miss Logan knew because she'd heard Mary's gossip from Jessie and later, Mary confirmed it.

"Don't be too sure," Miss Logan said.

"Let's change the topic, shall we?" Cate said. "Alan, how's the job?"

Giving more details than were necessary just to keep control, Alan then pulled Mr. Rosen into the conversation and even tried to engage Emil.

But Miss Logan had to bring up Mary's name again. "So, is it over between you and Mary? You made a great looking couple, by the way. A customer said she saw you two dancing and you made quite a team."

"We'll see," Alan said, chuckling, thinking of Mary laying on the floor, screaming at him. "She's a pistol, that's for sure."

When dinner was over, he had one thing in mind and that was to get to his room and crash. It had been an exhausting couple of days.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm beat. Think I'll get unpacked and call it a night."

"We've been meeting on the porch for wine around eight for summer nights if you'd like to join us, I mean if you're still awake," Cate said quickly.

"Any special occasion?" he asked.

"Just in honor of the summer," Miss Logan said.

"It's already almost the end of June," Cate added sorrowfully. "I hope I get to the beach this year."

"What beach?" Alan asked, confused. He was thinking she might be talking about a beach on the Alabama River.

"What beach? What beach!" Miss Logan said. "Are you crazy?"

Alan laughed out loud. "Tell me woman, what beach?"

"Dauphin Island, of course. Didn't you say you lived on the Gulf? Galveston, wasn't it? And you don't know that beach? Good lord, man. Get with it!" Everyone was laughing. It felt good to relax and let it all out.

"Maybe I'll join you later," he said. "Unless I fall asleep. Then you'll have to knock on my door."

"Choose who knocks," Miss Logan said, a sultry tone to her usually down-country accent. "Cate or me. Or both." Cate was laughing, holding on to her side.

"Sally Logan! What in hell has gotten into you? Please, no one pay any attention to her."

"I think you're all nuts," Emil Magda said, pushing his chair away from the table. "I've lived her for four years and none of you ever made a big deal out of me coming down for summer nights."

"Don't feel left out, Emil. They don't give me the time of day, either," Mr. Rosen said sadly.

"Okay, if I'm awake at eight I'll come down. I'm pretty tired, though." He looked at the men. "No malice intended."

"None taken," Emil said, frowning. "I'll be there tonight, by the way. I wouldn't miss this one for a million dollars."

"Me neither," Mr. Rosen said. "I think our presence might prevent an unsuitable event from taking place."

"Mr. Rosen! I'm shocked," Cate said.

"I'm hoping it will be good and unsuitable," Miss Logan said. "As a matter of fact, I'm counting on it."

"You're impossible," Cate said.



“Well, goodnight, for the time being,” Alan said, trying to get away without being rude. He didn’t wait for a reply, but left the dining room quickly and hurried up the staircase to his room. Cool air rushed out at him when he opened the door; Cate must have turned the air-conditioner on when they were chatting during dinner. He reached over to turn the light on when the pain hit, he thought something must have crashed on him from the ceiling. But when the knife twisted in his back, he realized nothing had fallen. The pain was too excruciating to call out for help, and within seconds, he wanted nothing more than to lay down on the clean bed and go to sleep. He fell forward and face hitting the pillow, saw Ellen’s image walking toward him, smiling, saying, “Hi, Dad.”





BOYD WALKED UP THE steps to Mary's house and knocked. When no one answered, he knocked again. He looked in the living room window but it was dark; she was probably out for the evening, known for her forays to the dance clubs in Beauregard. Boyd and Mary dated very briefly many years ago, and there was still a little bit of chemistry between them. He was relieved she wasn't home. He got back into the patrol car and headed out to Frank's although he wanted to talk to Mary to confirm what Alan had said first. Concerned Mary tore up the McPherson's garden; he would use the information to try to get at the truth about Frank and Ellen.

Repeating the same procedure he had the day before, he turned his car off letting it drift up to the house, just in case there was something to see. But he needn't have bothered; the outside lights were ablaze and Frank was standing behind the garage with Ellen in front of him, a hand gun in her hands, his arms outstretched, guiding her hands as she aimed at a target. Boyd waited until the gun fired, evidently a bull's-eye because of the screams of delight and laughter that followed. He put his flashers on just to warn them he was there. They looked up, and Frank took the gun from Ellen, who removed her earmuffs as they walked to meet him.

"Good shot!" he called.

"This girl's a natural," Frank replied. "Born to it."

"What's the occasion?" Boyd asked. It wasn't unusual for father's to teach their children how to shoot, but there was usually a preceding event and although Boyd knew what it was, he wanted to hear it from Frank.

"Just in case I'm not around and she needs to defend herself. Now's the time to learn, not after it's too late."

"What's she defendin' herself from?" Boyd asked softly.

"Can I go inside?" Ellen asked, anxious.

"Of course," Frank said, looking right in Boyd's eyes, challenging him to say differently. "You don't need to talk to her, do you?"

"No, not at all. Good night, Ellen," Boyd said.

The men stood and waited until she was in the house. "I got some news tonight," Boyd said. "I heard that someone, someone who will be unnamed for now, was out here at the cottage and saw you kissing Ellen the other night." Frank started to protest, but Boyd put up his hand. "I'm not out here to accuse you again, Frank, although it might come to that later. What I'm thinkin' was this person may have been the one who tore up your garden."

"What're you sayin? That someone was spyin' on us? And then they picked every goddamned flower out of my yard? Now that makes no sense at all."

"Why would someone think you would be kissin' Ellen? Now this makes two people." Frank wanted to protest; *didn't you just say you weren't accusin' me?* But he was starting to get scared and decided quickly to be his own best witness.

"That night Ellen and me were practicing our dancin'. Come inside and I'll show you the letter we got. She'll tell you herself, we were slow dancin', like we do all the time. Come inside now, Boyd, I'll prove it to you."

"It's not necessary. I believe you. It just isn't looking real good for you right about now, I'm sorry to say."

Frank didn't reply, looking up the house. He could see Ellen moving from window to window, probably worried sick. *Why was everything in our life turning to shit so quickly?*





SATURDAY AFTERNOON, two burly men wearing hazmat suits struggled getting a blood soaked mattress down the steps of the Towering Pines Boarding House front porch. On Friday night when Alan Johnson didn't show up for summer nights wine tasting, Cate went up and tapped on his door, but he didn't answer. The next morning, everyone came down for breakfast, and waited for Alan, debating whether to delay eating or not. His car was out in front so they knew he was still home.

"I think I'll go up and invite him for breakfast," Cate said. No one answered her, watching as she put her napkin down and left the room. She grasped the stair rail and started up the steep flight of stairs, not sure if what she was feeling was annoyance or dread.

Tapping on the door, she called out his name. "Mr. Johnson, Alan. We're having breakfast. Would you like to join us?" She tapped a little louder, but there was no answer. Pulling out a key fob attached to a lanyard pinned to her jeans pocket, she pushed the key in the lock, but hesitated. There was a smell, and it made her pull back. Running down the steps, she grabbed the phone in the hallway and called the sheriff's office,

"What's going on?" Mr. Rosen asked, coming out into the hall. She put her finger up, mouthing *one minute*.

"This is Cate over at Towering Pines. I have a resident who isn't answering his door and I'm concerned. There is a smell coming from the room."

Dispatch replied they would send someone over as soon as they could. Cate hung up and went back into the dining room. Everyone was watching her as she poured a cup of coffee with shaking hands.

"Do you want me to go up and look in on him?" Miss Logan asked. "I saw a corpse once when I was in beauty school, right at the entrance of Buford Medical. He didn't make it to the ER." Cate grimaced, shaking her head.

"Stop with the gruesome talk, will you please? It's probably nothing; I just don't want to barge in."

"What if he needs help and your modesty is keepin' him from gettin' it?" Miss Logan said.

"She's got a point," Mr. Rosen said.

"He could be in there choking to death and we're out here makin' small talk."

"Would you mind going?" Cate asked Mr. Rosen.

"I can't stand the sight of anyone suffering. Let Miss Logan go." Against her better judgment, Cate unpinned the fob from her jeans pocket and handed the keys over to Miss Logan. She started up the steps and everyone followed, Emil Magda covering his face, fingers spread so he could see.

"I already smell death," he said. "It's the same at work."

"Shut up Emil," Miss Logan snapped. They reached the landing and Cate pointed to Alan's door.

"Go for it." Miss Logan put the key in the door and as she turned it, everyone involuntarily stepped back one-step.

"Oh! Is that blood?" she said, walking slowly toward the bed. Alan was face down on the quilt, fabric bunched up in both hands. His eyes were open, and weirdly, he was smiling. "Oh no, I think he's dead." She turned to see why no had responded and they were cowering out in the hall.

"Someone call the sheriff back, in stead of standing there like a dummy. We've got a corpse here."

"Did you feel for a pulse?" Cate asked.

“The man’s been stabbed for heaven sake. Or shot. Right in the back. Your Aunt Petra’s quilt is a goner, by the way. You should have let me have it when I asked ten years ago.”

“Not the quilt,” Mr. Rosen said, snickering. Cate flashed him a dirty look and tiptoed in the room. Seeing Alan, obviously dead, she gasped.

“Oh no! Someone came in here and murdered the man? But when?” Miss Logan pushed her aside and ran out of the room.

“I’ll call the sheriff myself,” she said, pushing by the group. “Honest to god what a bunch of useless pieces of crap you three are.” Miss Logan ran down the stairs to the phone in the front hallway and dialed the operator, asking for the sheriff. Hand muffling the phone in case one of them called out something inane, they walked down the stairs huddled together.

“What if the murderer is still in the house?” Emil asked, voice shaking.

“What if it’s one of us?” Mr. Rosen asked. Cate pushed him away, disgusted.

“I’ll go clean up from breakfast,” Cate said.

“Not yet! I didn’t eat and I’m starving,” Miss Logan said. “Oh hell, I’ve got a booked morning, too.”

“Let someone else take your appointments,” Mr. Rosen said. “The sheriff will probably want you around to question, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Miss Logan snapped. “Don’t you have something to do?”

“I didn’t eat, either,” he answered.

“Me either,” Emil replied.

“Get away from me, all of you!” Finally, dispatch answered and Miss Logan told her what they’d found.

“Don’t let anyone touch anything,” dispatch said. Miss Logan rolled her eyeballs.

“Of course I won’t.” She ended the call and joined the others in the dining room. “I’ll lock up the room again so they can’t accuse us of tamperin’ with the scene, and then I’m eatin’ with the rest of ya.”

“Nothing has ever happened like it here,” Cate said, upset. “It won’t be good for business.”

“Well, since he’s the first new person come around in a while, I think you’ll be okay,” Miss Logan said, turning her head to roll her eyeballs again.

Margo Portland stepped out of the shower and heard talking coming from her bedroom. It would be Boyd on a call. He’d come over first thing that morning and they’d had a wonderful time in bed, the first in a long while. She knew he’d have to leave eventually, but hoped they’d be able to have breakfast together.

“Do you have to go?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so. You’ll never guess in a million years.”

“Oh no, don’t do that to me,” she said. “Tell me before I burst.”

“Alan Johnson was found dead in the upstairs guest room at Towering Pines.”

“No way!” Margo plopped down on the edge of the bed watching Boyd buckle his holster around his waist. “I was there when he came back to Cate’s last night.”

“Is that right? Sounds like a murder, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

“How is that possible? Was it Frank?” she asked, the words just popping out of her mouth. Margo felt sick. *Please, not Frank.*

“Oh God, I hope not,” Boyd said, frowning. “I never even thought of him. I thought a jerk comes into town and pisses someone off.”

“Right, Boyd. Frank McPherson.” But Boyd was shaking his head.

“No way. I can’t see Frank killing a squirrel, let alone a man. And this was a stabbing. It was personal. Did Johnson say anything about, well about anything last night?”

“Just that he was sure he was Ellen’s father and when he told Mary, she wasn’t happy about it.” Boyd put that tidbit into his knowledge bank.

“Look, are you going to be around later? We need to talk.”

“Not that,” she said, cowering. “Don’t ruin my weekend, if you don’t mind.”

“No, no, nothing like that. Just the opposite. I want to move out of the house and move in here.” He took her by the arms and looked into her eyes. “But I have to go right now, so just think about it.”

Margo was stunned speechless, but walked him to the door and kissed him goodbye, not checking to see if they were being observed. It didn’t make any difference now, or soon wouldn’t. For a moment, guilt struggled to overtake her joy, but lost. If she couldn’t have Frank, Boyd would be just fine.

• • • •

MARY LAY IN BED WITH an arm slung over her face. Hung over, miserable, the longed-for romantic relationship was not happening for her. The thought of going into the café made her ill, but she had to do it. June was the last friend she had, the only other woman in town who understood her, who was willing to stick her neck out for her, and June had the afternoon free. She had to go in and relieve her. Sitting up at the side of the bed, the room spun for a few seconds, just long enough to raise her gorge so that she threw up with such force it hit the wall. Mostly liquid but with a few mushy pretzel bits, acid burned her throat and crept into her nostrils. It was going to be a rough day.

Showering, she hummed a tune, a child’s old Bible tune to help her keep from thinking too much. *Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a river running deep and wide.* What had happened the evening before between her and Alan reverberated through her head unless she thought of that song, and it became a mantra to her, protecting her from anguish. Remembering her mother suddenly only intensified the torment and it would take more than a nursery rhyme to chase that vision away.

Valarie Cook, town drunk. A surprising laugh popped out of Mary’s mouth. Where’d laughter come from? Living with her mother in that same house was no laughing matter. It was a sign of the times; people didn’t interfere in others lives. Their neighbors, the mother’s of Mary’s few little friends, her school teachers looked the other way when it was clear a severe case of abuse and neglect was taking place right under their noses. Margo’s well-meaning parents took her to church every Sunday and the few Bible verses she memorized entitled her to her very own vinyl bound Bible. *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* Closing her eyes, she let the water run down her face while she prayed the verse.

The atmosphere in the town now would never stand for it; the gossipers would make sure they protected the children, even second handedly, through gossip. She stepped out of the shower and dried off, dressed for work, avoiding looking in the mirror. The night had to have taken a toll on her face, another stranger, groping in the back of the bar, a promise of a call that would never come. *Help me God.* Batting away a stray tear, something had to happen soon to make life worth living.

• • • •

WEARING AN OLD APRON of Margaret’s, Frank was at the stove flipping pancakes, the old radio tuned to the national news. Still in bed, the smell of vanilla woke Ellen up and she smiled at the thought of a special treat for a late Saturday morning brunch, just because. She was used to Margaret being gone, but the monthly trips to Hallowsbrook would be harder to forget. Now they could have



breakfast together and laze around without having to go anywhere until six pm when they were due in Beauregard for the dance contest.

“Knock, knock,” Frank said, standing outside of her bedroom, looking in the crack of the open door.

“I’m awake,” she said, sitting up. “What do I smell?”

Frank came through the door with a tray, holding her breakfast.

Bouncing up and down, Ellen started to laugh. “My breakfast? In bed? I feel like a princess.”

“Pancakes, strawberries, and tea.” He put the tray on the table where she did her homework during the school year but which lay fallow for the past week, and helped pull pillows into place behind her back. “Here you go. Today is gonna be a day of peace if I have to kill someone. We have to save our strength for tonight!”

“Don’t answer the door or the phone. Isn’t that what momma used to say? If they come unannounced they can be ignored.” Placing the tray across her knees, he left the room to get his coffee.

“Here’s what I’d like to do,” he said, coming back in and sitting on her desk chair while she ate. “I’ll get the grill out of the garage. Let’s drag those old chairs out, too and hose them down. And the picnic table; the benches need to be sanded.”

“I can sand,” Ellen said.

“Okay, sister, that’s your task. We can cook chicken on the grill and I’ll make potato salad,” Frank said. “That just feels like summer to me. If you want, we can get your old wading pool out, too and fill that thing up.”

“The rings have air leaks,” she replied laughing. “That thing is as old as I am.”

“I gotta tire repair kit around here somewhere. Sittin’ in four inches of water cold from the well on a hundred degree day just sounds refreshing.” They looked up when loud knocking at the front door disturbed their morning.

“Bother,” Frank grumbled, standing up.

“Don’t go,” Ellen said. “Remember we said we wouldn’t answer the door.” He walked to the window and pulled aside the curtain.

“It’s Boyd Dalton.”

“Again?” she said, annoyed. He left the room to answer, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach hit him out of nowhere.

“This is beginning to feel like harassment,” he said, opening the door.

“I know,” the sheriff said. “Can I come in? I need to talk to both you.”

“Ellen’s still in bed having breakfast. Come on back.”

“But this is bad, Frank. You might want her to come out here, no bad associations in her bedroom.”

“What is it?” Frank scratched his head. *Did the garage burn down? Margaret was gone, there wasn’t anything else they cared about that could be upsetting.*

“Well, maybe it’s better if I tell you first. You can tell her when the time is right. Alan Johnson was murdered last night.” He watched Frank’s face, and the man truly looked shocked. Confused, and then shocked.

“How?” Nervous stumbling over his words, “Why? The man just came to town. What enemies could he have?” Sheriff Dalton looked intently at Frank, although his name hadn’t come up yet, the truth was Frank was probably the only person who had anything to lose by Alan’s presence.

“You don’t think I had anything to do with it now, do you?” he asked, shocked. “When did it happen? I’ve been here all mornin’.”

“Last night, after dinner,” the sheriff said. “Down in Beauregard.”

“Well there you go, no one’s safe on those streets, the town has risin’ crime,” Frank said, breathlessly. “Besides, you was here, remember? I ain’t been away from home since we got here after work yesterday.”

“He was staying at Towering Pines,” the sheriff replied, pointing over his shoulder, south. “It happened in his room. His body was discovered this morning.”

“Towering Pines? I thought he was stayin’ over with Mary. The women was talkin’ about it so loud at Miss Logan’s I could hear it over the compressor.” It was the sheriff’s turn to snicker.

“Anyway, I needed to tell you because of, well, the paternity thing. How you think it’s going to affect Ellen?”

“She’s gonna be upset, what else?” Frank said. “The girl just met the man, thinkin’ here’s a real family member. I hate to be the one have to tell her, truth be told.”

“Do you want me to say something?” Frank shook his head.

“Naw, that’s my job. But the other, you can’t think I had anything to do with it.”

“Don’t worry about it now,” the sheriff said. “Not yet. You might be asked to come into the station for questioning.” He stepped over to the door. “Sorry to upset your morning. What’s the occasion?”

“For what?” Frank asked, confused.

“Breakfast in bed,” the sheriff asked, turning to look at Frank again.

“Somethin’ special. We’re still gettin’ used to not going to Hallowsbrook Saturday morning. Today was our visitin’ day. And we got a dance contest tonight.”

“Oh, right,” the sheriff said, extending his hand. “I’m sorry Frank. I keep forgetting about your loss. Forgive me,” he said, nodding his head. Frank shut and locked the door after the sheriff and turned to go to Ellen’s room when he saw her standing in the hallway.

“Did you hear?” he asked, seeing the look of shock on her face.

“I don’t get it,” she answered. “Both my parents, dead within three months of each other. You’ll always be my dad, Frank, but this seems almost planned, don’t it?”

“Don’t get paranoid,” he said, putting his hand on the back of her head and pulling her to his chest. “It’s just an ungodly coincidence.”

“Does he suspect you’re involved in some way?”

“I hope to hell not, excuse my language, sister. I hope to hell not.”

However, the assistant district attorney, Faye Baker was chomping at the bit to get Sheriff Dalton to talk to Frank. “It’s time to bring him in for a chat at the very least, regarding these child abuse allegations. It’s been two days now and I don’t want to wait until Monday.”

“I’ll call him,” Frank said. “I’ve been out there daily and already once today. It’ll look like harassment if I go again. He’s already used the word.”

“Ha! I doubt the man knows what it means,” the attorney said.

“Don’t let Frank’s simple talk fool you, Faye. Still water runs deep over there at the garage.”

“Whatever, Boyd. Talk to him, please.” So after hanging up, he closed the door to his office and picked up the phone again, dialing Frank McPherson’s number yet again.

“Come on down to the station, Frank,” he said, friendly and unthreatening. “I just want to talk to you about the allegations.”

“When do you want me? I was spendin’ the day with my child, trying to make it special for her. You already ruined her breakfast.”

“I’m truly sorry, Frank, but I felt you needed to know about Alan.”

“I don’t feel safe leavin’ her here.”

“Drop her off at Margo’s, Frank. Margo would love the company and Ellen knows her.” He’d have to call Margo quickly to let her know he’d volunteered her to babysit a fifteen-year-old. There was silence over the line for a moment, but Frank finally spoke.

“Okay, I can do that. She might object, being fifteen and all, but I don’t feel right leavin’ her here alone.”

“I gotcha, Frank. I don’t know I would, either.” After they hung up, Frank went back to Ellen’s room where they were trying to finish breakfast. She frowned seeing the expression on his face.

“Who was that? I heard the phone ring,” she asked, concerned.

“It was the sheriff again. He asked me to come down and talk about the *allegations*.” He was embarrassed talking about it with her, insinuating their relationship was dirty tainted the goodness of it. “I’m going to drop you off at Margo Portland’s place.”

“Do I have to go?”

“I wish I could let you stay here at home, but after everything with the garden, its better this way. The station is just a few blocks away from Margo’s house and you know her.”

She didn’t argue, but he could tell she wasn’t happy, it added to the news about Alan Johnson. Still not sure of the impact it was going to have on her, Frank was silent about the murder. There didn’t seem to be much left to say.

They drove into town, pulling up to Margo’s place. “This house looks like it’s made of gingerbread,” he said, walking up to the door with Ellen. It was a tiny Victorian cottage painted pale peach and the wooden curly-cues and ornamentation were turquoise and lavender. Ellen looked at the house as if seeing it for the first time.

“Why can’t I go with you?” she asked.

“It just wouldn’t be good, sittin’ there alone while I’m bein’ asked questions. And I don’t know how long I’ll be. You got yer book and all, you’ll be fine with Margo.” He knocked and Margo opened the door right away, smiling, sincerely happy to see them.

“Come in!” she stood aside so they could pass, but Frank stayed on the porch.

“Thank you for havin’ her,” he said. “I guess I can call you when I know what’s what.”

He felt foolish having no answers, but he didn’t know what was in store for him.

“That’ll be fine. We’ll be staying here unless Ellen has something she’d like to do.”

Margo smiled at her, but Ellen was upset and looked away. Frank said goodbye and Ellen went to hug him. Margo thought he seemed surprised, like they weren’t used to hugging, but he hugged Ellen back, then took her by the upper arms.

“Everything will be okay, I’m sure of it,” he said. “You take care now. Read your book and try to have some fun.” He’d never seen her look like this, fragile almost, near tears. Ellen was not a crier. He released her and walked to the truck while she watched, waving to her before he got in and drove off.

Ellen felt like a big hole had swallowed him up.

“Are you okay?” Margo asked gently. But Ellen was afraid to speak, so she shook her head. “Well come over here and sit down. You can read your book or watch TV. Here’s a bowl of candy. I can’t eat sugar, so help yourself, less temptation for me. I can make you a snack or some tea. Anything you want.”

The room was a woman’s room, thoughtfully decorated with feminine touches, but one a man would be comfortable in. Margo pointed to an overstuffed couch covered in off white cotton canvas. There was a fat calico cat sleeping on the arm, and Ellen reached out to pet it.

“Why are they doin’ this to us?” Ellen said, finally speaking. “Frank did nothin’ wrong. He’s the best father to me.”

Margo waited for Ellen to say something about Alan Johnson, but her mind seemed far from it, the focus all on Frank.

“It’s just to protect you, honey. The authorities need to follow up on accusations they hear.”

“But why would anyone accuse Frank of messin’ with me?”

The cat stepped down from the arm of the couch and onto Ellen’s lap, rubbing its head against her chin, purring. The gentleness of the cat touched Ellen and she lost her control and started to cry.

“He has never, *ever* made me feel uncomfortable. *You* know what he’s like with me better than anyone else does. He was so concerned to keep everything right between us he wouldn’t even talk to me about my body when I was growin’ up.”

Margo remembered five years ago that Frank asked her to talk to Ellen about menstruation. It was during that time that fantasies of Ellen being her daughter and Frank being her husband began, ripening her for Boyd when he made *his* move and things with Frank seemed hopeless.

“Yes, he was so sweet calling to set up the appointment. I do remember Ellen. And if I’m asked in his defense, I will definitely bring it up. I’ve been seeing you since you were a toddler, I would have noticed if anything were amiss. But we’ll wait for someone to ask me. They haven’t formally accused him of anything yet. There’s no proof. You shouldn’t worry, okay?” She took a step of faith that Ellen would submit to a hug, so she scooted closer to her on the couch and put her arm around her. “You’ve had a tough year.”

Ellen didn’t respond, but she knew Margo was referring to her mother dying. It had to have affected her, but she was in denial about its impact. Seeing the garden ruined was more devastating than the day Margaret died. She’d never forget the sequence of events. They’d gone to see her the previous Saturday and she was fine, had taken the trouble to prepare for the visit by dressing, putting lipstick on and combing her hair, surprising Ellen who’d then allowed hope to sneak in since Margaret seemed so much better.

“Look how nice Mrs. McPherson looks today!” The nurses said, crowding around the door to her room. Margaret was warm and talkative, almost animated that day. It was the last time they would see her alive.

The following Wednesday, Mary visited Hallowsbrook, and reported to Frank that evening that Margaret had gotten worse. “Frank, you better prepare yourself that Margaret’s not comin’ home. You and the girl need to face reality so it’s not so hard when it finally happens.”

He took to heart what Mary said, and when he got home from the garage that evening, he repeated her words to Ellen “Mary was by the hospital today and said your momma didn’t look too good.”

“What does that mean, Frank? It doesn’t make any sense. She’s been doing so much better. Did Mary say she looked sick? Maybe we should call the hospital.” But Frank hadn’t thought to ask and sure enough, Margaret died that night. Frank felt awful and if Ellen blamed him for not making the call, she never said.

A memory as transparent as a dragonfly wing fluttered through her mind, of her mother, dressed in a gingham blouse and a pair of denim capris, canvas shoes and her hair pulled back in a rubber band, standing in the bathroom putting bright red lipstick on.

“Whatcha doin’ momma?” Five-year-old Ellen asked.

“Why, I’m makin’ up my *face* so we can go to the garden for a bit to pull weeds.”

“But why are you puttin’ on lipstick for that?”

“Your daddy might come home for lunch and I don’t want him to catch me without my face on.” Those few words resonated every time she visited her mother in the hospital, especially those last months when Margaret started to recover.

Ellen was blossoming into womanhood at the same time Margaret came out of her fog. “Ellen, you’re growing up. You’re beautiful and it scares me. Frank, promise me you won’t let Mary near the girl. Promise me!”

“No worries, dear, none. Neither of us want her around, now do we?” Frank was appalled the conversation had taken place in front of Ellen.

“No momma, you don’t have to worry about it, okay? Ever.” While Margo held her, she thought of those unconnected things, of her mother’s concern for her wellbeing, and then that her birth father had lived with Mary for a few days. She shook her head.

“Alan lived with Mary, did you know that?” Ellen asked, looking carefully at Margo, ready to judge her response.

“He did,” she answered. “But just as a boarder.”

“I don’t think so,” Ellen replied confidently. “They were *together* together.” Margo sensed that Ellen was more aware of what was going on than she was giving her credit for.

“What makes you say that?” she asked, gently.

“Mary. The way she acted when she came into the garage, all sugary. She was trying to make my dad jealous. ‘I’ve got a date tonight. A guy from Texas goes by the name of Alan,’ she said. ‘He’s lookin’ for work, if you know of anything. And I’d sure like to keep him in Seymour.’ My dad jumped at the chance to get her off his back.” Margo turned her head to smirk; Mary Cook was a piece of work.

“Yes, well it does sound like they were dating.”

“After a few days? She’s disgusting.”

“It sounds like you have strong feelings about Mary,” Margo said.

“My mother never really liked her, yet Mary pretended they were best of friends. She warned me to stay away from Mary. There’s something super creepy about her.”

The hair on Margo’s arms stood up when Ellen spoke. There *was* something creepy about her. Margo remembered when they were growing up, bringing Mary home with her after school so she could get a decent meal, Mary asking if she could spend the night on school nights so she could bathe.

“Our water’s shut off,” she’d say. “My ma won’t care if I stay here tonight or forever.” The truth was, Mary wanted to live with Margo’s family, but she was only tolerable in small doses, often opinionated and ungrateful. Margo’s mother and father opened the house to Mary, and she’d complain about the food she was served or stole Margo’s clothes. It was a no-win situation.

“She visited your mother every week, didn’t she?”

“Only because Margaret had no control over who saw her. She died after Mary’s last visit. That always bothered me, but I never said nothin’ to Frank. We saw her on Saturday and she was better, she’d made the effort to fix herself up for Frank and was talking to us. You know they were thinkin’ of releasing her. I know Frank had his hopes up, that maybe my mother was on the mend.

“A few days later, Mary visited and came back to tell my dad she looked real bad, like she wasn’t going to last long. That night she died. They said she could have done it herself. But I don’t believe it for a minute.” Ellen bowed her head again, crying, expressing grief long overdue. Margo, trembling, put her arm around Ellen again, patting her hair. No one knew exactly what had happened to Margaret out at Hallowsbrook.

“At her *funeral*, I heard Mary whispering to Frank, beggin’ him to give her a chance now that my momma was dead. She used that word; *dead*. Not gone, not passed away. *Dead*. We never even used it once. I saw Frank go pale when she as talkin’ to him. Of course, he never says nothin’ bad about anyone unless it’s in a teasin’ way. But Mary sets his teeth on edge. He never came out and said it, but I know him.” Margo didn’t know how to respond except to try to get her to continue to talk.

“You don’t believe your mother died of natural causes.”

“No mam, I do not. Not anymore.”

“What do you think happened?” Her heart pounding, Margo didn’t want to plant ideas.

Ellen sat up straight and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I think Mary killed her.”

“Why do you think *Mary* did it?” Margo asked, chills traveling up and down her arms.

“She’s always after my dad like I said, even at the funeral.” Ellen had never called Frank *her dad* to Margo before. “He was embarrassed by it and tried to hide it from me. But I could see it, especially at the graduation dance last month.” Margo remembered Mary’s behavior that day. “She kept trying to break in, but Frank wouldn’t allow it and it made her angry.”

“But wasn’t your mother gone already?”

“Yes mam, but just since end of March. And she was flirtin’ with him in public at the dance. He almost caused a scene. Mary wanted my dad to herself. And he wasn’t cooperating.”

Not knowing what to say, Mary was pushy and inappropriate in the best of times, but that hardly made her a murderer. Deciding to downplay what Ellen thought, she’d let Frank know and she’d legally have to tell Boyd. It wouldn’t look right otherwise. She knew Mary didn’t kill Margaret.

• • • •

BOYD DALTON WAS WAITING for Frank’s questioning to begin, standing on the other side of the two-way glass. He looked at his watch as one of the detectives, Dave Madden came in. “What’s the hold up?”

“Faye. She was supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“She told me to bring him in right away, for Christ’s sake.” Seething, Boyd watched Frank sit with his legs crossed, tapping on the desk. He’d known Frank since kindergarten; the man was innocent of everything they’d accused him of, but it was his job to make sure the girl was safe. It was a contradiction. High-heeled footsteps in the hall signaled the arrival of Faye Baker.

“Why are you in here?” Faye asked, annoyed, looking at Frank alone in the interrogation room. “Dave, are you questioning the man or not?”

“I’ve been here for an hour waiting to do it, Faye.” She gave him a dirty look as he walked into the room where Frank was waiting. They listened for fifteen minutes as he questioned him about what the gossipers saw. Then, surprising the sheriff, Dave asked Frank about Alan Johnson. It was the same line of questioning they would ask every suspect; where were you, do you have anyone who can confirm it, what was your relationship to the deceased?

Dave shook Frank’s hand and said he’d be back in a moment, returning to the two-way mirror room. “Unless you have anything else to ask him, I think we’re done with this guy,” he said. “It’s a damn shame someone from the community is as beleaguered by gossip as this man has been.”

Faye shrugged her shoulders. “Do we have his prints on file? We should be hearing any second from CSI.”

“Frank was in the Navy, so I’m sure his prints are in the system,” Boyd replied sarcastically.

“Tell him to go home,” Faye said.

Frank pulled in front of Margo's house, surprised when Ellen came bounding down the steps, calling his name. "Frank! You're back!" Getting out of the truck, she ran into the street to meet him, and jumped into his arms. He hugged her, holding her feet off the ground, smiling at Margo.

"What's this all about? I was only gone two hours."

"Two hours too long," she said, near tears. "Let me get my stuff." She smiled at Margo as she went back into the house for her book and bag.

"Frank I need to tell you something quickly before Ellen comes back out. She said she believes Mary killed Margaret."

Frank yelled, "What?" But Margo put her fingers to her lips.

"Shush, please. I don't want her to think I betrayed her confidence. I just think you should know." Frank was about to say something when Ellen came back out.

"Let's go home Frank. Thank you very much, Miss Portland. It was nice havin' someone to talk to." She smiled and got into the passenger side of the truck.

Margo watched them drive off together, inexplicably saddened. *So much pain in the world.* She wondered how long it would take Frank to *realize he was a free man, in every sense of the word.*







INVESTIGATORS FOUND a bloody knife in one of the trashcans behind the bus stop at the end of the street Towering Pines was on. Forensics thought it was the weapon used to stab and murder Alan Johnson and would know for sure when his blood was found on it. Fingerprints in Alan's room and on the knife handle didn't match and weren't in the system.

After Frank's questioning was over, Boyd Dalton went to the lab with Detective Madden to look at the knife. "Check this out," Dave said. "There's a very tiny engraving here at the side of the knife." It was an expensive restaurant knife, a carving knife; not a hunting knife anyone could acquire easily from a hunting store.

"I'm over forty," Boyd replied squinting at the blade. "You want me to see something that small get a magnifying glass." Dave rummaged through the drawers until he found a glass with a handle. They angled the glass until the inscription was clear.

"Baker Forge, Professional Restaurant # 9490." He got on the phone to talk to the investigative team who had already discovered the knife inscription.

"The forge is located in New York," he said after hanging up. "They're waiting for a call back."

The case file open in front of Boyd, they slowly leafed through the paper. No one had talked to Mary Cook yet. "He was at Mary's house before returning to Towering Pines," Dave said. "At least that's what it says here."

"Margo was there last night having dinner when he walked in. Mary wasn't too happy about him being Ellen's father, according to Johnson."

"How's everything going with Margo?" Dave said changing the subject, concern for his friend.

"Good. I'm leaving Carol, moving in to Margo's cottage, so I guess I'll be going to hell."

"You prepared for some other guy to come along and snatch up your ex? It'll happen, and it'll hurt," Dave replied, frowning. "I've been there."

"I hope it does. I want her to be happy," Boyd said confidently. "And the sooner she replaces me the better for her."

"Oh, don't count on it buddy. You might regret it big time. Think about some greasy shmuck being with your children. Trust me, it's all well and good to think Carol will be off your back, but what if the guy she picks doesn't like your kids?"

"Jesus, will you give it a rest? I haven't even moved out yet."

"Okay, but take your time making any decisions." Boyd didn't reply, sorry he'd answered in the first place. *Every man's experience was different, wasn't it?*

"I'm going over to Mary's place," he said, picking up his hat. As he drove through town, he imagined what it would be like when he moved into Margo's cottage, Carol driving over to Family-Owned and slowing down as she passed the house, or if what Dave said came to pass, seeing her with another man. A light shiver went through his body at the image of her kissing someone else.

Bombarded with thoughts of Carol and Margo, murder and child abuse, he arrived at Mary's and started to pull into the driveway when her neighbor, Peter came dashing out, waving his arms and pointing to the concrete.

"Don't drive up here!" he yelled. Boyd put on his brakes and rolled down the window.

"What's going on Peter," he said, annoyed. "I was already up this driveway today."

“Your girlfriend had a temper tantrum last night after her beau left in a huff. As you can see, she smashed a mug to smithereens. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

Boyd got out of the car and looked down at the pavement, a thin layer of glistening substance covering an area of the concrete.

“Okay, thank you for warning me.”

“My pleasure, don’t want an officer of the law gettin’ a flat tire. She was madder than hell. Run outta here half hour latter, crying and mumbling to herself.”

“Did she come back? I was here earlier and there was no answer.”

“She left for work with her uniform on about an hour ago.” Boyd tipped his hat in Peter’s direction.

“By the way, she’s not my girlfriend. I’m here on business, not that it’s any of your business,” Boyd said.

“You were a fine pair, back in the day,” Peter said. “She’d never give me the time of day.”

“Maybe if you took a bath once in a while you’d have more luck with the ladies,” Boyd answered.” But Peter just laughed.

“Take me as I am, that’s my motto.” Getting into the car, Boyd waved, thinking that Peter might have just provided some information they didn’t expect. He steered the patrol car toward Main Street and the café, fluttering in the pit of his stomach. It wasn’t unusual for officers to come in for lunch so she wouldn’t suspect he was there for her. Not right away, anyway.

A parking spot open in front of the beauty salon, Miss Logan saw him pull up, fueling her dialogue about the morning at Towering Pines, in spite of being asked not to talk about it. “Look, there he goes now. I bet you a hundred bucks he’s goin’ to talk to Miss Mary Quite Contrary about her late boyfriend.”

Boyd removed his hat as he walked into the café and heads turned, looking on in admiration as they always did when he entered a room. Mary was standing at a table full of women with her order pad poised in the air, and he swore her face turned white when she saw him as he pulled a chair out to sit down. The women looked at him, church ladies from the area frowning, and he immediately thought they were thinking of Margo and him, having an affair.

*Get your head together, Dalton*, he thought. *Focus. Alan Johnson*. Watching Mary walk to the kitchen to place the order on the raised counter window, she lingered there for a moment longer than she really needed to. Turning, she picked up a menu and walked stiltedly to him, he could see she was hesitating, that she was frightened.

“Afternoon, sheriff,” she said, handing him the menu.

“How’s it going?” he asked, watching her. “Any specials?”

“Meatloaf or lake perch. Your choice of sides, same as always.”

“What time you get off today, Mary? I was by the house earlier, but you didn’t answer. We need to talk.”

“I get off at three, same as always,” she repeated. “You want to look at the menu a while longer or do you know what you’ll have?”

“Patience, patience.” He looked around the dining room and it was emptying out. Saturdays in the summer, people went to the beach and had picnics on the riverbanks, not diner food in town. “What’d you do last night?”

“Seriously? You’re gonna ask me that? What’s wrong? Margo give you the ax?” He wanted to say *how’d you know about Margo*, but it was obvious. Town gossip.

Instead, he laughed out loud. "I wasn't asking because I wanted a date, Mary. I'm asking because your boyfriend was found with a knife wound in his back, dead. You know anything about that?" He knew the timing was terrible here at her place of employment, but he wanted to see her response and it was about what he hoped it would be.

"You're lying," she said, color draining from her face again, her hands gripping the pen and pad.

"I am not, Mary. Flip the radio on. It's all over the dial."

"Your timing sucks," she replied. "I got orders to give out. If you aren't going to order something get out."

"Ha! What're you gonna do? Call the cops?" She sneered at him and he laughed again, opening the menu.

Mary couldn't believe someone had murdered Alan. It was almost as though the last week had never happened, that he'd never come into the café, or moved into her house, or made love to her. Feeling as if she could throw up again, Mary passed out plates of food to the table of women, the smell of cabbage and fried onions wafting up to her nose, nauseating. When everyone had their food, she went back to get Boyd's order, wishing she could slap his smug face.

"Isn't there a law against harassing a citizen at their place of business?"

"I'll take the steak and fries," he said. "Coffee, if it's fresh."

"I should piss in your cup," Mary replied.

"Peter tells me you had a little temper fit after lover boy left your place last night." He ignored her gasp. "Rumor has it you weren't too happy about his news. Not that it's been confirmed yet. Don't want that gettin' around if it's not true."

"What news are you referring to?"

"That Mr. Johnson is, *was* Ellen Fisher's real father," Boyd said, smiling. "Rumor has it that you were so upset, you smashed his mug in your driveway last night after he left your place."

"Your sources don't know what they're talking about," she answered smugly. "Prove it, Dalton."

"You don't seem very upset about his demise."

"Give me a moment or two to think about it, jerk. Now I'm putting your order in and if you don't leave me alone, I'm calling the station."

"Why not come down after work, instead," he replied. "Give us a chance to talk to you in front of a video camera."

"Why? Since when is it against the law to break up china in your own driveway?"

"Oh! Is *that* what you were doing? Peter tells a different story."

"You goin' around questioning my neighbors for no good reason is another form of harassment," Mary said, disgusted.

She walked away to put his order in and lingered behind the lunch counter for a while. Boyd was reading the paper, the morning edition left behind by an earlier patron. But he watched her over the paper's edge from time to time, wondering. She was attractive, smart, funny. Why couldn't she keep a man interested in her? He thought of his own relationship with her before he married Carol, how for a few short weeks he'd enjoyed being with her until her craziness made it unbearable.

"Here's your steak," she said, putting down a platter of food in front of him, with a steak knife poised over the edge. She walked away before he could respond, but he was fixated on the knife. It was a smaller version of the knife covered in Alan Johnson's blood. The bloody juices seeping out of the meat and the thought of the knife at the station, while it had been wiped clean by the time he saw it, made him queasy. He picked it up with a paper napkin and though he could barely see the

engraving, since he'd already seen it once that day, the letters spelling Baker Forge jumped out at him. Heart thumping, appetite gone, he waved Mary over.

"Can I have a takeout box? Our chat used up all my lunch time." She didn't reply, but retrieved a cardboard container for his food and went back to the counter without engaging him again. He left a twenty dollar bill on the table, a fifty percent tip for miserable service, but he had it coming.

"See you later," he said, waving, and left the café, anxious to return to the station with his latest find, a four-inch steak knife carefully wrapped in a paper napkin in the box his leftovers came in.





FRANK AND ELLEN SPENT the rest of the day in the yard as they'd planned after the detour to the sheriff's office. Chicken ready for the grill, they made potato salad and chucked corn and were slicing strawberries to top ice cream sundaes. More flats of petunias sat in the shade, waiting for planting. They'd weed and primp the garden, a favorite summer pastime.

"Who's that, sister?" Frank said, looking up at the road, shading his eyes with his hand. A human being walked toward the house, but its sex was unclear. "I need glasses."

"It's Mary!" Ellen replied, disgusted. "Why is she comin' here?"

"Bother," Frank mumbled. "Hide them berries. She's the last one I want to have to invite for a meal." Ellen picked up the tray of food and took it around to the back of the house into the kitchen. *What did Mary want?*

As she got closer, Frank could see she was in distress. They busied themselves resuming the sanding of the picnic table while they waited for her approach.

"Hi, thought I'd drop by," she called when she reached the driveway. She took a crumpled tissue out of her pocket and blew her nose. When they didn't respond, she stopped walking and called out, "Mind if I come up?"

"No," Frank said. "As you like." Caught off guard by his attitude, Mary hesitated. Frank was always polite, even when the most aggravated with her.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

Frank stood up. "What can I do for you, Mary?"

"I got bad news today, that's all. I came by to give my condolences to Ellen about her real father." Ellen looked up when she heard the word *real*.

"No disrespect, Miss Cook, but Frank here is my *real* father. My *only* father. Please remember that when you come around his house."

"You got a smart mouth on you for a girl," Mary snapped. "Frank, I'd think you'd want her to be more mindful of speakin' to adults."

"Mary, why'd you come out here?" Frank asked, exasperated. "We done nothin' to you. Your opinion about my child ain't welcome, neither."

She came closer, and then sat down with a plunk on the picnic table bench and started to cry. "I never did anything to you, yet you're so mean to me! I was there for Margaret from the time she got here. Her and you, Ellen. Took you both in and gave you what I had. I never asked for nothin' in return."

"Yet you talked trash about Frank to anyone who would listen," Ellen snapped. "Shame on you. It's disgusting."

"What did I say?" she said. "That I saw you two through the living room window, in a lover's embrace."

"That's a lie!" Ellen shouted, Frank going to her and patting her.

"Quiet up, sister, no point in gettin' yourself in a tizzy about it." To Mary, he said, "When in God's name did you ever see us doing that? Maybe in a dream, or a nightmare."

"Just this week! I was walkin' by the river and I looked up and there it was, as plain as day."

"Monday night, someone tore up our garden," Ellen said softly. "Was that you? Mary Cook, my mother's best friend. Was that you who destroyed her peonies? The roses? Not a petal left behind?"

Mary's face belied her next words as the flush came up her neck. "It wasn't me. It was a coincidence. I was here on the river's edge and I saw you and snuck up by the garage. That's when I saw the two of you, holding each other, rocking, kissing. It was disgusting."

Frank chortled loudly, slapping his hands on his knees. "Mary, we was dancin'! What you saw was us slow dancin', like we always do. You better get home. I don't think you're in your right mind, lady. Get on home before I call the sheriff and tell him you was the vandal who ruined our garden."

The three of them waited, his words sinking in. Mary, family friend albeit annoying as could be, had so much venom for them that she could do that to a beautiful garden. "How did it get to this? All I wanted was to be your wife, Frank. Be Ellen's mother."

"You can't force such things, Mary. We would have been together before Margaret ever came to town if it was meant to be."

Ellen had left so quietly they hadn't noticed. She was inside on the phone, calling the sheriff, telling the dispatcher Mary Cook had just admitted she was at their house the night the garden was ruined.

Sitting at his desk, Boyd had a new file in front of him. In it was the coroner's report from the autopsy of Margaret Fisher McPherson, nurse's notes from Hallowsbrook and a narrative from questioning Miss Margo Portland regarding the conversation she had with Ellen Fisher, daughter of the decedent.

The intercom buzzed. "Sheriff, call on line two." Boyd picked up the phone.

"It's Faye, Boyd. Prints on the trash can knife match the prints on the café knife." Sitting back in his chair, Boyd couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"What about the prints from the room?"

"They're unknown." He could hear her snickering. "Come by my office in about fifteen minutes; you and Madden go pick Mary Cook up for questioning." He put the phone down and the intercom buzzed again.

"Sorry, sheriff, line two."

"Who is it?" he asked, growling.

"Ellen Fisher." Boyd quickly picked up the phone.

"Ellen, you okay?"

"Miss Cook is here, sheriff. She's actin' strange, crying about the man who says he's my father." Boyd stood up and started to gather up his belongings.

"Oh boy, I'm sorry she's bothering you."

"That's okay, but she told Frank she was out at the house on Monday and made her silly remark about seein' us kissin'. Monday night was the night the garden got wrecked. She denied it, but I'm pretty sure it was her."

"And she's still there?"

"I think so. I left Frank and snuck inside to call you."

"You did the right thing, Ellen. I'm on my way now." They said goodbye and hung up. Ellen went to the sink and turned the water on, letting it run for a moment. She filled a glass part way and drank from it, looking out the window. She could still hear the droning of Frank and Mary's voices, rising up and then down to a whisper as they argued. Praying silently Sheriff Dalton would hurry and get there, she felt guilty about leaving Frank with Mary. She put her ear to the door.

"I don't believe you," Frank was saying, disgust in his voice reverberating. "You're sick, Mary Cook."

“It’s true Frank; I wouldn’t lie about something like that. I loved her and she loved me back. We were together before she married you.” Ellen’s heart was beating so hard, she felt faint. Straining to hear Frank’s response, it took her a few seconds to figure out he wasn’t talking, that he was just as shocked.

“We went on a date the second day she was here, Mary,” he said, finally. “If what you’re saying is true, you got on her that first day.”

“It wasn’t like that!” she screamed. “I didn’t *get on her*. It was mutual.”

“This is low even for you,” Frank said softly, looking around to see if Ellen was nearby, not wanting her to hear Mary.

“Believe me, Frank, it’s true. Ask the nurses at Hallowsbrook. They knew we wanted to be alone.” Ellen thought back to the few times they’d arrived on Saturday when Mary had already been there, how jealous she’d be finding Mary in Margaret’s room, her smug smile before she left. Afterward, Margaret ignored her family. *What if what Mary was claiming was true?*

“I loved her as much as you did. She was my best friend! I love Ellen, too. I promised Margaret I’d be there for her daughter. And I would have been, if you’d both only give me a chance. Please Frank, give me a chance. I promise I’ll do whatever it takes to please you.”

Ellen opened the door. “You’re a liar. My mother couldn’t stand the sight of you.”

“Sister, don’t do it, don’t lower yourself.”

“It’s okay, Frank. She needs to know,” she said, directing the next words at Mary. “My mother once said you had cooties. She begged Frank to keep me away from you and he has.” Frank took her arm and pulled her over to him.

“That’s enough now. Don’t lower yourself.” The sound of a car on gravel made them look over to the road, to the sheriff’s car turning into the driveway. Frank looked down at Ellen with his eyebrows raised and she nodded her head. Boyd got out of the car, pointing to the house. Frank took Ellen’s arm again, whispering to her. They went back inside, closing the heavy door after them.

“He must be confrontin’ her about the garden,” Frank said. They went to the window and peeked out the side of the drapery. It happened so fast, they’d later say that it was almost like slow motion, confusing them both.

“What the heck?” Frank shouted. “She punched him in the gut!” Throwing the front door open, they ran to Boyd who was lying on the ground moaning, holding his stomach. Mary was already at the road, running toward town.

Trying to catch his breath, Boyd was unable to talk at first. “Jesus,” he croaked. “She’s got a hell of a left hook.”

“As much as I’m sure you’d like to forget that ever happened, she just assaulted a police officer,” Frank said.

“What are you saying?” Boyd asked, as they helped him get to his feet.

“You need to report this. Sister, go inside and call the sheriff’s office again.”

“No, no, I’ll chase after her. I need to pick her up before she disappears. I came to take her in for questioning.” He didn’t elaborate and they didn’t ask what he was going to question her about when he got into the cruiser, groaning, and left without saying goodbye. Frank put his arm around Ellen’s shoulder and they watched as he turned onto the road, dust trailing behind him, as the car sped up.

“He’s probably embarrassed,” Ellen said, worried. “I thought she might have stabbed him in the belly.”

“Like Alan was stabbed?”



“Yes, just like that. Do you think she did it, Frank?” Rubbing his chin, Frank thought about it for a moment.

“I’ve said it before, Mary is trouble, but I don’t think she’s a murderer.” But Ellen’s thoughts had shifted from Mary the murderer, to Mary the seducer.

“I heard what she said about momma. She implied they were lovers, didn’t she Frank?”

“If they were, Margaret was coerced,” Frank said, stony. He remembered the early days of their relationship, how eager Margaret was to get out of Mary’s house when he would come to pick her up for a date, willing to risk town gossip to stay with him out at the cottage before they were married, never allowing Mary to baby sit with Ellen, even for a moment.

“No, I believe she’s lying. Your momma never kept any information about her past secret. She was honest with me.” She’d said it nearly the first date; *she’d had a child out of wedlock, what was there to hide?*

“Then what was it? Why would she say such a thing?”

“I don’t know, sister. But I do know you shouldn’t be worryin’ about it.” Not wanting to upset Ellen further, Frank’s brain was exploding with ideas of what might have happened to his wife, who might want her dead and why, but he’d keep those things from Ellen.

Mary may have taken advantage of Margaret, but she might have done much worse. He wanted to take a ride up to Beauregard and visit the hospital. Mary made the accusation herself; the nurses left them alone so they could be together. She was there on the day Margaret died. It was too much for him. Margaret was dead, and it didn’t make much difference who or what took her life. The finality of her death hit him just then.

“Boy, I’m sorry about everythin’. Sorry you had to lose your mother; sorry you had to hear what Mary had to say. We should be gettin’ on with life, not moving backward.”

“I’m ready to move on,” Ellen said.

They walked back to the house. “Let’s have our picnic, okay? We got the day off, although it seems like some people want to ruin it for us. Let’s not let ‘em.”

“Okay, Frank.” But Ellen’s teenage mind was processing Mary’s words, trying not to visualize her mother in the arms of another woman.





WHILE MARGO WAITED for Boyd to contact her, she stayed busy preparing for the next workweek. She'd navigate between the office in Seymour and the clinic at Hallowsbrook where patient physicals and updating charts would keep her mind busy. It was the most favorite part of her job; taking care of patients with mental health issues was challenging but rewarding.

Margaret McPherson's death still haunted her. Margaret petitioned the hospital board to have her involuntary commitment reversed; all the paperwork filed was in her favor. But privately, Margo wasn't sure it was in the family's best interest for Margaret's release and documented the facts in her report. The week of Margaret's death, the judge ruled in Margaret's favor, after her next doctor visit the following week, she'd be released to go home. Margo saw her the morning she died.

*"I'm going home!" Margaret had told Margo, her nurse and her friend, so excited, pacing in her room at Hallowsbrook, wringing her hands in anticipation.*

Memories disturbed, Margo heard the telephone in the kitchen ringing and ran to answer.

"Hello?" she said, out of breath.

"I'm headed your way in a while," Boyd said.

"Is that right?" she answered, smiling. "Well come on over."

"I need to make one stop," he said. Margo knew what it was; he was going to say goodbye to Carol.

"Okay, well I'll see you later. Love you," she said before hanging up, but he was already gone.

Busily ironing the last few items, putting the board away before he arrived, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. She was always ready for Boyd, just in case he could find time for her. Being involved with a married man forced her to rethink the way she lived, to make room for him in her life in ways she'd never thought she'd succumb. Spur of the moment requests, cancelations, outright standups were all part of the package. Putting up with it meant relinquishing that part of herself that hoped for a marriage and a family. Maybe now, if he was going to leave Carol, she'd have that chance for a real life with him. She'd been alone for so long with no eligible men in town except Frank. Frank, just thinking about him increased her heart rate. But he was hopeless. Even with his wife dead, he still wasn't free.



DAVE FOUND MARY COOK before she made it home. Just as her foot came out between two trees; she'd run through the woods from Frank's house, the officers were waiting to catch her. Boyd had called them after he left Frank's, admitting she'd punched him in the gut. They didn't think it was funny and he was grateful for it. Now he had to excuse himself from questioning her because charges would most likely be leveled against her for the assault.

"We're you been, Mary?" Dave asked.

"Don't you two have *anything* better to do?" She asked, exasperated seeing them waiting for her.

"We hear you've done the unthinkable. Assaulting an officer of the law is no laughing matter. It's an automatic sentence of thirty days for a physical assault."

"Poor Boyd, got soft in the middle," she whined.

"So you admit it?" Dave asked, getting out of the car. "Put your hands behind your back, Mary Cook. You have the right to remain silent..." he read her rights and while Henry opened the back door,

putting hand cuffs on her. She complained the entire time.

“I usually wear these *after* someone’s paid for my dinner. I have a business to run, and the weekend is my busiest time. You’ll be responsible for loss of income.”

“Oh, is that right,” Dave said. “Story is, your *last* boarder was murdered after you threw him out of your house.”

“Who said I threw him out?” she asked, sarcastically.

“When’s the last time you were at Miss Logan’s? Anyway, get in the car will you please? I don’t want to use force.”

“Has that bitch been talking about me again? Honestly, she’s the biggest liar.” Mary tried to get in the car with her hands bound behind her back but fell backward into the car. Dave picked up her legs and helped her get in.

“Actually, story is Johnson himself told everyone over at Towering Pines what had happened.” That revelation shut her up, and they made the rest of the ride to the station in silence.

• • • •

AFTER BOYD FILLED OUT the necessary paperwork and the physician at the clinic examined him, a large red welt on his abdomen obvious where Mary had punched him, and after he called Margo, he went home to say goodbye to Carol. Pulling into the driveway of his modest house, he noticed the peeling paint, a gutter swinging in the breeze, duct tape holding a screen in place. His neglect of the exterior screamed *divorced mother*. But they were still married. Guilt flooded his thoughts. He made a mental note to call a handyman and someone to cut the grass. But the inside of the house was neat and tidy, thanks to Carol. She liked order, and the house reflected it. He smelled basil and tomato, beef and garlic. She was fixing his favorite; Italian food. She always tried to please him, cooking the food he liked, trying to make the house an oasis for him.

Their boys ran to him and hugged his legs, screaming, “Daddy, you’re home!”

He put his hat down and pulled them both up to his chest by their arms, hugging them, kissing their necks. He thought of Frank, taking care of Ellen, loving her, devoted. Frank would kill himself before he abandoned Ellen. These boys were depending on him to set an example, and he was preparing to leave their mother, and ostensibly, the children as well.

“Let’s go see mommy, okay?”

They were still as could be, resting their heads on his shoulders. He walked through the dining room, noticing the table set for dinner as usual, the piles of neatly folded laundry on the buffet, waiting for her to take up stairs to the bedrooms. She was lifting a pot of boiling water with spaghetti, taking it to the sink to pour into the colander when she slipped, gasping and dropped it, splashing boiling water down the front of her legs and onto her feet.

“Mommy!” the boys screamed. Boyd put them down in the dining room, saying firmly to stay put and ran to her, picking her up and running to the bathroom with her cradled in his arms.

“You’re home,” she said, tears running down her cheeks, in shock and in pain as the burn was just beginning to take hold. He put her in the shower and turned cold water on her.

“Stay here, I’m calling for an ambulance.” He ran back out to the hallway and called dispatch, telling them what happened. The operator said a unit was on the way.

Carol was sitting on the floor of the shower when he got back, leaning against the tiles, letting the freezing water run over her body. “Where are the girls?” he asked, their two daughters, old enough to watch the boys.

“Next door,” she said, her eyes closed. Boyd went back out to the dining room, his sons frozen with fear.

“Mommy will be okay,” he told them. “Go next door and get Marisa and Gayle and tell them to come home right away. Tell Mrs. Anderson mommy is going in the ambulance.”

The boys left the house together, and he watched them running to the neighbor’s house. He went back to the bathroom to wait with Carol, wrapping her upper body in a towel, letting the water splash on him so that he was soon wet, too.

“I feel like a dope,” she said, softly. “Thank you for coming home.”

“Of course, I’m home,” he replied, kissing the top of her head.

“I don’t know why, but I had the strongest feeling you weren’t coming home tonight, like you were going to leave me.”

“I’m not leaving, Carol,” he said.

“I love you, Boyd,” she said, looking up at him, water running down her face. The siren in the distance got louder. The screams of the girls entering the house blended with the siren, each holding onto a brother, echoing into the bathroom, their neighbor running along with them, frightened for what she might find.

“I love you, too,” Boyd said, meaning it. “I love you, too.”

Delicious grilled chicken with barbeque sauce, potato salad, coleslaw, biscuits, corn on the cob, tomato salad, watermelon, and strawberry sundaes rounded out the picnic meal Ellen and Frank treated themselves.

“Oh, I am about ready to burst,” she said, leaning back as far as she could without falling off the picnic table. “That was really good.”

“I’m full, but I’m not getting up just yet, just in case I burp and make a little room for some more of that potato salad. Sister, you outdid yourself.” Ellen burst into laughter.

“Frank, you made that dish. All I did was peel potatoes and cut up celery.” Then she burped with her mouth closed, very lady-like.

“Excuse me! I believe I can eat a little more now,” she said, still laughing. She stretched her legs over the bench to get up. “You want a cup of coffee?”

“Okay, sounds good,” he said. He watched her walk around to the back of the house, could hear the sound of running water through the kitchen window. Completely satisfied, he shook his head. Here, he had so much at stake; if the law pressed charges against him, he could go to jail, and worse, he could lose Ellen. Monday was coming and he was expecting to learn something. He wondered what was happening with Mary, if they’d found her.

Ellen brought two cups of coffee out to the picnic table. “We need to practice a little bit before tonight,” she said.

“Thank you for reminding me. Between sheriff visits, interrogation and Mary, I forgot all about it.” He stood up and put his arms out, humming a tune. Slowly at first, they two-stepped away from the picnic table to a large, flat space in the yard, waltzing and the lindy hop, fox trot and samba. After ten minutes, they were both sweating and laughing out loud.

“The moral to this story is not to eat like a pig before dancing,” Frank said releasing her.

“We better clean up this mess and get ready to go. I’m getting nervous!” Ellen started stacking plates and covering dishes with foil, carrying what she could into the kitchen with Frank following.

“It will be good,” Frank replied. “You’ll do fine and make me look like I know what I’m doin’.”

MARY WAS SITTING IN the same chair Frank had sat in that morning, but instead of calmly tapping a foot, she was squirming in the chair, alternately crying and laughing, miserable. Dave and Faye watched her through the window as seasoned investigator Henry Cort entered the room to speak with her.

“Do you know why you were brought in to the station?” Henry asked.

“I have no idea, but harassment has somethin’ to do with it. I was minding my own business when you picked me up for no reason.”

“What were you doing last Monday night?” Mary screwed up her face and put her finger on her forehead, mockingly.

“You expect me to remember last Monday?” she asked sarcastically. “I can’t remember what happened yesterday.”

“Didn’t you just tell Frank McPherson you were out at his place? Spying on him and his kid through the living room window?” Henry picked up a piece of paper and began to read it out loud. “‘I was walking by the river when I saw you two.’”

“I never said such a thing. Those two are insane. It runs in the family.”

“What do you know about the family’s mental health?”

“Why Frank’s wife is, *was* insane. Committed for life up at Hallowsbrook.”

“Why do you say *was*?” Henry asked. “Did she have a healing?” Dave nudged Faye.

“Now it’s getting interesting.”

“Ha! No, she didn’t have any healing. She killed herself. I was there to visit her and she did it herself. She was acting all goofy and out of it. Kept falling asleep. It was horrible.”

“No one knew that,” Faye said, excited. “It wasn’t made public at the request of the family.” Everyone knew what the death certificate said because someone leaked it and the gossipmongers spread it around town like wildfire. Faye pressed a buzzer to get the investigator attention. He excused himself, leaving Mary alone in the room. She immediately began to primp in front of the mirror, and then examined it carefully to see if she could see through to the other side.

Henry entered the room. “What’s up?”

“Stop the interview. You just got her to admit to the coroners report. No one knew she might have done it herself.”

“Faye, everyone in town knew it.”

“Shut up, Henry. You’re talking gossip. We just needed someone to slip up in front of an officer of the law. Call Frank and tell him we have cause to question Margaret McPherson’s cause of death.”

There was a knock on the door and Rosalie the dispatcher opened the door. “Thought you guys should know, Boyd’s wife Carol was just admitted over at Beauregard Medical with second-degree burns on her legs and feet.” Faye and Dave exchanged looks.

“Thanks, Rosalie,” Dave said. “Let us know if you hear anything more.” She nodded her head and closed the door.

“Tell Miss Cook to go home, but she should stay in town.”

“She never goes anywhere,” Dave said, snickering.

“Just tell her,” Faye snapped and left the room. Dave knocked on the interrogation room door.

“Mary, you’re free to go.” She looked up at him, squinting. He thought she was very attractive for a woman approaching middle-age, but she was a nut job.

“How am I supposed to get home? This place isn’t exactly in the middle of town.” He shrugged his shoulders and waved her over.

“Come on then. I’ll give you a lift.” It was a scary proposition being alone with her in a car. No one trusted Mary, for their safety or for the stories she might carry. She followed him out of the station, pausing as he stuck his head in the dispatch room.

“Rosalie, I’m going to drive Miss Cook home.” Making sure everyone knew where he was and whom he was with was more for his own peace of mind, but Rosalie looked at him with concern.

“Okay,” she answered. “I just saw Fred’s cab drive by. You want I should call him over?” Dave smiled and laughed, shaking his head.

“See you in fifteen. Call out the troops if I’m not back by then.”

When they got outside, Mary finally spoke. “Jesus, you act like I gonna ravish you. You’re not *that* cute, Dave.”

“Ha!” He laughed out loud. “That’s the problem with a small town, Mary. Everyone knows who the troublemakers are.”

“I’m highly insulted,” she answered.

“Yes, well be that it may. I’m to tell you not to leave town this week.”

“Where the hell am *I* going to go? Oh wait, tonight is June Extravaganza at Phillip Anderson. I can’t miss it.”

“Beaugard doesn’t count,” he answered. “You dancin’ in the contest?”

“No, just watchin’. But I’ll be dancing the rest of the time. You going?” she asked.

“Wife doesn’t dance,” Dave answered. “She’s about ready to hatch.”

Mary didn’t reply, resentful that yet another local woman was going to have a baby and she was still alone and barren. The car pulled up to her house just as a stranger, a woman was walking down her steps.

“A boarder! Let me out of this damn car.” She opened the door before he was fully stopped but he slammed on the brakes as she jumped out. The woman stopped on the sidewalk, shocked to see the police car.

“Thanks so much for the lift, honey!” Mary said, waving at Dave as she climbed up to the sidewalk, smiling at the woman. “Just my boyfriend. Help you?”

“Is this your place?” She pointed over her shoulder at Mary’s house.

“Yep, it’s all mine,” Mary said walking up to the porch.

“I was told you rent rooms,” the woman said, taking in Mary’s disheveled appearance.

“Who told you? Frank?”

“No, some man at the grocery store. Bearded fellow.” Mary frowned; those characters at the check-out really were a nuisance most of the time. Turning the key in the lock, she pushed the door open and the familiar smell of her house wafted out along with the cold air.

“Just passing through?”

“Yep, just for the night. Took a wrong turn down in Mobile I guess.”

“Come on in,” Mary said, stepping aside so the stranger could enter. “No one here at the moment so you’re in luck.” She turned to close the door, looking on the street for her car.

“Leave your car uptown?” Mary asked. The woman didn’t answer so Mary turned to look at her and repeated the question. “Leave your car uptown?”

“Ah, yes. Uptown,” the woman answered.





• • • •

THE REST OF THE WEEKEND was uneventful. Frank and Ellen had fun dancing in Beauregard Saturday night, helping them forget what was happening back in Seymour. Sunday morning, trying to brighten Ellen's day, he drove into town and got take out fresh pastry and french toast for breakfast, the café's specialty. Although they tried their best to recover from the week, worries about the possible charges pending made them both ill, waking up Monday morning with a feeling of dread. Trying to sweep it aside by sticking to his routine, he got into the shower and ended up cutting himself shaving, his hands were shaking so badly. They were supposed to learn something about the allegations against him that day. Hopefully, the investigation would be dropped, but if not, he couldn't imagine what he would do about Ellen. Margo came to mind; Ellen liked her and she was kind and trustworthy, so as soon as he was dressed, making sure Ellen was still asleep, he went into the kitchen and dialed Margo's number.

• • • •

LATE SATURDAY NIGHT, Boyd left the hospital. He was tempted to stop by Margo's, but forced himself to head straight home. Once he was sure his children were okay, he went back to the bedroom and called Margo.

"I was worried about you," she said, angry. "When you left this morning you said you'd call me, that I'd see you. I expected you to be here for dinner."

"Please forgive me Margo," he answered, grasping for the right words.

"Are you home now? What happened, Boyd?" He told her about Carol's accident, and although she felt sorry for the woman, she was livid that a clumsy mishap was enough to drive Boyd back to her and leave Margo in the dust. Incredulous, Margo needed to hear him say the words. *They were through*. "So are you saying you're not leaving her now?"

"Please forgive me, Margo. I know it sounds like a lame excuse, but I can't do it to my kids." It was more than that, he couldn't do it to Carol, either. But he was trying to avoid a blowup and using finesse was the only way to do it.

"Fuck you, Boyd. Don't *ever* call me again." She slammed the phone down and burst into tears. Immediately regretful, she tried to call him again but he didn't answer. It would be a sleepless night.

Sunday was hell; she knew he was at the hospital with his wife but had no way to contact him and he probably wouldn't have taken her calls anyway. She debated going to the hospital to confront him, but aware it would be unprofessional, maybe enough for her to lose her job, she dropped it. Between bouts of uncontrollable sobbing, in which she'd listen to melancholy love songs, and forcing herself to do something productive, she got through the day. Longing to hear his voice after two days of silence, she stayed busy wishing Monday morning would hurry up and arrive so she could go to work.

Standing in the kitchen, she drank morning coffee while holding an ice bag to her swollen eyes, looking out over the lawn. The heat of summer would soon do a number on her garden and this year, she wouldn't fight it, let nature take its course. The ringing phone snapped her out of her stupor.

"It's Frank, Margo. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, no, Frank. I'm awake. Just waiting to start my day as usual. Everything okay?"

"I don't know yet," he admitted. "I should hear something about the prosecutor making a case against me."

“Oh, right,” Margo said, empathy for him driving some of her own angst away. “I don’t think it will come to that, Frank.”

“I need to be prepared, just in case,” he replied. “You’re about the only person in town Ellen and I trust. You *are* the only person. I know this is a lot to ask. If I’m put in jail, or if they take her away from me, can she stay with you? I’m sick thinkin’ they might place her in one of those awful foster homes you read about in the paper.”

Margo’s heart rate sped up. Frank just paid her a compliment she didn’t deserve. It was her call to Boyd that started the whole mess against him, giving the words of gossips life, fueling their hatred.

“I don’t deserve this,” she said, fighting tears, self-pity and condemnation flooding over her. “Frank, I would be honored to take care of Ellen if it comes to that. But you don’t know what you’re saying. I’m not that great.”

“Look, all I care about is my kid is taken care of by someone I trust and admire and that’s you. There ain’t *no one else*, Margo. No one.”

Margo sat at on a stool at her kitchen counter and started to weep. Thinking of her empty life, in which getting involved with a married man was the most exciting thing she could conjure up, persuading him to leave his wife and kids, Margo really didn’t deserved the trust Frank was placing in her. It was an answer to prayer. He was waiting for her reply.

“Okay, Frank, don’t worry about Ellen. She has a room here with me if need be. But I don’t think that it’s going to be a problem, okay? Let’s not be premature.”

“Thank you, Margo. Thank you,” he said, choked up. “I have to wake her up now. But I’ll be in touch later.” They said goodbye and hung up.

The sound of Frank’s voice, the praise he gave her and trust he put into her, although undeserved, triggered a complete one hundred-eighty degree change in Margo’s mood so that what Boyd had done in betraying her no longer mattered, as a matter of fact, his timing was perfect. She stopped thinking about him all together. What she’d wanted was a chance to get Frank’s attention and it looked like she’d succeeded. Everything was falling into place. Looking in the hallway mirror on her way out, Margo was pleasantly surprised how pretty she looked. “Have a nice day!”

• • • •

FAYE BAKER WAS AT HER desk early Monday, her boss and two detectives sitting across from her, deliberating. “So it’s agreed, we have no case against Frank McPherson.” The others nodded their heads.

“Agreed,” they echoed.

“Good. Now we can concentrate on Alan Johnson.” They closed one file and opened another, thicker file. “We have two knives, one a steak knife from the café and the other a carving knife from the same manufacturer, both covered with Mary Cooks fingerprints.”

“The only problem is that she works at the café,” Dave Madden said. “Boyd was able to smuggle his steak knife out without a problem *after she gave it to him* with his lunch. How do we know the same thing wasn’t accomplished with the carving knife?”

“We don’t,” Faye replied. “Does the café do a knife inventory?”

“They do, and that knife is missing. We have her neighbor’s testimony that after Johnson left Mary’s place she had a temper tantrum and smashed the mug he used on her driveway.”

“Sounds lame to me,” Henry said. Faye hit her palm on the desk.

“Bring her back here,” she told him. “She’s at work by now at the café. Please bring me back a blueberry Danish.”

“I’ll go,” Dave said.

“Go with him,” Faye said, pointing at Henry. “She’s trouble and God knows we don’t want any more belly punches.” The detectives left the office, laughing but feeling badly for Boyd.

Faye sat across from her boss. “What’s next?” he asked, looking at his watch.

“I want to reopen Margaret McPherson’s death investigation.”

He pushed his chair away from her desk. “Knock yourself out,” he said, saluting her and left the room.

Opening the file in front of her, she reread the nurse’s testimony from Hallowsbrook, listing the onset of symptoms and the speed at which Margaret succumbed. Pulling her phone close, she dialed the number of a nurse friend of hers who might be able to unlock the mystery behind the gibberish that was the autopsy lab reports and spot something someone, including the coroner missed. It was a long shot.

• • • •

JUDY CHECKED HER WATCH, tapping on the crystal. Looking up at the wall clock, she could see that the time was correct, just as it had been when she checked it ten minutes ago. Mary was never late. She might get to work just in time, but she always arrived so Judy could leave. Today, she was forty minutes late and not answering her phone. Judy couldn’t leave the café to go check; Mary could have overslept in a drunken stupor, or fallen and hit her head.

Turning her back to make fresh coffee, the bell on the door rang. She looked up just as Dave and Henry walked in. “Sit anywhere you want,” Judy said.

“Isn’t it time for Mary to be here?” Dave asked.

“She’s late,” Judy said. “I’m getting worried because she’s never late.”

“How ‘bout we take a run down the street and check it out for you?” Henry asked.

“Oh, thank you so much,” Judy said, gratefully. The men left, returning to their squad car, just as they saw Boyd pull up to the garage.

Faye called Boyd, asking him if he’d do the honors. “Go tell your buddy to dry his tears,” she said. “No charges will be brought against him. But warn him to get something in writing as far as custody for his kid goes. He needs to do it pronto.” She wished she could arrest the old biddies in town who spread the lies, not realizing they were younger than she was.

Ellen was sitting at the counter checking their appointments for the day when Boyd came through the door. She frowned, but was polite. “Frank’s in the garage.”

“Thanks,” he said, opening the door and stepping down into the bay. Frank looked up at Boyd and the color drained from his face.

“Its okay, Frank,” he said holding his hands up. “They aren’t pressing charges.” Frank slumped against the car, his hand holding a wrench going to his forehead.

“Thank God,” he said, shaking. “I need to tell Ellen.” He put the tool down and went to the door.

“Make sure you get legal custody of her, Frank. The prosecutor asked me to remind you.”

“Okay, I’ll start that ball rolling today.” He opened the door to the office. “Ellen! It’s okay. Everything is okay,” he said and she hopped down off her stool running to him for a hug. Boyd waited until they parted so he could get through the doorway.

“I need to call Margo and let her know,” Frank said. Boyd stopped short, the mention of Margo’s name making his heart speed up.

“Why’s that?” Boyd asked.

“She offered to take care of Ellen if this thing took hold and I lost custody of her. I need to tell her she won’t have to now, but maybe in the future, if I die before she’s of age, Margo can step in.”

Boyd looked at Frank through different eyes, as a competitor who would be good for Margo, better than he could ever be because Frank was single. The thought bothered him, and on the cusp of a jealous outburst, he channeled it into a positive comment on behalf of Margo.

“Margo would be a wonderful parent, Frank. I think you’re making a smart move. You should consider it while you’re still alive.”

“My wife just died, Boyd. It’s too early to think about seein’ anyone else.”

“That was thoughtless of me, Frank. My apologies,” Boyd said, embarrassed.

“No apologies necessary. It’s an idea, but just not right now.”

Boyd nodded his head and left the garage before he said anything else, happy for Ellen, Frank and Margo, and sad for himself.

As Frank dialed Margo’s office, Ellen sat and watched smiling. “Margo, it’s Frank again,” he said, cheerful. “None of the charges will be filed against me after all.”

“Oh, I’m so thrilled! That’s just wonderful, Frank.”

“Yes, we’re pretty happy here,” he said. “Thank you for agreein’ to help us out. It gave me the first peace I’ve had since this mess started.”

“My pleasure,” she said. They chatted a while longer before hanging up.

“I really like Margo,” Ellen said, thoughtful. “Let’s invite her to Phillip Anderson’s Saturday.” Frank frowned, not sure what she was getting at.

“You want me to ask her for a date? It seems a little early for that.”

“Sort of,” Ellen said. “But we won’t call it a date. Just an evening out with two friends. It seems sort of cruel to ask her to be my guardian in one breath and then ignore her when she’s not needed.” Frank nodded his head.

“I gotcha,” he said. “That’s true. I might ask her if she would consider makin’ that legal in case I die.”

“Please don’t mention that,” Ellen said, shuddering.

“Okay, I’ll call her back while I have the nerve.” He dialed the office number again and she came on the line in a minute.

“It’s me again, Margo. Frank McPherson.”

“I recognize your voice,” she said, smiling at the phone. “Is everything still okay?”

“It’s fine, just fine,” he replied, winking at Ellen. “Me and Ellen here, we wonder if you’d accept our invitation to go dancin’ at Phillip Anderson.” Margo was speechless for a moment. Of course, she’d love to go out with Frank. But his wife was only dead four months and she and Boyd had just broken up. It would be cause for more gossip. Not sure that she cared, she reminded herself it was also the answer to her prayers.

“Wow, what a nice surprise,” she answered, trying to stall while she thought about it.

“I’ll be honest with you,” he said softly. “We decided that we were goin’ to ask you to be Ellen’s guardian if anythin’ happens to me. And if we would ask that of you, we should spend time with you.”

“Time ballroom dancing?” she said, smiling. “How can I say no to that offer? I don’t dance very well though.”

“We’ll practice. How about you come out to the cottage tonight and we have a practice session before the actual occasion.” Ellen was giggling.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” Margo said, laughing.

“Come for dinner,” Frank offered, excited. His happiness was palpable.

“Thank you, I will.” They discussed the time before saying goodbye.

“You asked her to dinner,” Ellen said, looking off into space. “What should we have?”

“Your spaghetti and meatballs are the best,” he answered. “What do you think?”

“I hope she likes garlic!” Ellen said laughing. “Dancing with garlic on your breath...not a good idea.”

“Oh, right. See, that’s why I need you around. How about fried chicken?”

“I guess, but it seems like a lot of work,” she said frowning. “I’ve got it. Hamburgers. Everyone loves ‘em and they are easy to fix.”

“Good idea! We better stop by Family-Owned and pick up a few items. I guess I’ll get back to work, sister,” Frank said, standing in the doorway.

He wanted to say more to her, but couldn’t find the words. It was a new start for them. She put her book down and looked at him lovingly.

“I don’t feel afraid anymore,” she said. “Now the threat of you being stuck in jail is gone, I feel safe again.”

“I’m sorry about it all,” he replied. “Sorry you were exposed to all that ugliness. All over our dancin’ together.”

“I just thought of somethin’ Frank.”

“What’s that?”

“Mary. She wasn’t at Phillip Anderson’s Saturday night to watch the contest.”

“That was an answer to my prayer,” he replied, shaking his head in disgust as he went back into the garage.

• • • •

HENRY PULLED THE PATROL car into Mary Cook’s driveway. It looked unoccupied, with two days worth of newspapers scattered on the porch, her mailbox jammed with ads and coupons. Dave tapped on the door and a dog down the block started barking.

“Big fight over there the other night,” next-door neighbor Peter called over the fence. Dave hopped down off the porch and met him.

“Is that right?” he asked. “What kind of fight?”

“About the usual for Mary. A lot of screaming and yelling and glass breaking. I was getting used to it and then not a peep all day yesterday.”

“Did you call the police?” Henry asked.

“Why in God’s name would I call the police?” Peter asked. “I’d be calling over there every night if that was the case. Take your pick. That house was last night,” he pointed across the street. “Mary here Saturday night and a few days before when that dead guy was here pissin’ her off. We got a regular cast of characters fightin’ in this neighborhood.”

“Stick around, Pete. You can tell us more in a minute,” Henry said.

“I’ll call for back up,” Dave said, reaching into the car and pulling the radio out. While waiting for Boyd to show, they walked the perimeter of the house, but nothing seemed out of place. Dave pulled a bucket over, turning it upside down and stood on it to peek in the windows but the curtains were tightly closed.

“Here he comes,” Henry called when Boyd pulled up.

“What’s going on?” Boyd asked. They told him what Peter had said, and that there was no answer, and she was over an hour late for work now.

Boyd lifted the mat and found her key, conveniently located for thieves, and opened the door. The smell was still faint, but evident. Boyd's heart sank. They entered in a line with him leading. Frightened, Boyd wanted to be the first to find her.

"Look," he said, pointing to the floor just beyond the vestibule. "Blood." Dave returned to the car to call for a forensic team. The trail of blood wound through the hallway into the tiny kitchen. A chair was on its side and the dish strainer on the floor with smashed dishes and glassware confirmed Pete's comment.

"There she is," Boyd called. The men were careful not to step in her blood. Laying face down on the kitchen floor was Mary Cook.

Henry bent over her, feeling her neck for a pulse. "She's dead."

"Who'd kill Mary?" Boyd said, flabbergasted.

"She's wearing the same thing she had on Saturday," Dave said when he returned. "I remember because when Henry hand cuffed her, she fell back on the seat and I had to lift her legs up into the car. I remember those pink pants and those sneakers. I bet if you turn her over, her shirt has Mickey Mouse on it."

"It does. I mean her shirt had the mouse on it. When she punched me in the gut over at Frank's I remember thinking why a grown woman would wear a mouse t-shirt."

"I dropped her off here after questioning her over at the station Saturday. There was a woman just leaving the house. Mary said she was a boarder."

"Do you remember what she looked like?" Henry asked.

"I'll have to think about that one," he said. "I hope I can remember something. I know she had hospital scrubs on. Peter might have seen her." He left the house, calling neighbor Pete over.

"Bad news," Dave said. Peter put his hand up to his face, stunned.

"She dead?"

"I'm sorry to say. You want to talk to me about Saturday afternoon? Did you see anyone new around?"

"I was fixin' my meal and looking out that wind'er," he pointed to a window overlooking the front of Mary's house. "I saw a woman walkin' from town, come up the stairs to the porch, knock and then leave after a bit. Then you or someone in a cop car dropped Mary off and the woman turned back and followed her into the house."

"Did you recognize the woman?"

"Nope. She was a stranger. No one in Seymour has purple hair. Miss Logan wouldn't stand fer it."

"What'd she look like?" Dave asked. Pete looked up at the house, thoughtful.

"Unattractive," Pete said. "Course I'm lookin' through a wind'er to see her, but she was tall and big. Mean lookin' with a rope of purple hair down her back like a horse."

"Did you see her leave?"

"Nope. I was lookin' for her, too. After the ruckus and all."

"When'd the fight start?"

"Bout half hour after she got there. It was a bad one. We's used to Miss Mary and her fights round here, but this was bad even for her. Is that when she got kilt?"

"Did you hear any names spoken, or anything stand out?" Dave said, ignoring his question.

"Nope, just a bunch of screamin' and breaking glass. It seemed like it lasted a long time, but thinkin' it was probably just a minute." Dave thanked him.

"I'll be around later to talk more. You open to that?"

“Yes sir. Wow,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m gonna miss Mary. She made it lively around this place.”

In minutes, sirens blasted as the rest of the crew came to Mary Cook’s house for the last time, a van with Clarke County Morgue stenciled on the side pulling into the driveway.







NEWS WOULD TRAVEL FAST through Seymour to Beauregard, thanks to Miss Sally Logan. She was standing in front of her mirrored booth in Miss Logan's Beauty Salon when the emergency vehicles rushed down First Street.

"What's that all about?" she hollered.

"Got no idea," the receptionist said. "You want me to run down and find out?" But Miss Logan was already out the front door, jogging around the corner. She saw the police car in Mary's driveway and the emergency vehicles and Boyd's car lined up.

Putting her hand to her mouth, Miss Logan let out a genuine sob. Mary Cook was a pain in the ass, but she was an old friend. Someone she'd watched grow up in Seymour, who she'd try to assist when the girl's mother was at her worst. Picking up her pace to a sprint, she got to Mary's just as the forensic team arrived. "Oh no," she said out loud. "What happened?" Boyd came down the stairs, wiping his hand on a paper towel. He went to Miss Logan, putting his hands on her shoulders. She could feel the damp; he must have just washed them. She knew what he was going to say and burst into tears.

"I don't want to hear it," she wailed. "It can't be happening."

"I'm so sorry, Sally. Let me take you back to the salon. Or home. I can take you to Towering Pines. There's nothing to be done here."

"Can I see her?" she sobbed.

"No, best not. She's been lying on her face for two days. You'll see her at the viewing, if there's one."

"Oh, there'll be one," she replied, sniffing. "I'll pay for it myself." Boyd waited while Miss Logan composed herself.

"Do you know who could have hurt Mary?"

"No, not a clue," she said blowing her nose. "Poor Mary. I still can't believe it."

"Dave said someone was staying at the house Saturday night," Boyd confided, taking a risk. "This is privileged information, Sally." He hoped she'd blab it all over town. Someone knowing about the boarder might come forward.

"I talked to her when she got home Saturday evening and she said she couldn't stay on the line; she'd just walked in the door and someone new had arrived, but that's all she said. A *she*. 'Let me get my guest settled and I'll call you back.' I got busy readying to go out. Frank and Ellen danced at Phillip Anderson Saturday night and I thought for sure Mary would be there unless she didn't want to leave her tenant. I called her in the morning but there was no answer. I just figured she had a date or was out with whoever it was she had stayin' here."

Boyd patted her on the shoulder. "Come on, Sally. Let's go." He put his arm around her and they walked to the patrol car together.

"What an awful thing," Miss Logan said, crying again. "Just awful."



FAYE BAKER WAS SEETHING. "Okay, I've had about enough of this small town shit. If I wanted murders every night I'd have stayed in Philadelphia."

“Calm down, Baker,” DA Thomas Walker replied. “Two murders in twenty years. Three if you count McPherson.”

“Oh, she was murdered alright. She had no glucose in her blood and a shit load of insulin. A little tidbit overlooked by our coroner who said she died of natural causes. Ha! Where the hell would she get insulin?”

“So what now?” Walker asked.

“We find out who has diabetes,” Faye said. “It’s as good a place as any to start.”

She looked down at the file again as Henry Cort ran into her office. “Jesus, take it easy,” Thomas Walker said, moving out of the way.

“You aren’t going to believe this,” Henry said. “I can’t believe it.”

“Spit it out, Cort. I got high blood pressure.”

“Fingerprints in Alan Johnson’s room match prints found at the scene at Mary Cook’s.”

• • • •

BOYD DALTON PULLED up into the driveway of Towering Pines with Miss Logan in the front seat. It was the first time he’d been in her presence without her talking his ears off. “You want me to go up with you?” he asked gently. “I could use a cup of coffee.”

“What about Carol?” Miss Logan asked shaking her head. “You should probably get over to the hospital and see her.”

“I told her we were together and she said to give you her love.”

Miss Logan bowed her head and started to cry again. Guilt from gossiping about Boyd and Margo filled her, regrets for her behavior overwhelming her in the sadness of losing Mary.

“I’ll be okay, Boyd. Give her a kiss for me. I think I want to be alone for little bit.” He nodded his head and got out of the car.

“Let me at least walk you up.”

Cate was in the window, wondering what in God’s name the sheriff was bringing Sally Logan home for and met them at the door.

He tipped his hat to Cate. “Miss Ashby. Take care of Miss Logan.”

Saying goodbye, he skipped down the steps, giving Sally Logan a wide berth so she could start telling her story. Pulling out of the driveway, he got to thinking about Margo, hoping she was okay as he drove to the hospital to see his wife. The best thing he could do was to leave Margo alone, give her a chance to get back on her feet.

• • • •

AT FIVE, FINISHED WITH his work, Frank came into the office to get his daughter. “Time to call it a day, sister. Family-Owned, here I come.”

“Can I go to the store with you? I want to see what inspires me for dessert,” she said smiling. “I want somethin’ extra special for Margo tonight.”

“You like her, don’t you?” Frank asked, wanting confirmation that it was in fact all right with her if he started to see Margo.

“I like her fine,” Ellen said.

After Mary, Margo was a breath of fresh air, someone who could be trusted with her secrets, who wouldn’t desecrate the name of her mother like Mary Cook had.

Frank gave her a one armed hug as they crossed the street together, unaware of the stares of the motley group of characters who waited to carry groceries. “Those men give me the hebbly jebbies,” Ellen said. “They seem dangerous, waitin’ there to ponce.”

“They’re harmless,” Frank said. “The sheriff watches ‘em like a hawk.”

They entered the store, patrons and employees smiling and waving at the handsome father and daughter who’d danced so beautifully the weekend before. Some even clapped, embarrassing Ellen.

“This was a mistake,” she mumbled.

“Let’s run through and get our burger and buns,” Frank said smiling and waving back, all in the name of promotion for the garage. Ellen chose a gooseberry pie with a double crust and vanilla ice cream for dessert.

“I don’t know if I can wait to eat this!” Ellen said. “I love pie.”

“I’ll teach you how to bake one,” Frank said, laughing at the notion; Frank’s pies were misshapen but delicious.

“Sounds perfect. Makin’ my own pie could be dangerous though. I hope Margo likes pie.” The excitement in the truck was palpable as they drove to the cottage, and although they didn’t say it out loud, expectations growing that Margo Portland might someday be a part of their family and that Ellen would bake her pie. It wasn’t until they pulled into the driveway that Ellen remembered Margo couldn’t eat sugar.

“What’s wrong with someone who can’t eat sugar?” Ellen asked. Frank frowned, thinking.

“Not sure what you mean,” he answered.

“When I was at Margo’s on Saturday she told me she couldn’t eat candy because it’s made of sugar and she can’t have it.”

“She must be a diabetic,” Frank said. “How awful for her.”

“I’ll think of somethin’ else to make for her,” Ellen said. “But you’re right. Not being able to have pie would be awful.”

• • • •

AFTER BOYD VISITED Carol at the hospital, making sure she was on the mend, her burns healing and in good spirits, he stopped off at the station to see if the team uncovered anything in the search of Mary Cook’s house.

“Same prints in both our victim’s rooms. Whoever killed Alan Johnson turned the air conditioning unit on. Cate Ashby said she never touched it because he’d moved out and returned unexpectedly. The same two fingers that unscrewed the light bulb next to Alan’s bed also turned the air on, and drank water from a coffee cup at Mary’s.”

“Oh man that is big,” Boyd replied. “You have DNA from the cup, too.” DNA use in crime detection was its early stages, but they would utilize it fully for this.

“Peter reminded me that the woman who met Mary on the sidewalk had an odd color hair. Sort of purple, so it could have been a wig. *And* she was wearing hospital scrubs. Navy blue. Evidently, navy blue scrubs aren’t standard uniforms at the hospitals in the area.”

“Everything has a way of coming to the surface in time.” Boyd said, distracted. “What file is this?” He pointed to a file left on his desk.

“Margaret McPherson,” Dave replied, sorting through paperwork on his desk. “Faye got the go-ahead to reopen her case. She had one of her nurse friends go over the lab work from the autopsy and McPherson’s glucose was undetectable, while she had a lot of insulin in her blood. The coroner said she could have injected herself with it, but the nursing staff said it would have been impossible for her to acquire the syringe. Evidently, all their syringes are kept under lock and key. What’s your take on it?” When Boyd didn’t answer, Dave looked up. Boyd was gone.





SITTING IN HIS PATROL car, waves of nausea hit Boyd. He opened the door and threw up until there was nothing left in his stomach. Starting the car, he slowly drove out of the parking lot, wondering what steps he should take. He could just leave it alone and let the wheels of justice do their job. But he didn't know if he had the patience to allow it. More about confrontation, he was an action kind of man, someone who liked to get things done quickly.

Hoping he wasn't making a mistake, he drove over to Margo's house, praying no one would see him. The idea that the two biggest gossips in town were gone; Miss Logan home in Beauregard and Mary dead, gave him peace. If anyone saw his car there, they wouldn't care. He parked in the alley and went through her backyard.

She wasn't home. He knew where the key was, but didn't want to do anything without a search warrant. "You dumb ass," he said out loud. "Why didn't you do that in the first place? Go back to the station." He went to his car and called the station on his radio.

"Is Faye Baker still there?" he asked.

"She is," dispatch said. "She's breathin' down my neck."

"What is it Boyd?" Faye asked.

"I don't want to say over the radio," he answered. "Can you stick around? I'll be right there."

"Hurry up," she said. He put his flashers on as he sped through town, getting back to the station in less than five minutes. A memory from a year ago, like a thrown shoe hitting him in the head pounded in his brain.

He was waiting in bed while Margo got out of the shower. Modest, she put a robe on before coming out, but it was silky and flesh colored, hugging her body, as enticing as if she were nude. Then as if she were purposely trying to ruin the mood, he watched her draw up insulin in the tiny syringe, then open her robe and pinch flesh on her belly, throwing the needle like a dart.

"A sure fire way to murder someone is to use insulin," Margo said.

He sat up, resting on his elbows.

"Who wants to commit murder?"

"Oh, no, no, no. No one," she giggled. "I'm just saying that it's a way to do it. The insulin works quickly and is difficult to detect."

"Well, you've got it if we need it, is that what you're drivin' at?" She got back into bed, laughing.

"I do indeed."

At the time, he wondered if she was hinting he kill his wife. But the idea sweet Margo would think of such a thing was so outlandish, he buried it.

Was Margo waiting for Frank to be free? As Margaret's nurse practitioner, Margo saw Margaret getting better, ready for discharge. It was all conjecture. She acted right away, before Margaret returned home, tired of waiting for Boyd to leave Carol. Frank would be single if the plan worked. Since she had access to her, she'd kill Margaret and get away with it. Almost. New technology could detect insulin, even in a corpse.



FAYE WAS WAITING FOR him, pacing. "I hope you have something."

"I need a search warrant. Fast."

“For what?” He told her, watching her expression turn stony.

“I need to get the judge before he leaves,” she said, running out of the room.

• • • •

“I HOPE THIS IS ISN’T a wild goose chase,” Faye said.

She and Boyd were standing with the doctor who owned the office where Margo Portland was a nurse practitioner.

“We don’t have the need to empty our sharps containers that often. So if insulin was injected and the syringe disposed of in March, it’s still here. There are two containers; one in the lab and one in the clinic. Margo would use the one in the clinic, unless she was trying to hide something. We don’t administer insulin in the clinic, ever. It won’t be difficult to find the syringe if it’s here.” Boyd didn’t think Margo was a sophisticated enough murderer to think that deeply. If she injected herself, it would have her DNA, not Margaret’s.

“Unless she got rid of it at Hallowsbrook,” Faye said, whispering.

“I doubt that,” Boyd said. “They’ve got security cameras all over that place.” Turning to the doctor, he had one more request. “I’ll need your files for Margaret McPherson.”

“We don’t keep those here,” he replied.

“You might not think so, but I know Margo brings them home each night. I’ve seen her with the files.” The doctor shrugged, looking at him, curious.

“Let’s head to her office. It’s in the clinic.” They followed him to the back of the building, the clinic off a large fenced-in parking lot, providing privacy for the patients who required clinic services. The rooms were dark and depressing, clearly not meant to be a place where a person would care to linger.

They searched her desk and file cabinet and the doctor found the file marked McPherson, Margaret. The insignia for Hallowsbrook was marked on the front, clearly not an office file. “This is highly unprofessional,” he said, handing it over. “Files are never supposed to leave the unit.”

Pointing to the sharps container outside of Margo’s office, the doctor lifted the container off the wall and deposited it in a red bag Faye was holding open.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said, frowning. “You should try to brighten up this dump for the poor folk.”

“Just because Margo Portland has diabetes doesn’t mean she’s the one who gave Margaret McPherson too much insulin,” Faye said as they drove back to the station, a red-bagged sharps container on her lap. “And if the syringe with her DNA isn’t in this bucket, we have nothing but your hunch.”

“I’ve got more than a hunch, Faye.”

“Why would Margo want to kill her? That’s what I don’t get.”

“She wanted Frank,” Boyd replied. “Margaret was getting better and up for release. Margo wanted to make sure Frank stayed free.”

Boyd kept driving, knowing if they found the proof they were looking for, he’d have to confess in a public court of law that he was having an affair with Margo when she said those damning words, “A sure fire way of murdering someone is to use insulin.”

Returning to the station, the file and each sheet contained within were dusted for prints by CSI and handed over to Faye. The first thing she noticed reading the notes was that Margo Portland saw Margaret early on Wednesday before she died. By the time Mary Cook visited later Wednesday, Margaret was already beginning to go into insulin shock.

BOYD AND DAVE MADDEN sat outside of Margo's house for an hour.

"This has got to be hard for you," Dave said. "I mean, of course it's hard. But are you okay?"

"Yes," Boyd answered. "I thought I should bow out, but Thomas Walker said *not yet*. So here I am."

"Where the hell did she go?" Dave said. "I hope she didn't get wind of what was happening and bolt."

"Let's drive over to Frank McPherson's," Boyd said suddenly. "I know he was talking to Margo about taking care of his kid if he was charged with abuse."

"Why would she go over there?"

"It's just a hunch," Boyd said, stony.

He started the car and drove through the night, passing the lighted houses in the residential neighborhood on the outskirts of town, and then down a lonely dirt road, unlighted. The moon was bright, the stars invisible, unable to compete.

"Is that it?" Dave said, pointing to a cottage lit up like a beacon.

"That's it," Boyd replied. "I'm going to sneak up on them." Like he always did, hoping to catch Frank doing something wrong, he turned off the lights and engine and drifted up the driveway. As clear as could be, in what appeared at first to be an intimate embrace, Margo Portland and Frank McPherson were standing together. Johnny Rivers played in the background, music floating through the open windows. But as the sheriff and the detective watched, the couple started to sway back and forth innocently as Frank led her in step. Ellen was jumping up and down, clapping.

"They're dancing! They're *slow dancing*," Dave said hitting his knee and laughing. "People still do that?"

"Yep, it looks like they do," Boyd said, sadly. "The busy bodies probably saw the father and daughter slow dancing, and with dirty minds thought they were doing something bad. Poor Frank. If what I think is true, it'll be the last time he dances with Margo."







GETTING OUT OF MARY'S house without anyone seeing Noelle was no mean feat. The man who lived next door hung out on his porch for a while after the fight. The screaming and commotion had to rouse the rest of the neighborhood's curiosity but no one called the police, or if they did, there was no response. Waiting until dark to go, she left Mary's house from a back door that faced an alley. Not believing she'd get away with it gave her confidence she didn't usually have. If she got caught, oh well. How would it change her life, really? Already living in self-imposed confinement; going to a job she loathed, the loneliness unbearable, and then finally succumbing to Alan's lies, at least a murder trial and life in prison would bring some excitement, not to mention she'd have companionship in jail.

After she killed Mary, she found a bottle of spray cleaner under the kitchen sink and wiped over the few places she touched, the door handles and the handle of the knife while it stuck out of Mary's back. Exhausted, she went into the living room and sat down to rest, confident no one would come to the house because Mary had said so. "You're in luck! The place is empty and I'm not expecting anyone tonight, so come on in!"

Arriving at Mary's that second time; a police car pulled up to the house just as she'd given up knocking on the door and walked down the steps to leave. It threw her into a state of panic so intense she almost ran, thinking they were coming for her. But the cop was just dropping Mary off. Jealousy surged seeing Mary; thin, animated, pretty; everything she wasn't. Imagining her in Alan's arms intensified the rage; up until that moment, she only wanted to talk to Mary but anger would be the deciding factor in Mary's demise. Following the exact same procedure she did with Alan, only this time she used Mary's very own kitchen knife, originally lifted from the café, to stab her in the back.

The logistics of killing Alan the evening before were trickier. When he called her from Mary's house earlier that week, giving her the ax, it was simple for Noelle to get the number he was calling from. Dialing star six nine, the number was repeated by a recorded voice. A wait of a few days to decrease suspicion, Noelle called the number.

"I'm coming into Seymour tomorrow and want to reserve a room," she said.

"No need for a reservation," Mary said, putting lipstick on, anxious to leave for Beauregard. "Just come by when you arrive."

"Can I have your address?" Mary gave it freely, not cautious at all.

"How'd you hear about me?" she asked. But Noelle had already hung up.

Mary Cook was the woman she was looking for, and Noelle made the decision to leave Florida and go to Alabama; there was no other alternative. Years of systematic emotional abuse by men culminated in Alan's mistreatment of her and he would be the scapegoat, paying the dues for all those who went before him.

The bus ride was awful, reminding her of nightmares of youth, going across the border with her mother to visit relatives. Arriving in Seymour in the early afternoon, the bus stop was at the corner of Mary's street, relief when the whoosh of the hydraulic doors opened and fresh air could finally flood in. The café in town offered her a chance to regroup, and it was empty, business almost done for the day. An older woman with a tired limp put a menu and a glass of water down on the table.

"Where's the bathroom?" Noelle asked.

“In back,” the waitress said, pointing to the left of the lunch counter while she returned to filling a tray of saltshakers. On the way to the bathroom, the perfect weapon presented itself; a six inch carving knife in a plastic bin of knives. Slipping the knife into her bag, adrenalin surged through her body. She just made it to the bathroom before bursting into tears, unable to bear the pain for another minute. Locking the door, she knelt down on one knee on the dirty floor and rolled up her pant leg. Using the knife from the café, she very slowly nicked the skin below her anklebone. When she was sure she missed any major vessels, she cut a little deeper, the relief coincided with the rush of air from her lungs. Wrapping the wound with gauze she always carried, she wiped the tip of the blade off and put it in her bag with her bandage supplies. She’d be able to do this.

Alan’s unlocked car parked in front of Mary’s house was a perfect place to hide and wait. She saw it on the street and her mouth filled with bile, heart thumping so hard she was afraid she’d die. Carefully opening the door, she got in the backseat and because of anxiety, immediately fell asleep.

What she wasn’t expecting was to be a witness to the fight. The noise woke her up and at first, she couldn’t tell where it was coming from. Just as she peeked up over the back door to look out the window, Alan flew down the steps with his suitcase. Cowering on the floor, she was sure he’d see her.

Fortunately, he opened the front door of the car and threw it in the passenger seat. He mumbled, calling her a bitch, gulping air in his flight, clearly furious.

Nerves building to enable Noelle to kill Alan as he drove down the deserted road, she was just getting ready to plunge the knife into his neck when he pulled into a well-lit gas station and got out to make a phone call. Now it was her turn to gulp air, heart bounding in her chest, she tried to slow her breathing down before he heard it.

He got back into the car, mumbling again, but his anger seemed to have resolved somewhat. Squatting on the floor behind him, she silently prayed for strength to carry out the murder. He deserved no mercy.

The car slowed down and finally stopped. She listened to him opening the door, getting out of the car. The passenger door opened and he got his bag, slamming the door shut. She peeked over the seat and saw a dark, hulking structure with a wraparound porch, saw him open a door and enter the house without knocking. Carefully opening the back door, she cringed when the interior light went on but she moved fast and quickly and gently closed the door. Approaching the house, she decided if they caught her, she’d just say she was there to see Alan. But no one saw her.

Waiting until he went into the dining room to sneak inside the house, no one noticed her creep by due to the fuss the tenants were making over Alan’s return. Hiding under the staircase, Noelle wasn’t sure what would happen next, listening to their conversation. A woman he called Cate said he could have his old room at the top of the stairs. Alan and another woman named Margo chatted, their attraction for each other clear in his voice and Noelle’s contempt grew. Someone brought up Mary’s name, enraging Noelle further. Barely able to contain the rage and having heard enough, she tiptoed up the stairs, opened the door she hoped was his room at the top of the stairs, the heat blasting her in the face. Not thinking it might alert someone, she turned the air conditioning on, hid next to the wardrobe and waited for him.

It was so easy to do the deed, not at all how she imagined it would be having never stabbed a person before. She was afraid of the knife resisting, of having to force it in. Aiming at the middle of his back, the handle in an icepick grip, the extra leverage gave the sharp, pointed knife strength to slice into him like butter.

In spite of the ease, she started to sweat, beads of sweat dripping off the end of her nose. Alan had once complained when they were having sex that he didn't like her on top of him because her sweat dripping on him was gross. She remembered the insult, giving the knife an extra twist. He grunted and fell forward. After the writhing stopped, she rifled around in his pockets. He only had fifty dollars. Laughing, she said, "What a poor ass."

Listening at the bedroom door, she didn't have to wait for long to make her escape. Scraping of chair legs on the floor in the room below echoed; the meal in the dining room had come to an end. Pausing at his door, she saw another staircase at the end of the hall. Luckily, the stairs led to a back door where she could make her escape undetected.

She walked in circles in the dark neighborhood for half an hour, confused, uncertain, until finally, the noise and smells of food led her to the center of town. Killing time, she hid in the library for as long as she could without rousing suspicion, and then walked down by the river for an hour. She found the bus station where she could hide out until the next bus to Seymour left in the morning. The need to confront Mary grew. Any woman who had betrayed her with Alan deserved retribution. She really hadn't intended on killing her but once it was over, she was relieved.

The bus left Seymour early Sunday morning with Noelle on board after the deed was done. When it passed by the café, she recognized the gorgeous man walking out with a take-out bag in his hand, crossing the street to his parked truck. She'd seen his photo in a newspaper article left behind in the bus station waiting room. A man and his daughter, dancing for all they were worth, won the grand prize the night before at Phillip Anderson's Ballroom.

### **The End**

If you enjoyed Slow Dancing, you will enjoy Pam of Babylon.

**[CLICK HERE TO READ PAM OF BABYLON FREE](#)**

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

**[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)**

• • • •

USA TODAY BESTSELLING Author SUZANNE JENKINS writes page-turning contemporary romance, mystery, and women's fiction with passionately gripping characters in over eighty books that stay with readers long after they turn the last page. The five Detroit Detective Stories, beginning with The Greeks of Beaubien Street, are compelling American fantasy with historical reality. Twenty- six Pam of Babylon books consistently rank in the Top 100 Bestsellers on Amazon in American Drama with over 1,000,000 downloads.

Be sure to subscribe to Suzanne's email list at **[www.suzannejenkins.com](http://www.suzannejenkins.com)** to received periodic Free stories.



# TAMARA FERGUSON: TWO HEARTS UNSPOKEN TARGETS

---

TWO HEARTS UNSPOKEN TARGETS  
BY TAMARA FERGUSON

**Author's Rating:**



**Language:\*\* Sexuality:\*\* Violence:\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used factiously.

Two Hearts Unspoken Targets

Copyright © 2019 by Tamara Ferguson.

All rights reserved.

Cover Designer: Adriana Hanganu

[AdipixDesign.com](http://AdipixDesign.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored or transmitted electronically, mechanically or recorded without express permission from the author.





The single mom of a severely autistic son, Elizabeth Bowen is a full-time accountant in Illinois. But the plant where she's been working will be closing soon, due to the struggling economy in Illinois. She's had her hands full with her son Kyle, since his father's been long out of the picture, so when the opportunity to enroll Kyle in a vocational facility in Wisconsin comes up, she gladly accepts.

Retired air force captain, Zachary Logan, is a wounded warrior, searching for a new life for himself outside of the air force. When he relocates to the town of Crystal Rock at the invitation of his friend, Luke Bryant, he realizes he's found it, and accepts the position of administrator at the recently built wounded warrior facility.

When Beth and Zach meet at the beach at Dragonfly Pointe, their attraction to each other is instantaneous. And the most wonderful thing of all? Zach is accepting of her special needs son, Kyle, for exactly who he is.

But battling PTSD, Zach experiences flashbacks of a gruesome murder. Can he keep his new love and autistic son safe when they're all singled out by the killer?



October, 2014

Iraq

Their squadron was finally going home.

Air Force Lieutenant Josh Logan watched his fellow crewmen begin assembling, climbing into their one-man cockpits as he stepped into his own. After the bombs had been dropped on Kobani, each flight team had returned to the isolated airfield serving as temporary headquarters for their hand-picked elite unit. They were in a protected zone, and the Iraqi government had sanctioned the U.S. occupation of the former air base.

“Begin to assemble flight team one,” blasted out through the intercom set up near the run-down control tower. Slightly smaller than usual, the twelve-bomber squadron had been divided into three flight teams for this special mission. Each bomber would be departing from the field in fifteen-minute intervals. Now that their primary mission had been completed, pilots from another squadron would be arriving later in the day to take their place.

“Flight team two be ready,” Captain Jason Matthews called out to his other men.

Manned by Hawk Benton, Team One’s first F-22 Raptor made it down the runway safely and was easing along the short-ragged strip in preparation for take-off before disaster struck. Gunfire echoed suddenly through the air, and the insurgents seemed to be attacking the base from all directions.

Listening through headphones, Zach sat waiting in his cockpit, watching several members of base security rushing across the field as, one by one, they contained each of the five offenders before they could reach the runway. It all happened so fast. In less than five minutes three men were killed and two were taken into custody, although not without a fight.

And then chaos ensued. Fire erupted from Hawk Benton’s bomber that had been ready to depart, and moments later, after hearing another explosion, Zach realized he’d apparently been hit by gunfire as well.

“Hold back! That’s an order,” Captain Matthews roared, as Zach noticed other team members moving away from their planes, everyone ready to jump into action.

Captain Matthews must have decided it was too dangerous of a situation, Zach figured. The last thing they needed right now were more casualties after losing Hawk Benton, the pilot of the raptor that had just blown up.

Airman Luke Bryant, who’d been next in line after Zach to depart, obviously had been unable to hear Captain Matthews’ orders, because after climbing out of his raptor’s cockpit, he was working frantically to open Josh’s cockpit door.

The fire seemed to spread in a heartbeat. As Josh’s bomber became caught up in flames, Captain Matthews came rushing across the airfield while Josh kept attempting to escape from the cockpit.

But the temperature inside the plane was becoming scalding hot, and when the instrument panel failed to work, probably due to the heat, Josh pounded at the door, trying to get the jammed controls to respond.

“It’s the heat,” Luke shouted, continuing to pry at the door with a crowbar one of the mechanics had brought over in his hand.

As Captain Matthews arrived at the scene, Zach heard Luke screaming, “It’s screwing up the instrument panel, and *Zach’s stuck inside.*”

Somehow, Luke finally managed to wedge the cockpit open, and when he reached inside to pull him out, Captain Matthews held back the burning cockpit door.

Zach felt like his flesh was on fire and was unable to move as Captain Matthews assisted Luke with pulling him out.

Zach heard a loud crack and then someone cried loudly in pain, and the last thing he remembered was being hauled away from the scene by Captain Matthews.

• • • •

ZACH KNEW HE WAS BEING airlifted out, because someone had awoken and was screaming in agony.

*Wait a minute...maybe it was him?*

No, not all the moans and screams were coming from Zach. Someone else appeared to have been severely injured as well.

But he couldn't turn his head to see who it was, because something was wrapped around his neck and he appeared to be latched in place, probably so he wouldn't move around.

And he was hooked up to something – there was a tube wedged into his throat. *Oxygen*. That's right, *his lungs*. The last few minutes before losing consciousness, he'd barely been able to breathe.

Dozing, Zach found his mind drifting, returning to the past and the same recurring nightmare he'd been having for years, ever since he'd taken on his first covert assignment working with a search and rescue unit in Afghanistan.

Drugged and tortured, there were so many pieces of his captivity still missing from his brain. Zach never knew for sure whether his nightmares were based on reality or delusions from his hazy memory.

They'd been drawn into a trap, and Zach had never been able to discover why he'd been the only person left alive.

That was his last cognizant thought, and moments later Zach lost consciousness.

• • • •

ZACH WAS AWAKENED SUDDENLY by the pain, and glancing down, he noticed IV tubes seemed to be running out of him everywhere while parts of his body were swathed in some kind of strange bandages. He seemed to be pretty heavily sedated, but bits of conversation in English along with a vaguely recognizable second language floated into his consciousness as he struggled to understand what was happening.

He must be in a German hospital, he figured, because alternative services had been established at the makeshift airbase in Iraq for transporting injured service people from emergency situations.

How long he'd been here, he couldn't say. It must have been several days, he decided as his eyes swept through the sterile hospital room.

Panicking, Zach suddenly heard a voice overhead.

“Hello, Lieutenant. I'm Magda, and I'm one of the team who's been taking care of you. You've been in critical care for your burns for over two weeks now. Although it probably doesn't seem like it, your condition is improving. The best thing you can do is try and rest.”

Zach wasn't sure if he'd been given additional drugs for the pain, but he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

• • • •

THE NEXT TIME ZACH awakened, it was to the sound of familiar voices talking softly in his room.

Zach murmured, "Mom?"

Sure enough, it was his mom leaning over the bed, studying him intently. "Zach? Do you know where you are?"

"Germany?" he answered. "Hey. There's no more tube in my mouth, but geez my throat is sore."

"They just took it out," Zach's father, the Colonel, was now standing next to Mom. "I'm glad to see you talking, even though you're croaking like a frog. You sure had us worried."

Zach said hoarsely, "I'll admit, I was a little worried myself. How long have you been here?"

"Nearly a week, now," Mom answered.

"I'm on an indefinite leave of absence," Dad said. "I'm not going back to work until we have you situated on a plane going back to the U.S."

"I'm glad you're both here," Zach said softly, his eyes suddenly closing.

• • • •

NEARLY A MONTH LATER, Zach was being flown back to the states to the veteran's hospital in D.C. for his final checkup after his initial healing period. Future surgeries along with skin grafting procedures were being recommended because of the severity and location of his burns.

The sooner, the better, Zach had been told. Supposedly, he was lucky, but after the sight of his scarred neck and body in the mirror, it was hard for Zach to agree.

But now he was going through a slew of emotions. At least he was up and moving around, ready to move forward, while Luke Bryant was stuck in the hospital in Germany indefinitely.

Zach was concerned about Luke. Not only was he in bad shape physically, his leg had been amputated, but his mental state was going to be questionable as well once he completely understood what was happening. Luke was ten years younger than Zach, and Zach was having trouble himself accepting his own limitations. Since Luke had been planning on making the Air Force his career, how would he adapt?

But Zach needed to consider his own recovery, and supposedly Luke had lots of support back in the states, so for now, Zach needed to concentrate on getting well himself.

Zach had been able to speak with Luke before he'd left the hospital, but Luke was still in and out of consciousness from the painkillers, even though he'd finally been upgraded from critical condition. He was improving, although much more slowly than Zach because of the amputation.

Zach probably wouldn't be alive if it weren't for Luke, so he'd move forward as best he could. Hopefully, he'd have an opportunity to show Luke how grateful he was someday.

Provided Zach could feel appreciative to be alive himself eventually, once he decided how to go on with his life. He was definitely feeling depressed about the future. At thirty-six years old, he'd planned on the air force being his career, just like his father, since three generations of Logans had served proudly.

But working in an office had never appealed much to Zach, so maybe after eighteen years it was time to consider retirement? Especially if he had to go through all the surgeries he'd been told he'd need. Although he'd come close once, he'd never been married, so most of the money he'd earned had been put into savings and investments, since he'd never lived in one place for long.

And his parents were not exactly destitute either, they would do anything for their only child. Zach's father had even told him years earlier that he didn't expect Zach to follow in his footsteps, which was unusual considering his dad was pretty far up in the chain of command. Puzzled at the time, Zach suspected his mom might have had something to do with his father telling Zach that he'd be proud of him no matter what he decided to do about his future.

Concerned about his lack of motivation for recovery, Mom and Dad had stuck around the entire month to make sure Zach was doing what he was supposed to do to aid in the healing process.

Until now, Zach had never realized just how alone he really was. When he was younger, he'd assumed by age thirty-five, he'd have a wife and family. It wasn't just that he'd never met the right woman, but he didn't really have any other interests besides the Air Force and flying.

So, it would be up to him to find something that would interest him enough to plan his future.



*Three Months Later.*

*New Orleans, Louisiana.*

His cousin, Marc Logan, was waiting to pick him up inside the airport after Zach disembarked from his plane.

In his mid-twenties, Marc was a grad student who had also started teaching.

Marc approached Zach in the airport, and after grabbing one of Zach's carry ons, he shook Zach's hand.

"I would have known you anywhere, even with the beard," Marc murmured. "Everyone keeps telling me we look so much alike."

Zach grinned. "Frankly, I don't see it."

"Me, neither," Marc answered, grinning as he led the way.

Zach couldn't get over it. Despite not having a beard and being much slimmer, Marc looked enough like him to be a younger twin.

"I figured we'd go straight to the house. I've already been forewarned that you're not taking it easy like you're supposed to after surgery."

Zach grimaced as they walked outside toward the parking lot. "I have so many more surgeries to go, I can't survive with sitting still for long."

Pointing at a truck, Marc muttered, "I can't believe I haven't seen you for over ten years. You were my idol, you know."

Zach waited for Marc to unlock the truck, and after throwing his bag into the back seat, he sat in the passenger seat. "I thought about you a lot when I was overseas. To tell you the truth, I kind of hoped you'd change your mind about enlisting."

Marc laid the bag he'd been carrying beside the other before slipping behind the wheel of the truck. "You tried so hard to teach me how to defend myself. I'm still an uncoordinated klutz. Even Dad was relieved when I decided to go to college instead."

Zach laughed as Marc revved up the engine, backing up in the parking lot and steering toward the exit.

"I can't believe I haven't been back here since Katrina," Zach murmured.

"You never really liked living here, did you?" Marc asked as they reached US 90 and began traveling east.

"It's not that I didn't like it," Zach answered, giving Marc a side glance. "New Orleans is pretty cool. It's the house. Every time I'm staying there, I'm kind of creeped out, and it was ten times worse when I was a kid. Most kids are unhappy when they have to move, but I was actually glad when Dad ended up transferring to Virginia and then Atlanta before he was deployed again."

"Did you stay at the house last time you were here?" Marc asked, looking puzzled.

"After Katrina? I did," Zach answered. "That's when I got rid of the twin sized bed in my room and moved in a queen size from upstairs."

Marc nodded. "I was away at school. I offered to come home, but Dad wouldn't have it."

Zach answered, "It was a mess. We had emergency personnel staying at the house."

Marc continued, "Our home, along with the three others down the lane, are located at the highest elevation in the area, which is why the house has been standing as long as it has. Our ancestors



worked with various construction engineers through the years to ensure that the property remained above sea level.”

Becoming thoughtful, Zach answered, “I didn’t understand that until Katrina. I know the property has been in the family for over one-hundred and fifty years, so it’s something we want to hold on to, but I’m really glad that your parents moved in to take care of the place after we moved away.”

“It was a dream come true for me,” Marc muttered. “I can’t wait for you to see the plans I’ve drawn up for remodeling the place. Your mom and dad figured it would keep you busy, helping me decide whether everything I’m thinking about doing is feasible.”

“You know, Marc? That’s something that would work for me. I have some construction experience from when I was employed at a local lumberyard in Atlanta during high school. I really enjoyed it too.”

Marc gave him a wry grin. “Exactly what Uncle Niall said.”

Just then, they reached their turnoff, and uneasiness swept through Zach as Marc pulled into the long narrow road leading across the Logan estate. He was hoping he might feel better this time around, but now he was breaking into a cold sweat. After Katrina, it had been a little easier to deal with staying here with a house load of people assisting with the rescue operations and cleanup, but now it would only be Zach and Marc alone at the house since Marc’s parents had retired and spent a lot of time traveling.

Marc glanced his way and frowned. “Are you going to be alright?”

“I’d better be,” Zach growled. “After everything else I’ve been through, I’m determined to put this stupidity behind me. Every time I’m here, I feel like I’m walking into a gothic horror novel.”

“This should be interesting,” Marc grimaced, pulling into one of six parking spots located in the garage. “Maybe it’ll be easier after we begin the restorations.”

Zach was pleasantly surprised when he walked into the house from the breezeway which connected it to the garage. The former servants’ quarters had been transformed into additional kitchen space with a new pantry included.

But the biggest change? The atmosphere inside. At one time dark and gloomy, the kitchen was bright, airy and inviting.

Zach looked at Marc in astonishment. “How did you...?”

“Mom always hated this kitchen,” Marc grinned. “We added skylights in the old servants’ quarters and bigger windows around the perimeter of the kitchen. It was my first project. What a difference, huh?”

“I’ll say. It’s incredible. You’ve even included a family room with a fireplace,” Zach muttered, his eyes scoping the other side of the room, where an oversized couch and a couple of modern recliners had been placed on either side of the fireplace.

Marc continued, “I spend most of my time in here, since I’ve been living here by myself.”

Zach shook his head dazedly, noticing the desk set up near a large picture window overlooking the oceanfront.

“What a view,” Zack murmured, stepping up to the window. “I can’t believe this side of the house never had windows.”

“Back when this house was originally built, it was a safeguard for preserving the warmth in the house. The winds blowing in can be pretty fierce.”

“That’s true,” Zach answered. “I don’t remember too much about living here. I was pretty young when we moved away.”

“Can I get you something to eat?” Marc asked.

“Tell you what? I’m kind of burned out right now. If I rest up for a little while, how about going out with me tonight to eat? My treat, of course.”

“That’ll work,” Marc replied. “I have someone hired to come in and clean once a week, so I had her air out your room and put some sheets on the bed. I hope that’s okay?”

“That’s fine. I have a feeling moving into my old room is the only way I’ll get over this weirdness I have about staying in this house.”

“Did you know that your parents sent over all your belongings from your house when they moved from Atlanta? Everything is packed away in boxes in your bedroom closet.”

“Funny, I never thought about that when they moved.” Zach pursed his lips. “I have some stuff coming here from my apartment too, either tomorrow or the next day, and then I decided to hire someone to deliver my truck, so I won’t have to depend on you for transportation.”

“Great. I’ll keep an eye out,” Marc said, picking up Zach’s largest piece of luggage and heading up the back staircase to the second floor.

Zach followed Marc up the stairs and along the old familiar hallway, carrying his smaller suitcase and duffel bag.

“Everything is still in great shape, isn’t it?” Zach asked.

“Structure-wise, anyway. It’s the outside that needs all the work, since being so close to the ocean degrades the exterior,” Marc answered. “I have a trustworthy cleaning crew coming in every two or three months when I notice everything upstairs getting dusty.”

Zach murmured, “Four stories with sixteen bedrooms along with ten bathrooms makes for a lot of upkeep.”

“Most of it stays closed,” Marc said, walking into the bedroom at the end of the hallway, its door opened wide. “When we had the kitchen redone, we had a new heating and cooling system installed that works by zones. It should really be done to modernize the remainder of the house, instead of using window air conditioners and electric wall heaters, just for the convenience.”

“I imagine if we’re talking about restoration, we should make the right kind of improvements to maintain the value of the house?” Zach asked distractedly, walking into his old bedroom.

“For sure. Not everything has to be done at once,” Marc answered.

Unfortunately, that same feeling of doom overtook Zach as he stood, glancing around his old gloomy bedroom.

“Is it me or does it feel cold in here?” Zach asked, walking over to the dormer windows overlooking the rocky shoreline.

“I turned down the temperature on the wall unit earlier,” Marc said, strolling toward the wall mount air conditioner, reaching up and switching it off. “You’ll get a nice cross breeze if you open the window at the end of the hallway and leave your bedroom door open. I’m in the room upstairs above yours, but since I’ve been here by myself, I’ve been sleeping on the couch downstairs.”

“I don’t blame you.” Zach raised a brow. “By any chance, were you hearing strange noises during the night while you were growing up?”

Looking startled, Marc turned back from walking through the doorway. “How did you know?”

“That’s when all my nightmares began,” Zach murmured, just realizing it himself. It’s funny how he remembered so little about growing up here. He’d always associated his nightmares with the years he’d served in both Afghanistan and Iraq, since he’d been captured while on active duty overseas.

Marc was looking at him strangely. “We’ve lived here since Dad opted out, but I was about twelve, and began hearing stuff then. Me and one of my friends used to search upstairs in the attic and down in the basement, trying to figure it out. We never really did discover what it was.”

Zach became thoughtful. “Maybe we’ll come across something while we’re working on the restorations?”

Marc nodded his agreement. “Maybe. But most of the changes are cosmetic since apparently there was some reconfiguring of the floor plan inside back in the eighties.”

Zach opened both windows. “As long as I’m staying here indefinitely, the first thing I’m going to do is paint these walls. What an ugly shade of blue.”

Marc laughed, walking back toward the door. “This room and your parents’ room haven’t been touched because of all the personal items inside. There were plenty of guestrooms to use on the two upper floors when we had company.”

“Well, I’m going to put my stuff away, and try to rest for a while,” Zach said, laying his luggage on the bed.

Marc walked through the doorway into the hallway. “Good idea. I’m going to go downstairs and work for a while, since I’ve got class tomorrow, but I’m usually around during the afternoon. It’ll be great to have you here, because then you can supervise the construction crews and make sure the guys are doing what they’re supposed to.”

“Sounds good to me,” Zach murmured, pulling a bunch of new oversized t-shirts from his bag.

“Hey, Zach?” Marc called out from down the hallway.

Zach peeked into the hallway through the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Check out your bathroom. It’s a gift from your parents.” Marc grinned, before galloping down the staircase.

Puzzled, Zach walked through the bedroom, opening the door leading into the bathroom.

Stunned, his mouth gaped open, staring at the completely remodeled bathroom, tripled in size from what it had once been. Not only was there a large walk in shower for him to use, but a huge whirlpool tub with jets had been added.

There’d been a small bedroom on the other side of Zach’s room that had once been used for Zach’s father and uncle’s live in nanny, and Mom had used the room for storage when Zach was young.

Apparently, the room had been sacrificed for Zach.

Heading back into the bedroom, he grabbed his duffel bag, and lugging it into the bathroom, he began unloading the vast array of supplies he needed to use daily because of his scars.

He took a few painkillers, which he’d avoided taking earlier today, and then his antibiotics.

And then sighing heavily, he stacked small tubs of antibiotic lotion, bandages and a thermometer on the granite vanity surface so everything was easy for him to get to when needed.

Grinning, he began running water into the tub, and then turned on the jets. He missed his workouts, which he’d been forced to cut off. He’d have to keep the water tepid, and he wouldn’t be able to fill it very high, but at least it would help relax him, hindering the constant cramping in his legs.

Maybe he’d *finally* be able to sleep a little better.



Zach and Marc settled into a routine during the next month. In fact, Zach was enjoying keeping busy, even though he was still supposed to monitor his activity and not overdo it.

The only problem Zach had to deal with was some trouble that had occurred when the company he'd hired to deliver his truck wasn't able to do it. Supposedly, the brakes had failed for the driver as he'd been coming through Mississippi on his way here. Luckily, the driver was fine since he'd been traveling along an isolated roadway surrounded by flatlands, so he'd been able to stay in control of the vehicle while continuing to slow down.

Marc had driven Zach to Jackson, which was only 150 miles away, and after getting estimates to repair the brakes, Zach had decided that instead of bothering to have it fixed, he'd just trade it in for a similar new vehicle since he'd been thinking about purchasing something that was a little more comfortable for him to drive. Meanwhile, his insurance company would evaluate the issues and determine the payout quickly.

But the brake failure was strange, since Zach had always taken excellent care of his vehicles and didn't recall any issues with the truck before he'd left for the mission in Iraq.

Zach had made the trade and in a matter of hours he was driving a roomier truck. He and Marc took their time driving back to New Orleans in separate vehicles, and made a stop to eat, even though the driving didn't bother Zach at all. It had been a huge issue traveling on a plane the month before when he'd flown here from D.C., feeling pain and discomfort.

At the beginning of February, he and Marc decided which of the renovations would be happening first, and by mid-February, Zach was supervising the construction crews working outside on the house. After some much-needed work was done on the foundation and the entire roof was replaced, they would begin repositioning and replacing windows. A million and one problems seemed to come up though because of the age of the house, and the cost of improvements needed had more than doubled since the original estimate.

His parents weren't too happy to hear he had decided to hold off on more surgery for a while. But part of his discontent was having to be restricted afterwards, so being more physically active was great for improving his attitude about his limitations.

Zach was beginning to think his fear of living in this house as a kid had been unwarranted, and that everything he thought he'd heard or seen had been a figment of his imagination. But with some help from Marc, Zach had completely remodeled his bedroom, painting and moving around furniture after polishing the wood floor.

Once the workmen were ready to do some window installation, both Zach and Marc's bedrooms would be first on the list, along with rebuilding the balcony and deck which had been integrated in the original layout of the house, referencing one of the old pictures Marc had discovered when organizing the library on the ground floor. Marc was still trying to locate the original floor plans, but so many records on file in town had been destroyed by Katrina, so his only hope at finding the plans, if there actually were any, would be continuing to search the house, which had a lot of hidden nooks and crannies. During the kitchen overhaul, Marc had even discovered a couple of doors which had been hidden by walls from someone's previous remodel.

It was approaching spring, and Marc had been dating a girl from town, when he surprised Zach with a suggestion when they were sitting in the kitchen, eating breakfast on a bright sunny day in April.

“How about going out with me and Denise? She’s got an older sister who just arrived in town and is going to be visiting for a couple weeks.”

Zach snorted. “I don’t think so. I’m not up for dating anyone right now.”

“It’s not really a date. She’s got a boyfriend serving overseas.” Marc shrugged. “We would just have dinner and then go somewhere and maybe listen to music afterwards while having a couple beers.”

Marc had been getting on Zach’s case a little about never leaving the house.

“I’ve been avoiding people, haven’t I?”

Marc asked softly, “Because of your injuries?”

Zach sighed heavily. “That’s part of it, I suppose. You’ve seen the scars.”

“They’re pretty awful,” Marc agreed. “But not if you meet the right woman. Surgery won’t improve the appearance?”

“Possibly, but since I have the least sensation in the areas with the most scar tissue, the surgery will be done to try and improve the flexibility of my skin. All this scar tissue could lead to a lot more issues as I grow older. And I have to be so careful about infection. Now that the weather is warming up, my skin seems to be bothering me a lot more too. I can’t sweat, and sometimes I feel like there’s something crawling all over my skin.”

Marc seemed thoughtful. “And you haven’t found a shrink?”

“You’ve noticed, huh?” Zach sighed heavily. “I’m not ready to rehash my issues with someone new.”

“Are you planning on returning to D.C. then? I get the feeling that this is only temporary.”

“Maybe.” Zach gave Marc a wry grin. “I like the doctor I’ve been seeing, but even he’s been getting on my case about having more surgery and seeing a shrink. If I’m going to continue with the next round, I suppose I’d better go back within a month or two.”

“Will you return here?”

“Probably,” Zach answered. “I’ve actually come to like it here. But a lot of that has to do with you, and your support.”

Marc grinned. “And me not getting on your case?”

Zach smiled widely. “You’ve got it, man.”

• • • •

ZACH ENJOYED HIMSELF when they went out that night. They went to dinner at a small restaurant Marc recommended in the French quarter which featured local bands for entertainment.

Like Marc had said, Denise’s sister, Jan, had a boyfriend overseas who was an Army Ranger and she was deeply concerned about the fact that she hadn’t heard from him in over two months.

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t be worried, but two months is really nothing in the scheme of things, Jan,” Zach reassured her. “You tend to lose track of time, depending on your mission. At this point, I’d say no news is good news.”

“Thanks, Zach,” she’d said at the end of the evening. “You’ve helped me more than you know. I sure hope that you find what you’re looking for now that you’re home for good.”

Zach had smiled. “Me, too.”

She’d kissed Zach on the cheek, whispering in his ear. “And it’s just like Marc said – the right woman won’t care about the scars.”

They’d dropped the girls off at Denise’s apartment before heading home.

“I’m glad you talked me into this,” Zach murmured, as Marc pulled into the driveway. “It felt good to get out. And when it comes down to it, no one is really looking at me.”

“Well, maybe, maybe not,” Marc answered. “It they *are* looking at you, it’s not for the reason that you’re worried about. I’d love to have abs the size of yours.”

Zach laughed. “But I’m shrinking. I’m surprised I can do as much as I do physically, but low impact exercise and not overextending my arms because of the damage on my chest is keeping me somewhat in shape. I went to a physical therapist in D.C. too, so I have a long list of dos and don’ts.”

Marc frowned, looking at the house as they approached the garage. “Is it me, or does it look like there’s a light flashing around near those new windows upstairs on the second floor?”

Zach peered upwards as Marc slowed down. “No. It looks like someone’s roaming around with a flashlight. Has anyone else got keys besides us?”

Marc stopped his truck in the middle of the drive, meeting Zach’s gaze. “No. We just changed all the locks after we put in new doors, remember?”

“We’d better get that new security system installed soon,” Zach answered.

“I just pulled out the old one in February before we started the construction because it was outdated and wasn’t working right anyway,” Marc murmured. “The sensors were screwed up.”

“Someone’s up there, alright,” Zach said. “I’ll go check it out. I’m still pretty good at stealth.”

“*Wait*,” Marc said, as Zach slipped from the truck. “You don’t even have a weapon.”

“I won’t need one.” Zach smiled grimly. “Call the cops, Marc. If you see the hallway light turned on upstairs, it means that it’s safe to come inside.”

Zach heard Marc say something else, but Zach ignored him.

By that time Zach was close to the house, slipping around the perimeter and approaching the breezeway that led into the kitchen.

Carefully unlocking the back door, Zach crept into the house, climbing directly up the staircase. But by the time Zach moved stealthily through the hallway, no one appeared to be anywhere.

Methodically, he explored each room on the second floor, switching on lights and listening carefully as he made his way through each bedroom, checking inside closets and even in the bathrooms.

Completely mystified, Zach finally made his way into his own bedroom, staring in shock at the mess that had been left in his closet. All Zach’s things, old and new, had been packed away in those boxes, and someone had been going through them.

Whoever it was seemed to have completely disappeared.

*But what in the hell had they been looking for?*





By the time Zach heard the police arrive a few minutes later, Marc was standing beside Zach studying the mess that had been made by whoever had been inside the house. About half of the boxes stacked in the closet had been completely dumped out, and Zach's belongings were scattered across the floor.

Appearing dazed, Marc asked, "What do you suppose they were looking for?"

Zach answered, "I don't have a clue. It's funny how whoever it was looked like they were planning on going through everything."

"So, how did they get in and out without either one of us seeing them?"

"More importantly, *how in the hell did they know that neither one of us was here?*"

Marc's eyes went wide. "What should we tell the cops?"

Zach made a decision. "Nothing, for now. Let's say we interrupted a robbery and leave it at that."

"Alright. You probably have your reasons?"

Just then, Zach heard knocking at the front door, so he and Marc walked toward the bedroom door.

"I do. I've always felt like something strange has been going on at this house and judging by how uneventful life seemed to be while you and your parents were living here, crazy things seem to only happen when I'm involved."

Making their way through the hallway, Marc hurried down the front staircase while Zach trailed behind. Zach was probably never going to be able to walk without a limp since his left upper thigh was badly damaged from burns.

Two cops walked inside the house, looking around, and Marc knew them both, introducing them to Zach.

They had a quick discussion and decided they might just as well file a report, even though nothing appeared to be missing.

Or, so, Zach thought anyway. Tonight, he would leave everything as it was, and begin going through the boxes himself tomorrow.

• • • •

SINCE THE NEXT DAY was Saturday, Marc had no classes, so he and Zach searched the upstairs of the house for signs of another entrance.

After a couple hours scouring walls and the insides of closets as well as the attic, they were both still stumped. How in the hell had anyone gotten inside and left so quickly?

"There's got to be something we're missing," Marc said, scratching his head as they both sat at the kitchen island drinking coffee.

*How had whoever it was known they weren't home?*

A sudden thought came to Zach's mind, and reaching over, he laid his hand over Marc's arm nodding his head at the door.

Marc's eyes went wide.

But after Zach stood up carrying his coffee, Marc followed behind as Zach made his way along the terraced pathway leading to the property's ocean overlook.

"What is it, Zach?" Marc asked as they took a seat on the bench of the deck.

"This is great how you've added this terrace. What an amazing view," Zach murmured. "I haven't been this close to the cliffs since I was a kid."

Marc blinked. "Really? Why?"

Frankly, Zach was puzzled about that himself.

"I'm not really sure," Zach answered. "I get this cold and clammy feeling when I even look this way. I might have to ask my parents if something happened when I was a kid, because I can't really think of a reason. I don't have a problem anywhere else. I've hiked, climbed and worked in search and rescue at some of the most dangerous places overseas."

Zach continued, "Anyway, what I wanted to say? I think someone is either listening or watching us with some kind of eavesdropping device."

Marc's mouth gaped open.

Finally closing his mouth, he asked abruptly, "Why?"

"I don't have a clue," Zach answered. "But how else would they have known that neither one of us was home?"

Marc sighed heavily. "One of the workmen installed it?"

"Most likely," Zach answered. "They were in and out of the house when they were installing the doors and windows. I was around, but I couldn't watch everyone."

"I take it we're not going to try and find the devices?"

Staring down at the jagged rocks along the water's edge, Zach shook his head. "No. We can't be obvious about it anyway. How else would we have a chance to discover who put them there? Whoever is listening or watching is obviously able to do it on a phone."

"I'll be careful what I say. Maybe I should sleep in my room?"

"I wouldn't change your habits right away," Zach murmured, standing up. "Let's get out of here. I'm feeling kind of sick to my stomach."

"Alright," Marc answered. "Maybe we should come up with a signal if we discover anything?"

"Good idea." Zach pointed as they approached the house. "Let's do palms up, and then we can move outside to the gazebo over there. I doubt if there's anything to worry about inside since we never use it."

"Alright," Marc answered.

"I'll be coming up with a list of questions. Why don't we meet out here tomorrow about the same time so we can talk freely?"

"What kind of questions?" Marc halted since they were nearing the house.

Zach stopped, pretending to examine one of the new windows. "I want to know about all the neighbors, and who's living down the lane, and whether they're in residence or not."

"Good idea. We need to start somewhere."

"Exactly," Zach murmured.



The following afternoon, Zach and Marc met at the gazebo and took a seat at the patio table inside.

“Until you brought it up yesterday, I forgot about how colorful some of our neighbors are,” Marc said, pulling out a list. “We have Ryan Carlton, who’s property is at the very end of the road. Although his uncle was a pretty seedy character, I’m pretty sure that Ryan is on the up and up. He’s the CEO of one of the largest companies here in New Orleans, and he seems to have a lot of friends.”

Zach was curious. “What do you mean by seedy?”

Marc cleared his throat before answering, “There were rumors that Frank Carlton was a mob boss.”

Zach blinked. “Ohh-kay. Maybe a little more than seedy if it’s true? And the mansion beside it?”

“Well, I’m not sure who owns the place anymore. Occasionally, I see visitors at the mansion. I have a sneaking suspicion that a woman’s shelter, or rehabilitation clinic, has been set up on the property, where a new structure has been built. I think Ryan Carlton coordinates whatever is going on over there, and everyone seems to stay on the grounds. The square footage is probably more than ours and it also has an adjoining beach with Ryan’s.”

“Does Dad’s buddy, Lieutenant Colonel Ed Jackson, still own the property next to ours?” Zach asked.

Marc grimaced. “He does. I can’t say I like him very much. He’s always complaining about something or trying to order me around. He’s here a lot during the summer, more often on weekends.”

“I haven’t seen him for a long time,” Zach admitted. “When we were living in Atlanta, he used to stop by and go out to dinner with my parents all the time. He and Dad used to play golf together too. Truthfully, despite the Air Force connection and being neighbors growing up, I’ve never been able to figure out why they’re friends. Dad recommended him for a promotion and the job as the commander of the air base nearby instead of taking the job himself. Of course, Dad said he and Mom always wanted to travel and go overseas. But I always got the impression that Dad owed him a favor, although I don’t have a clue what it could possibly be.”

“I guess he kept an eye on this house years ago before we moved in when no one was living here. But didn’t he and your dad grow up together?”

“I think he was *your* dad’s friend growing up. He’s actually a few years younger than mine,” Zach murmured.

“Really?” Marc grimaced. “Well, if they were friends once, they aren’t anymore. Dad can’t stand the guy.”

Zach nodded thoughtfully. He’d always thought the Colonel was kind of strange himself, and Zach had sometimes felt an odd sense of discomfort when he was around. Actually, it was more than discomfort. Jackson had been in charge of interrogation back in Afghanistan, and he really didn’t know anyone who had anything nice to say about the guy, including the men serving under his command. Supposedly, he’d been married for a while when Zach was active overseas, but his wife had passed away less than ten years later.

Zach and Marc sat outside for another few minutes discussing the remaining neighbors who lived inland along the coastal road in the subdivision nearby. Marc admitted he used to ride his bike along the road as a teenager and still knew some of the families. There never seemed to be any trouble

though, and the homes were modern and well kept. A new gated community had even been added as well.

“I can introduce you to Ryan Carlton,” Marc said as they began walking toward the house.

“Sounds good,” Zach answered. “And meanwhile, in case our internet is being monitored, I’ll take my laptop in town and check further into him and see if any other strange happenings or robberies have occurred in the neighborhood.”

Marc nodded. “Yes, that’s a good idea. I rarely talk to anyone around here, and we’re kind of isolated where we’re located. There’s free wi-fi at the library in town and at a couple of the fast food places too.”

Zach nodded.

Marc sighed. “We’re probably not really getting anywhere, are we?”

Zach snorted. “No. But like you said yesterday, we have to start somewhere. I went through the boxes that were dumped out and repacked everything, but I barely remembered half of the stuff Mom saved for me. I’ll go through the other boxes today.”

Marc grimaced, as they walked into the kitchen. “The construction crew is back tomorrow to start rebuilding the porch.”

“I’ll stick around until you get home from class. You’re home by one on Monday, right?”

“Right,” Marc answered.

• • • •

“SPEAK OF THE DEVIL,” Marc murmured, a few hours later, when Zach came downstairs and was preparing to go outside and start the grill.

Zach had just finished opening and shuffling through the rest of his things upstairs, but without knowing what he was looking for, he felt like he was wasting his time.

“Who’s that?” Zach asked, hearing a knock at the back door.

“Jackson’s out there,” Marc said. “I just saw him through the window, walking along the path.

Zach grunted, heading to the back door and opening it.

According to Marc, Lieutenant Colonel Jackson had been back and forth to his home here several times during the last three months, and Zach found it interesting to see that the Colonel didn’t look surprised when Zach answered the door.

“Captain,” Jackson murmured, nodding his head. “I heard you were here in town.”

“Colonel,” Zach answered, automatically giving him a quick salute.

“I saw some police cars here the other night when I was driving by. Is there anything I need to be worried about?”

Zach studied him thoughtfully. If anything, now that the Colonel was getting older, he was looking even creepier than he had when Zach had been a kid. He was thinner with sunken eyes and sallow skin, accentuated by the color of his hair, obviously dyed raven black.

“Nothing to worry about, Sir,” Zach answered. “Someone was in the house, but nothing appeared to be missing afterwards.”

“It was probably just some kids messing around,” Marc said, after approaching and standing beside Zach. “Since we disconnected our alarm system because of the construction, we were probably more vulnerable.”

“Good to hear,” the Colonel murmured. “I’ll just have my caretaker double up on his rounds of the property.”

“Would you like to come in for a beer or drink?” Zach asked.

If Lieutenant Colonel Jackson was surprised at the invitation, he didn't show it. "No, thank you. I need to start on my way back to base."

Turning away and walking along the path, the Colonel suddenly looked back. "It's good to see you again, Zachary. Glad you made it home safely."

Zach answered, "Thank you, Sir."

Marc's eyes met Zach's in obvious astonishment as he and Zach moved outside from the kitchen.

Zach murmured, "I believe that as much as I believe I've got a hole in my head."

Marc grimaced. "Geez, he sure gave me the creeps, the way he said that."

"Tell me about it." Zach smiled grimly. "It sure doesn't feel like a coincidence that he stopped by, does it? But I can't think of one single reason why he'd have anything to do with the break-in."

"Me, neither," Marc agreed. "Plus, most of that stuff has been sitting there in your closet for years. It has to be unrelated. None of this makes any sense. Does it?"

"It doesn't," Zach admitted. "If it wasn't for the strange sophistication of the break-in, I would have probably written it off right away."

Marc had invited his girlfriend Denise and her sister over for dinner last week, but after what had happened Friday night, Marc had decided he'd go into town and meet Denise a little later tonight instead.

Zach thought it was a good idea. The strangeness of what was going on had him worried and since Marc hadn't appeared to have any unusual happenings until after Zach arrived, Zach somehow sensed that whatever the reason, it was definitely all about him.

Zach was settled in for the night, watching baseball on the television downstairs when he heard his phone ring.

He'd been checking in with his parents weekly, and very few people had the number, so he was definitely curious when he couldn't identify who was on the phone by the caller ID.

"Hello?" Zach answered.

"Lieutenant Logan? Er, I meant to say Captain. I heard you were promoted."

Zach sat up attentively. "*Luke?*"

"Yes. It's me," Luke muttered, sounding sheepish.

After standing and walking toward the kitchen door, Zach grinned from ear to ear as he stepped outside and made his way toward the gazebo. "*Well, how in the hell are you?*"

"I'm good." Luke cleared his throat. "Great, actually, Captain."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," Zach answered. "And start calling me Zach, Luke. I'm retired now."

"Alright, Zach," Luke answered. "I'm living back in Crystal Rock, Wisconsin with my girlfriend, Kelly. I've been going through rehab, and I've been fitted for a prosthetic."

Listening to Luke, Zach was still grinning. "You sound happy."

"Happier than I've ever been in my life," Luke admitted quietly. "But let's talk about you. Captain Matthews said you're hiding out and avoiding rehab and not having your recommended surgeries."

Zach groaned. "I was wondering how you got my number."

Luke answered, "I have a feeling you might actually like what I have to say, since I've heard you've been living in limbo. I have a proposition for you Zach..."



The next morning, Zach kept a close eye on all the workmen while he sat on one of the comfortable stools at the kitchen island preparing a short resume on his laptop. His conversation with Luke had him thinking a little more about the future, and just because he was retired didn't mean he didn't want to work. Since they were nearly through with all the renovations at the estate for now, Zach wouldn't have much to do in a few more weeks.

His conversation with Luke was like a wake up call, and it was time for Zach to decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He would be visiting here for sure, but he really didn't want to make New Orleans his home. At least not yet.

As Zach stood up and opened the fridge, Marc came walking through the doorway into the kitchen. "I brought lunch," Marc murmured, laying a couple of subs on the kitchen island. "I knew we were low on groceries, but maybe we can go into town later today when the workmen are gone. Also, coincidentally, I just ran into Ryan Carlton, and told him about someone breaking into the house. Did you realize he used to keep an eye on you occasionally when you were growing up?"

Zach blinked. "It's weird, but I hardly remember even being here when I was young. It's like I have a blackout when I try and think about it."

After grabbing them each a bottle of water from inside the fridge, Zach handed one of the bottles to Marc.

Marc sat down, taking a sip of water before unwrapping one of the subs.

And then Marc glanced at the screen on Zach's computer. "It looks like you're thinking about the future a little, huh?"

"Yeah, a little." Zach showed Marc his palms. "Want to go eat outside since it's a pretty nice day?"

Marc grimaced. He'd definitely forgotten about the possibility of them being watched. "Sure. Let's go sit in the gazebo."

A few minutes later, they were settled at the table.

"Ryan said if you have any questions, feel free to stop by this afternoon," Marc murmured. "He'll try and fill you in the best he can about the people who've been living here for the last thirty years."

"You want to come along?" Zach asked, biting into his sub.

"Nah. While I was in town, I talked to a friend of mine about a security system for the house. I think he's coming by this afternoon to give us an estimate. He might even be able to begin the installation right away if it's a system he keeps in stock."

Zach took a sip of water. "I'm glad you've already talked with someone about security because it was the first thing I was going to suggest taking care of after speaking with the neighbor."

As they ate in companionable silence, Zach gave Marc a wry smile. "A friend of mine called last night. He was injured pretty badly, but he's doing everything he's supposed to be doing, so he gave me a lecture. It was definitely a wake up call. We'll be done here in a few weeks, so I'm trying to figure out what's next."

Marc grimaced. "I'll miss you. Having you here has been like having an older brother."

"I'll miss you too, Marc," Zach admitted. "You're definitely like a younger brother to me, but better."

"Why's that?" Marc asked.

Zach grinned. "We never argue."



Marc blinked, and then laughed.

• • • •

ZACH HAD A FEELING that deep down, Marc had been hoping he would stay in New Orleans, and even though Zach would definitely make an effort to return soon, right now he was just too restless to hang around once the construction was finished.

They decided that splitting up their tasks for the afternoon would be easier. After visiting Ryan Carlton, Zach would go into town and use his computer where he could remain unobserved. Maybe it would be a waste of time trying to discover anything unusual which might have happened in the past, but truthfully, he couldn't think of anything else to do. Since nothing appeared to be missing, the cops hadn't bothered with any sort of investigation, and trying to take fingerprints would have probably been useless, anyway. When he was finished with what would most likely be a short computer search, he would pick up some groceries so Marc could remain at home and hopefully have some kind of alarm system installed today at the house.

As Zach made a left and headed down the road toward Ryan Carlton's estate, he realized he'd only taken out his new truck about a half dozen times. Zach had a feeling Marc wanted Zach to love it here as much as he did, because Marc liked driving Zach around town, showing off a little more of the rebuilding progress that was still happening after Hurricane Nina.

There was a high security fence surrounding the Carlton estate, so Zach stopped at the gate. Speaking into the intercom and giving his name as requested, Zach waited for the gate to open, following the drive toward the house.

When Zach knocked on the door, it was answered by a man who appeared to be about ten years older than Zach. But apparently, he was having some health issues, because he was pale and very thin.

"Zach?" He smiled. "You probably don't remember me, but everyone calls me Rye."

"Wait a minute." Zach suddenly *did* remember. "Didn't you used to come by with your girlfriend?"

"I did." Rye gave him a rueful smile. "Vanessa. Her dad never really liked me, so we would get together and babysit for your mom, who was here alone a lot because of your father's tours."

"Until I saw you again, I didn't remember," Zach murmured, following Rye as he led him through the house toward a sunny three season porch.

A woman appeared at the doorway. "Can I get you and your guest something to drink, Rye?"

Rye looked at Zach. "How about some coffee?"

"Yes," Zach answered, smiling. "Black would be great."

"I'll have it black too, Sandra," Rye said.

"Give me about ten minutes," she responded, smiling and walking away.

They conversed for a few more minutes, before Rye got to the point. "I've heard you had a break in, and you wanted to find out a little more about some of our neighbors?"

"Well, let me tell you what I'm most worried about," Zach answered, grimacing. "We can't figure out how they got inside."

Not seeming to be surprised, Rye sighed heavily. "Your home and the Danielson home next door were originally the only two estates located here along the Gulf. We're talking about hundreds of years ago by your great, great grandfather. In fact, maybe you can even add another couple of greats to that. So, take a guess why those homes were built here in the first place? Although the homes that are there now, are not actually the very first homes that were built."

It only took Zach a moment to figure it out, even though it was strange that he'd didn't know much about the history of the property. The steep cliffs, the long sandy beach down below. *The caves that he remembered going into with his dad as a kid.* "Smuggling?"

"You've got it," Rye answered.

"Isn't it weird how I don't know much about the estate?"

Just then, Sandra walked into the room with their coffee, handing a cup to Zach first before resting Rye's on the table beside him.

As Zach took a sip of his coffee, Rye answered, "Not so strange really. You were probably only about five or six years old when your dad was transferred to Virginia."

Rye continued, "Both of the original homes were destroyed by a hurricane and flooding, so the original owners, Ronald Logan and Rene Breunard, who were friends, set themselves to work trying to find ways to elevate the property before rebuilding, since the location was so secluded, which made it perfect for their nefarious activities."

"How were they able to make that work?"

"Don't forget, slavery was common back in the early 1800's. What they did was haul rock and soil and whatever else was available to stabilize the property. And the structural changes had to be monitored constantly to prevent erosion. There were canals and levees built, but a lot of deaths of slaves and Irish immigrants occurred for many years. It's rumored that your ancestors were way ahead of the times and were doing these things way before the city was."

Zach asked, "So, I'm presuming there are passages in and out of the houses?"

Rye nodded his agreement. "Most of them came later as the structural changes became more advanced, like steel became an easily available commodity in the mid to late 1800s. The passages were eventually reinforced like mine shafts, although most of them were supposedly sealed off eventually. The smuggling went on for years, but then there was a rift between Ronald Logan and Rene Breunard, the original owners sometime before the civil war."

"Let me guess," Zach murmured. "One of them got greedy?"

"Apparently, yes. Ronald disagreed with Rene on what, or rather who, was being smuggled. Rene Breunard branched into human trafficking and trading slaves, while Ronald Logan continued operating by smuggling only goods and did whatever he could to deter Breunard until his family was threatened by Breunard. No one was able to confirm it but, Logan's eldest grandson might have been kidnapped and murdered."

Zach grimaced.

Rye didn't know much more than that. Supposedly, Zach's mom had searched for some kind of records or blueprints for the house long before Katrina, but nothing had been found. Rye remembered her having a keen interest in the history of Louisiana and particularly their estate while she'd been living here, because it had kept her busy while Zach's dad was away on tour.

Zach and his mom really needed to do some talking one of these days. Zach had never even had a clue she was interested so much in history, but Rye seemed to think it had more to do with their ancestry, and Zach agreed, since Mom's parents had passed away when she was young.

Another thirty minutes later, Zach stood up, reaching out a hand.

Smiling, Rye rose from his chair and shook it. "So, I probably haven't been much help. It could almost be anyone who snuck inside your house, although it's more than likely a local. There's public access to our beach, and even a dock on the other side of the Danielson property. Sam used to live here in town, but he inherited the property from his wife when she was killed, so he doesn't know

much about the house. He visits regularly but he's actually the police chief for a small town in Wisconsin, and it's complicated, but I'm handling his interests for him here in New Orleans."

A small town in Wisconsin? That was kind of a coincidence, but then again, there were a lot of small towns in Wisconsin.

"Here, let me give you my card." Walking towards a desk, he slipped a card out from inside a drawer, bringing it over to Zach. "That's got my phone number and email address in case you have any other questions."

"Thanks for your time, Rye," Zach murmured. "I really appreciate it."

"Good to see you again, Zach," Rye answered, walking with him toward the door. "Get in touch if there's anything you need to know. I hope you're able to get back on track with your rehab and surgery. Marc mentioned you might be leaving soon."

He gave Rye a rueful smile. "I can't put off the future much longer."

"It's good that you came back and confronted your demons," Rye muttered.

Zach was startled.

Rye must have noticed because he smiled wryly. "I've had a lot of my own to deal with. Good luck, Zach."

"You too," Zach answered, holding up a hand in farewell before stepping into his truck.

• • • •

BRINGING HIS LAPTOP into town had been a complete waste of time, Zach decided an hour later as he was driving home with groceries. He really didn't know what he'd been looking for, but he was willing to bet that anything important was not going to just appear in front of him online.

Everything he'd discussed with Rye about the house predated any information available on the internet, so what Zach had done was looked into Ryan Carlton, who had impressive credentials, before trying to discover more about some of the other surrounding neighbors. One couple had only purchased their home ten years ago, and both of their teenage sons were of age and living in other states. Another neighbor was a millionaire with high visibility, who spent a lot of time traveling, and only visited New Orleans near Christmas because he'd been born in the state.

Zach had still checked into the Colonel, although he knew there would be nothing to find. On paper, Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Jackson's record was impeccable.

After driving across the long Twin Span Bridge from town, Zach was approaching the treacherous roadway leading back to the house when he suddenly had trouble accelerating and frowned.

"It's a brand-new truck," he muttered. "How in the hell could it be giving me trouble?"

Zach was still able to drive, but at a much slower speed, so taking out his phone, he gave Marc a call.

"Hello?" Marc answered.

"Hey, it's me, Zach. I'm having a problem accelerating my truck. I just came over the bridge and I'm on that narrow roadway about five miles from home."

Marc answered, "Since you're close to home, I'll call for a tow, and then come and get you. Don't take any chances. Find a place to park if you can."

"Gotcha," Zach answered, switching off his phone.

And then suddenly, a huge pickup with dark tinted windows was coming straight at him from the opposite direction.

"*What the fuck is he doing?*" Zach shouted, looking at each side of the road to consider his options.

And before he was hit by the truck, Zach was able to reach the end of the roadway where a small rest area had been constructed and swerve off into the narrow parking lot, flooring the brakes.

Turning to look through the window from where he'd stopped in the middle of the lot, Zach swore that the guy on the roadway must have been a stunt driver. The brakes on the monster truck squealed as he came to a halt before backing up on the narrow roadway.

“What the heck am I going to do now?” Zach growled, searching the area. He wasn't getting around well enough to run, especially with his limp. “I definitely need to get back into rehab.”

At that moment, a couple of cars appeared on the road, one coming from town and the other from the opposite direction.

Squealing its brakes again, the driver of the monster truck halted, jerking the truck into gear and moving forward, speeding along the narrow roadway.

“I sure wish I knew what the hell was going on,” Zach muttered, scratching his head.



When Marc appeared fifteen minutes later to pick up Zach, he must have noticed how worried Zach was.

Marc called out, "Just leave the key under the front mat for the tow truck."

"Will do," Zach answered.

"What happened?" Marc asked as Zach stepped into the passenger seat after they loaded the groceries into the back seat of Marc's truck.

"Someone deliberately tried to run me off the road."

In the process of accelerating, Marc hammered the brakes, turning and staring at Zach.

"Who in the hell would do that? *And why?*"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Zach answered.

Marc remained quiet as he continued to drive, and ten minutes later he was pulling into the garage.

Once inside, Zach showed his palms.

It was an obvious warning for Marc, who seemed taken aback.

Marc murmured, "Let's put the groceries away and sit outside with a couple of those beers you bought."

Zach nodded his agreement. "Sounds good to me."

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting outside in the gazebo with beers in hand.

"When I thought this was just about something that someone wanted from me, I wasn't so worried. But after what's happened today, I think it's time for me to consider your safety, Marc."

Marc sighed. "What do you think we need to do?"

"Well, since I'm a pilot, when I heard the engine of my truck start to sputter, I had a pretty good idea of what was happening. Someone put water in the gas tank, most likely when I was in town, otherwise I would have had trouble on the way there."

"My buddy Will is checking it out and he'll be giving you a call tomorrow."

Zach nodded thoughtfully. "So, what about your friend who's doing the alarm installation? How advanced is he with his knowledge of electronics?"

Marc snorted. "Jeff went to MIT. And yes, I trust him."

Zach's eyes went wide. "Then what's he doing here putting in alarm systems?"

"He owns the company. I think he said he's up to five cities now and growing."

"So, I guess he won't have any trouble jamming signals for those devices I think we have in the house?"

"I can ask," Marc answered, grimacing. "Why didn't you want to talk in the car?"

"Precautionary," Zach murmured. "But I think they knew where I was because of my phone."

"I'll admit at first, I thought you were being paranoid. But this has been getting crazy. Someone really tried to run you down?"

"Someone in a monster truck with tinted windows. Do you know anyone who has a truck fitting that description?"

Marc rolled his eyes. "About a quarter of the population around here."

"That's what I figured," Zach murmured. "I've been considering how best to handle this. I'll probably leave sometime next week after the workmen have finished, if your friend is able to jam the

signals. Hopefully, we can do it one room at a time so whoever is doing this doesn't realize we're onto them. I'm kind of glad I bought a truck with a topper."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Taking away all those boxes in the closet so you don't have to worry about anyone else breaking in, at least for something I have inside them. First, I'd like for you to have some kind of alarm set up inside the house on each floor, since we still don't know how that person got in. If we can jam the signals, we might be able to catch them unawares."

Marc pursed his lips. "I'm no expert, but I think to jam a signal, you need to know the frequency and where it's coming from, but if anyone knows how to do it, it would be Jeff. I'm thinking he has to jam the whole network though."

"Let's see what he has to say and go from there. The next best thing would probably be doing it during the middle of the night. If someone is keeping an eye on us, more than likely, it's during the day."

"Where will you go?" Marc asked.

"Not to D.C.," Zach answered. "I have a friend in Wisconsin who invited me to live in his guest house and told me about a job he thinks I should apply for. But I'm not going to spread the word about where I am. And since Mom and Dad are in Europe, they really don't need to know anything more than I'm continuing my therapy and surgeries."

Marc nodded his agreement.

"We need to get a couple burner phones. I'll turn off the phone I have now and quit using it. I'll expect you to keep in touch."

"Of course I will," Marc muttered. "Just be careful, and make sure you take care of yourself."

Grimacing, Zach continued, "I won't use credit cards and I'll probably stick to online banking. Maybe I'll make a cash withdrawal before I leave town, so I'll have enough money to get by, since I'll have to make several overnight stops on the way to Wisconsin because of my injuries."

"Is there anything we should do tonight?"

"How about we just have a few more beers?" Zach replied. "Maybe after we talk with your friend tomorrow, we'll have more options."

"Sounds good to me."

• • • •

BOLTING UPRIGHT, ZACH let out a blood curdling yell. What was freaking him out the most was that even though he couldn't recognize faces, this time he'd finally seen the events clearly through a cloudy haze.

Zach was standing witness as a woman was being raped and tortured before she was shot in the head.

Zach had been having PTSD bouts and flashbacks ever since he'd awakened in the hospital in Germany, continuing even after he'd arrived in the states. But Zach's nightmares had suddenly become worse during the past month. Although he didn't speak about them with Marc, Marc had come running into the bedroom a time or two to make sure Zach was alright and offer his silent support.

The same thing was happening right now, Zach realized, opening his eyes.

Marc was sitting beside him on the bed looking extremely concerned.

"Zach? Zach? Are you alright?"

His face caked with sweat, Zach shook his head dazedly. "I...I don't know if what I'm seeing really happened."

“You’re going to be seeing a shrink right away when you get to Wisconsin?”

“I am,” Zach muttered.

“What can I do for you now? Would you like some water?”

Feeling shaky, Zach moved to the edge of the bed, sighing heavily.

“I’ll be alright Marc. I think I’m going to take a quick shower.”

“Alright. If you need anything, just yell. I was half awake when I heard you.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate your help, you know,” Zach murmured, standing from the bed.

“I know you do,” Marc said, patting Zach’s shoulder before he made his way from the bedroom.

Instead of a shower, Zach went into the bathroom and ran a bath instead. He wanted a few minutes to think about what he’d seen in that nightmare.

Stripping off his t-shirt and shorts, he sat down in the tub while the water was filling.

What was concerning him was the fact that he’d had two different visions. In one, he’d been captured and strung up high, while one of his unit members was being tortured, raped and killed, and in another, someone was being shot right in front of him.

And it had been happening when Zach was just a kid.

• • • •

MARC ONLY HAD ONE CLASS to attend the following morning, so he was back before ten. Grabbing a cup of coffee first and laying it on the counter, he showed Zach his palms.

Standing from where he was sitting at the island checking some information on his laptop, Zach picked up his coffee before following Marc outside.

“They found a magnetized tracking device in your truck bed. Shall we leave it there for now?”

“Yes. You can show it to me before I leave and when I’m traveling out of town, I’ll drop it off somewhere in a creative place,” Zach murmured. “I’m glad I’m not losing my mind.”

Surprisingly, Marc laughed.

A few minutes later, Marc’s friend Jeff pulled into the driveway in his van.

“I stopped by and talked with him before coming home, and I told him you were military, so we needed to keep all of this quiet.” Marc pursed his lips. “The guy was actually excited to hear what we wanted. I guess what he’s doing now isn’t as glamorous as he thought it would be.”

Zach grinned. “I’d be happy myself for the monotony. Little did I know what I was getting myself into when I came here for a break.”

Marc grinned back. “I can’t believe how well you’re taking all this crap, Zach, with everything you’ve been through.”

“I will say one thing, the Air Force sure prepared me to expect the unexpected.”

“Hah,” Marc muttered, leading Zach toward the van.

A tall guy with dark hair stepped outside and smiled. “Marc.”

Marc said, “Jeff, this is my cousin, Captain Zach Logan.”

“Nice to meet you, Jeff,” Zach said.

“Same here, Captain. Step inside the van if you’d like. I’ll need to take a quick look at your router inside the house, and then I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll show you where it’s set up,” Marc said, leading Jeff toward the back door.

When he saw them returning from inside the house, Zach stepped into the van.

“What a setup,” he murmured, when Jeff and Marc were standing beside him. “It looks like a surveillance van.”

Jeff hung his head, clearing his throat. “Ah, well...uh, to tell you the truth...”



“I presume you do some surveillance work on the side? Don’t worry about what I think,” Zach murmured. “*We’re* the ones asking for help.”

Jeff took a seat in front of a huge computer screen and started typing on a keyboard.

“Hmm,” he finally murmured, while checking something out onscreen. “The connection has to be close. There are about a half dozen other Wi-Fi setups in this neighborhood. But that doesn’t mean anything, if it’s set up in an outbuilding or structure close by. And then there are the tunnels and passages Marc was telling me about, although if it’s part of a network, there would have to be a satellite nearby. It could even be running through someone else’s network without them knowing.”

“What are our options?”

“Unless we can figure out who has what router, you’ll have to jam them all at the same time.”

“There’s not a way we can see whether a mini cam is active or not? I *think* that’s what they’re using, anyway,” Zach said.

“You want me to see if I can spot anything while I’m hooking up security for your windows?”

Zach shrugged. “Sure. If you think you can do it discreetly?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll have to run some wiring upstairs anyway.”

“Let’s do it then,” Marc murmured.

• • • •

A FEW HOURS LATER, all three of them were back in the van looking at a diagram of the cameras Jeff had discovered in the kitchen and the rest of the ground floor.

“I saw four in the kitchen alone but only one in each of the living spaces,” Jeff said, pointing out their locations. “I gather the kitchen is where you spend most of your time?”

“Not as much lately, although we try not to make it obvious,” Marc admitted.

“I’ll work on the second floor this afternoon, and try and finish up for you tomorrow,” Jeff said, sounding reassuring. “I’ll bring along something I think will work for jamming up the signal. I’d rather you would pay me cash for that, for obvious reasons.”

Zach nodded his head. “I understand.”

Jeff hesitated. “Is there a reason you’re not going to the cops about this?”

Zach answered, “We’re not sure why someone is doing this or what they want. I have a feeling if we get the police involved, we won’t get any answers. And if we remove the devices, whoever it is could return and do more than just watch us or eavesdrop, and the situation could become even more dangerous.”

“Makes sense to me,” Jeff answered, nodding his head approvingly. “Alright, I’ll get back to work.”

• • • •

ONE WEEK LATER, ZACH’S truck was loaded, and he was finally ready to get on the road. He’d been withdrawing money in increments from his account in town, and he figured he had enough to last a week for motels and food.

But before he left, Marc handed over five thousand dollars’ worth of traveler’s checks, murmuring, “Pay me back next year when you’re working. This should help you lay low for another six months if you don’t have to pay rent.”

Shaking his head numbly, Zach asked, “Are you sure you can afford this?”

“Puh—leeze,” Marc answered, grinning. “I have a girlfriend who expects nothing and a father and uncle who insist on paying for the renovations and everything having to do with the house, since they claim they would have to hire a caretaker. I save pretty much all I earn.”

“You ought to consider a side business as an architect,” Zach said. “You’ve got your burner phone in a safe place?”

“I do,” Marc answered. “And it’s nice to know there weren’t any cameras in either of our bedrooms and they were only placed at each end of the hallway, monitoring the staircase.”

“Yes, and that explains how whoever it was knew I was climbing the staircase that day. Jeff said the camera had a motion sensor which would just ping on someone’s phone if they set it up.”

“It’s amazing how many eavesdropping devices are out there these days.”

They’d moved the boxes from the closet in increments during three different nights, jamming Wi-Fi signals in the neighborhood for about an hour each time. Zach had left each box at the top of the staircase, and Jeff had come by to assist Marc with loading them up in Zach’s truck since it was difficult for Zach to carry things up and down the staircase because of his injuries.

Zach had packed most of his clothing but had waited to load everything in the truck early this morning before daylight when Jeff had assisted for the final time.

Zach would take his time driving north, since there was no need to be in a hurry. The job in Crystal Rock he’d applied for wouldn’t officially begin until next year. He would make one final trip into New Orleans, leaving the tracking device in the parking lot of the bar and grill he and Marc frequented weekly.

When he wrapped his arms around Marc for a quick bear hug, Zach could tell that Marc was feeling as emotional as he was. They’d become good friends, and Marc would miss Zach as much as Zach would miss him.

As Zach pulled out of the driveway, he glanced into the rearview mirror at Marc, who was waving goodbye, and lifted his hand in farewell.



*Six months later.  
Bloomington, Illinois.*

“Marry me, Liz?”

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped. Just when she was ready to leave town, Jim was finally willing to make a commitment...*now*, after dating her for nearly five years? For a moment, Beth was tempted. She was so tired of being a single parent.

Then she remembered, being married to Jim probably wouldn’t be much of a help as far as *that* was concerned either.

But she still found herself asking, “What about Kyle?”

Jim hesitated. “I’m sure we can find a place for him to live, as long as we both look hard enough?”

Oh, yeah, Beth thought, as her heart sank lower. Too little, too late. The offer had just been too good to be true. After all, she had a pretty solid reason for deciding to break it off with Jim and starting over somewhere new. She wouldn’t be leaving much behind. These last few years had been...well...interesting, would probably be about the closest word she could think of for describing it. Her son, Kyle, would always be her number one concern, and she’d been telling Jim that from the beginning.

When the announcement had been made, that their plant would be shutting down within the next six months, Beth had been devastated. Diamont Motors had been operating for around twenty-five years in the Bloomington area, and Elizabeth Bowen had been the head accountant at the company for almost fifteen of those years.

But the state of Illinois was going through a major budgetary crisis, and maybe it was time to take a chance, she’d decided, and follow her dreams. Despite the fact Kyle was mentally impaired, and required regular medication to control his behavior problems, she’d managed to put away a tiny little nest egg for the future. And even the financial assistance she received for Kyle’s home services and medication was in jeopardy of being eliminated if the new governor got his way.

So, she was taking the early retirement package which the company she worked for was offering. Now, hopefully, her house would sell, since she’d purchased a huge fixer-upper in the town of Crystal Rock, located in northwest Wisconsin.

Wisconsin was in a little bit better shape financially than Illinois. But the factor that had swayed her most was the new vocational facility which had been built in Crystal Rock for the mentally and physically impaired. Crystal Visions was getting rave reviews, and Beth had had some pull with the center’s founder. Her cousin, Cal Callahan, was Jake Loughlin’s best friend, and had done all the construction work for the privately-owned facility. Jake’s wife, Danielle, had contacted Beth six months ago about beginning the application process for acquiring the funding Kyle needed to enter the program.

Beth sighed, her eyes meeting Jim’s, since he appeared to be anxiously awaiting her answer.

“I just don’t think it would work for us, Jim,” she finally said softly.

Jim looked stunned. “*But, Liz?*”

And *that* was another thing that annoyed her, that stupid nickname of *Liz*. She couldn’t remember how many times she’d mentioned it to Jim, during the last five years they’d been dating. He never seemed to listen to *anything* she said. If she hadn’t been such a coward, she would have broken it off

with him a long time ago. She'd just been lonely, she'd realized, and had wanted some extra companionship, as well as someone to hold her at night sometimes.

It was difficult going out with friends because of her situation with her son, but Jim would come over to her house on the weekends to watch baseball, football or basketball, depending on the season. She'd cook and...well, that was about it. Jim would just sit on the couch and watch TV, while he drank a few beers and ate. She and her son would either hang out in the kitchen, since Kyle loved anything to do with food, or go outside, or into the basement, where Kyle would play with his toys.

Anything, really, to stay out of Jim's way.

Inwardly, she sighed. *Come to think of it, maybe she was escaping just in time.*

"We talked about you moving with me to Wisconsin, remember? You said you weren't interested."

He shrugged. "Well, since I had that job offer from Stan's Automotive, I thought you'd rather stay here in town, and move in with me." Jim cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "After we found somewhere for Kyle to live first, that is."

*No way.* She was definitely doing the right thing by starting over. Beth was almost relieved now, when she said to him, "I know it's a job, Jim. But you'll barely be making minimum wage, and you won't have any benefits or a retirement plan like you've had at the car plant."

Although he drove an expensive truck and owned his house, Jim already liked to live above his means, and judging by the thick book of payment stubs she'd seen on his desk, the truck wasn't even close to being paid off. Beth was pretty sure he wasn't putting any money back into his house, because it had definitely needed a new roof for a while now. He'd never really let her in on the state of his finances, but she had a sneaking suspicion that Jim was gambling a bunch of his money away, too.

Beth hesitated. "You know how important it is for me to get Kyle into this vocational program? I *have* to go north."

"Yeah, I guess. But there's still gotta be a place you can get him into around here, isn't there?"

She sighed. Nope, Jim never paid *any* attention to what she had to say, did he? How many times had she mentioned to him that the waiting list for a facility equipped to handle someone with Kyle's disabilities was over twenty *years* in Illinois? Illinois was at the bottom of the ranks when it came to human services. That's why the governor's quest to cut the budget for the most vulnerable and dependent individuals in Illinois was basically pretty heartless, as far as Beth was concerned.

But enough of that.

"No, there isn't anywhere, Jim. Believe me, I've looked into it. I don't want to live in Bloomington anymore, either."

How many businesses had closed their doors during the last few years? When her dad had been transferred to the main branch of his insurance company here in Bloomington, and Beth had been forced to move here in the eighties, the town had appeared to be stuck in the middle of a corn field. The area had grown and prospered, until all of a sudden, the economy had declined because of the state budgetary crisis, which had been developing during the last ten years. Although she had a lot of friends here, Beth had never really liked this town. It was kind of unbelievable to think that she'd remained here, even after her parents had retired and moved away.

"I'm still pretty sure you could find a better job than with Stan's Automotive, if you moved somewhere else," Beth murmured.

Jim appeared hesitant when he shook his head no. There was no doubt about it, he was afraid of change. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, with dark brown hair that was graying at the temples and warm hazel eyes. Maybe he wasn't as thin as he used to be? But heck, for someone approaching fifty, he still looked pretty damned good.

But as far as anything special between them?

Nah, not really. And there hadn't been any genuine spark between Beth and Kyle's father either. Come to think of it, there had never really been *any* special guy in her life. Kind of sad, considering she'd just had her forty-fifth birthday the week before.

Jim hadn't even remembered. And what did *that* say about their so-called relationship?

Yes, Beth was even more relieved, now that Jim had decided he wasn't coming along with her. It saved her the trouble of having to tell him that she didn't really want him moving along with her to Crystal Rock, anyway.

But it would probably hurt his feelings if she came straight out and told him to his face.



Two weeks later, Beth was pulling off the highway and slowly driving into the town of Crystal Rock in her SUV. At least Kyle had been content during the entire eight-hour drive. They'd made a few pit stops to use the restrooms, and after purchasing fast food, she'd pulled into the parking lot of a scenic rest area, so they could stretch their legs and eat.

It had been years since she'd taken a trip with Kyle, because of his behavior problems. In fact, she'd purchased the SUV immediately after he'd hit her so hard on the head, she'd nearly run the car she was driving off the road. Beth had owned a four-door sedan back then, and Kyle had always sat right behind her. Now, at least, he was settled far enough away from her in the backseat to allow for some reaction time for her to prepare for the worst.

Beth peeked through the windshield excitedly as they drove through the center of town. When she glanced at Kyle in the rear-view mirror, his deep blue eyes were as big as saucers as he stared at the Christmas decorations lining the streets. It was two weeks before Christmas, and an awful time of the year for the car plant to be closing, she thought for about the millionth time since it had been announced. But at least the long-time employees had been offered early retirement benefits, along with decent compensation packages.

Beth had only seen pictures of the house before purchasing it online. She'd depended on her cousin, Cal, who'd checked it out thoroughly beforehand. Callahan Construction had been working on the demolition work for the past four months, so that Beth would be able to complete the finish work on her own. She'd learned a lot about remodeling from all the updates she'd done on her house in Bloomington, after purchasing it twelve years ago.

Hopefully, the house in Bloomington would sell, because she really needed the proceeds to complete all the projects that needed to be completed in *this* house. It was four times the size of the property she'd owned in Illinois. But she hadn't been able to resist, because according to Cal, the price Beth had paid was a steal. Although her former home was located in what was considered a prime area of Bloomington, the real estate market just wasn't what it used to be, because of the economy.

Beth glanced at her watch. Even though she had the address logged into her GPS, she was still supposed to meet Cal at his office in about an hour, so he'd be able to take her directly to the house and show her around. Maybe she'd give him a call to see if he was already waiting? But looking back at Kyle, who was obviously excited, she decided to take a drive around the lake instead.

Crystal Rock was her mother's home town. But once the family had moved from Bloomington to Arizona, her mom and dad and two younger sisters hadn't visited here much. Since Beth had remained in Bloomington after graduating from Illinois State, she'd never made it back here at all. The members of each branch of the family still managed to remain close though, and Beth's cousins had flown out several times to Phoenix, where her parents had continued to reside, even after they'd retired.

It was rather amazing she still remembered how to get to the lake, Beth thought, as she followed the access road leading toward Dragonfly Pointe. The last time she'd been here was back in the eighties, when she'd been around sixteen-years old.

*Oh, my God*, she thought, stretching up in her seat as she and Kyle drove by the Dragonfly Pointe Inn. It was everything she'd heard it had become, but a heck of a lot *more*, Beth realized, staring in



shock through the passenger window. The last time she'd been in Crystal Rock, the inn had been about one quarter of the size it was now. And it had been literally falling apart, nearly ready for demolition.

The Dragonfly Pointe Inn rose majestically above the lake, amidst a backdrop of towering pines. Now, with its columns and crisp white siding, it looked stately, magnificent really.

Turning her attention back on the road, Beth managed to jerk the wheel of the SUV just in time, as she came only inches away from running down a floppy-eared dog, wandering along the edge of the road.

"Damn," she muttered under her breath. He looked to be a Bassett hound. Well, partly, anyway. Led on a leash by a jogger, who was running on the gravel bordering the side of the road, the dog scrambled over the blacktop.

When she began to slow down, the man lifted his hand in acknowledgement, while continuing to keep pace with the dog.

Relieved, Beth blew out a long deep breath as she kept on driving. Hopefully, she was going in the right direction?

Yeah, she was, she discovered, because soon she was pulling the SUV off the road and into the parking lot of the deserted Dragonfly Pointe Beach.

She'd always loved this place. Beth had lots of great memories from spending summers here with her cousins. And despite the fact that she'd never actually lived here, the town of Crystal Rock had been the only place in her entire life that had ever felt like home.

She turned to Kyle, who was looking hopeful, with his endearing smile and big blue eyes. Kyle had just turned twenty, but he'd always been a handful, particularly after outgrowing Beth by several inches. Although he'd had some increased behavior problems associated with puberty, Beth considered herself fortunate compared to some of the other parents she'd met. Many of Kyle's classmates had much more severe problems than he'd had. Kyle's temper had always been relatively manageable, even though she'd eventually given in, putting him on medication during his teenage years for the sake of his teachers and caregivers.

Ah, what the heck? It was a crisp cool day, and a little fresh air would be good for them both after the long drive. Why not just go for a short walk along the beach?

Bundling herself up into her winter coat and slipping her earmuffs over her ears, Beth hopped out from the van, sliding open the passenger door behind her.

"Put your coat back on, sweetie," she said, smiling at Kyle.

Kyle grinned, slipping into his coat, and pulling his hat on over his head.

Reaching over, she yanked the stocking cap down over his ears, before zipping his coat up to his chin, and then pulling his hood over his head, Beth tied it securely.

Definitely excited, Kyle began to giggle.

Probably because he was already thinking about when he was going to be able to sneak that hood off from his head, Beth thought, grinning and reaching for Kyle's hand.

As they headed toward the beach, peaceful contentment invaded her senses once she and Kyle began making their way across the crunchy sand. The air was crisp, but Beth had been told that it wasn't nearly as cold as it usually was at this time of the year, because Cal and his crew had been able to work around the clock at her new house. Normally, the lake would have been completely iced up at this time of the year, but with the breeze blowing in across the lake, choppy waves crashed over the sand.

When she let loose of Kyle's hand, he began running immediately beside the edge of the water. Obviously delighted, he laughed harder, and harder still, as he rushed down the length of the beach.

Yep, *this place still seemed magical*, Beth thought, closing her eyes. The soothing sound of the pounding waves along with the haunting squalling of the gulls infused her senses. She breathed in the crisp cool air. It smelled so *fresh*.

Tipping her face toward the sun, she felt exactly like she'd felt vacationing here as a kid.

Happy and at peace.

All of a sudden, someone grunted loudly, and soon, the next moan Beth heard was accompanied by a long soulful howl.

Opening her eyes, she spun around and searched the vast expanse of beach.

Finally, she spotted him. "*Kyle. What have you done?*"

Covering her mouth with a hand in horror, Beth began running across the sand, rushing over as quickly as she could toward Kyle.

Apparently, he'd tackled someone, and sitting on top of a flat prone body, Kyle was giggling with a stranger laying beneath him, leveled on the sand.

The man's faithful friend was obviously alarmed, because he began cleaning the man's face frantically with his tongue. Damn it, she inwardly swore. It was the same do she'd nearly run down in the SUV only a few minutes earlier.



Zach sputtered and spit when Emily began licking his mouth and beard, after cleaning the rest of his face first. “Okay, Em, you can just quit that right now. I’m fine,” he muttered at the dog reassuringly.

And then as a shadow fell over Zach from above, a woman began talking to him in a breathless voice. “Oh, I’m so *sorry!* I’ve never seen Kyle do anything like *this* before. Although he does like to watch football sometimes...”

Her voice was *so* soft and sexy, was the first thing Zach thought. He’d been jogging along the beach, trying to decide whether to steer clear of her or stop by and say hi. And then he’d been ambushed by what had felt like a tank.

Zach opened his eyes and looked up to try and see the woman who belonged to that voice. But his eyes were blinded by the sun, and he was seeing double.

His eyesight seemed to be adjusting a little better by the time he got a hold of himself.

And then he was able to focus on her face. *Damn, I think I’m in love*, was the second thing he thought. He hadn’t had a real good look at her through the windshield of the van earlier, although it had been long enough to notice she appeared to be pretty damned hot.

And, *whoa*, he admitted to himself dazedly, *hot* didn’t even begin to describe how lovely she was.

Zach started, turning his attention on the kid who was giggling like crazy, using Zach’s body like a beanbag chair.

But he really wasn’t a kid, was he? He looked to be a little bigger than Zach had thought when he’d first set eyes on him. This woman was his *mom*? Must be, he supposed, because she grabbed the boy by his hand and yanked him off Zach’s chest. She just didn’t look old enough to have a *kid* who was probably in his late teens or early twenties.

The woman continued holding the boy’s hand. He was nearly a foot taller than her, but she seemed to have him under control.

Grimacing and biting her lip, she bent down and began looking Zach over. “Are you sure you’re alright? I’d like to help you up, but I’m afraid if I let Kyle go, he might jump on top of you again.”

Zach blinked and shook his head in confusion. And then he began to laugh, because he just couldn’t help it. The situation was pretty damned ridiculous.

A smile began to tug at the corner of the woman’s mouth, before she was laughing along with Zach.

And then Emily stuck her snout into the air and began to howl.

When her kid began giggling again, the woman rolled her eyes upward.

Finally, their laughter subsided into awkward silence.

Zach was shaking his head numbly, when he slowly sat upright from the sand.

Yep, she was really lovely, Zach thought, once he finally stood on his feet. She had deep blue eyes and shoulder-length, white-blond hair. Maybe she was a little older than he’d thought at first? But, wow, he loved the way she laughed, soft, slow and kind of breathless, and the way she smiled, like the sun was coming up after one of his long restless nights.

Zach shook his head dazedly, because everything about this woman seemed to be turning him on.

And when Zach looked into her eyes, he was feeling something that he’d never felt before. Something that he’d never thought he was capable of feeling.

Ever.



What was *wrong* with her? This man, *this stranger*, was doing something really crazy to her insides, and her heart was thumping madly in her chest when her eyes met his.

And what beautiful brown eyes they were, with flecks of gold, but warm and creamy like melted chocolate. Usually, she didn't care much for facial hair. But, on him, that neatly trimmed beard and mustache somehow looked *right*.

When was the last time she'd *ever* felt tongue-tied around a man?

She shook her head numbly. *Never!* This was silly, the guy was *young*. He had to be at least ten years younger than her.

Taking in a deep breath while attempting to regain her normally rational sensibilities, Beth stuck out her hand, introducing herself. "I'm Beth Bowen."

When his hand clasped hers firmly, Beth sucked in an unsteady breath, when a jolt of awareness shot through her senses.

"Zachary Logan. Nice to meet you Beth," he said, in a smooth southern drawl, while staring deeply into her eyes. "And this is Emily," he added, nodding at the dog.

Even his *voice* sent shivers down her spine. She couldn't believe all the things she was thinking about, as she looked Zach over slowly. Although he was wearing a scraggly hooded sweatshirt, she could tell his shoulders were broad, and his hips were narrow. Just the way he stood there before her, seemingly relaxed, made him look so *sexy*.

She blinked. *Get a hold of yourself, Beth.*

She searched for something else to say. "Uh...this is my son, Kyle."

Even to herself, she sounded rather breathless.

Reaching for Kyle's hand, Zach shook it firmly.

Kyle gave Zach a huge smile, but when Kyle acted like he was ready to pounce on Zach again, Beth took a firmer grip of his hand.

"I'll bet Kyle's going to be included in the program at Crystal Visions?" Zach asked.

"Yeah," Beth answered, somewhat surprised. "He sure is."

Zach grinned.

Uh, oh, Beth thought as her heart began beating irregularly again.

"I work there part-time," Zach admitted.

Beth's eyes went wide. "*Wow*, that's some coincidence."

Zach nodded his head in obvious agreement. "For sure. But it's a small town, especially in the winter when a lot of the resorts are closed."

Zach looked at Kyle. "I definitely know a few kids who are going to be really happy to meet you, Kyle."

Beth smiled at her son.

"I'm glad to hear that," Beth said, turning back to Zach. "I know that the program is only a couple of years old, and there's not a whole lot of funding available for too many kids to be enrolled right now."

Zach shook his head up and down slowly, giving her a seemingly uncertain smile.

She searched for something else to say. Beth still couldn't believe she was tongue-tied. It was really kind of crazy, considering she'd always been a rather talkative person.

Even around great looking guys.

But the weird thing about it was, as he continued to stare into her eyes, Zach appeared to be searching for something to say to her as well.

He hesitated, looking first at Kyle and then at her. “Well, I should probably get moving, before my muscles begin tightening up.”

Bending down, he picked up Emily’s leash.

Suddenly startled from her silence, Beth checked the time on her watch. “Oh, man. We’re running a little late now, too.”

She looked at Zach and grimaced. “Are you sure you’re alright? You look like you might be limping a little.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Previous injury,” he answered, sounding rather gruff. “I’ll walk you guys on up to your vehicle. I don’t live too far away from here.”

Beth smiled at Zach, before they all made their way across the sand toward the parking lot.

• • • •

AFTER WALKING WITH Beth and Kyle and delivering them to their SUV, Zach continued jogging with Emily across the road and down the path leading to the guesthouse he was still living in, which belonged to Luke.

And here Zach was now, fifteen months later, feeling not quite as whole as he’d been expecting a year ago, when he’d been released from the hospital and traveled to New Orleans. Luke had said he was welcome in the guesthouse for as long as he wanted to stay. But now that Zach had decided to make Crystal Rock his permanent home, he wanted to get his belongings out of storage, so he’d begun searching for somewhere else to live.

Besides, Luke would be getting married soon, and once the weather became warmer, Luke and Kelly might want to use the in-ground pool, which was situated near the guesthouse, for some romantic time alone together.

Zach grinned at the thought, stepping out from the shower, until he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room. Studying the puckering scars and the mangled skin covering much of his torso, along with the skin over his lower back and buttocks, his frown was fierce as he stared at his naked body in the mirror. The first of the new series of skin graft operations had begun, not so much to make his appearance presentable, but to increase the flexibility of his skin while hopefully decreasing the amount of pain and discomfort in the future. There was a lot of heavy scar tissue covering his torso and upper arm, along with some more extensive scarring running down one of his thighs.

*What in the hell had he been thinking*, earlier today? Sure, the burns only covered about twenty percent of his body. It could have been a heck of a lot worse. Although there was still a lot of scarring covering his neck and the underside of his chin, his face had been saved.

But looking at himself in the mirror, he couldn’t help thinking *what female would even want him, the way he looked now?* His chest was a mess, all wrinkled and mangled, with the hair on his chest beginning to grow back in spotty patches. And one of his nipples was barely recognizable. He couldn’t even stand looking at himself. What had made him think he could ever expose any woman to the horror of his naked body, the way it was right now?

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself, you idiot,” he muttered out loud. “Luke lost his limb saving your life, and his burns were a hell of a lot worse than yours. You don’t see *him* feeling sorry for himself.”

Zach smiled wryly, still staring at himself in the mirror. At least his anatomy was still in working order.

But what kind of woman would ever want to make love to a guy like him?

He inhaled a long deep breath. *Beth?* Something weird had happened to him, when he'd seen her standing alone and isolated on the beach at Dragonfly Pointe. She'd reminded him a little of himself, at peace, but not quite whole, as if she was searching for something elusive, something...

Hmm. Zach supposed *unspoken* would be the right word to call what was definitely undefinable.

What a chore it must be, raising that kid of hers. The dedication, the time involved was inconceivable.

He began getting dressed as he thought about Kyle. After pulling on some sweats, he hesitated, before tugging a t-shirt on over his head. Could this, by any chance, be the new kid from Crystal Visions Zach was supposed to be working with in the new year?

He smiled wryly. *Maybe.* Zach had been training since the fall as a volunteer at the school, to get the feel of things, and now he was supposed to become a personal assistant for one of the kids during the day. Supposedly, the kid was entering the vocational program, and was slated to begin working at Callahan Construction with Zach, come spring.

Zach began whistling as he made his way into the kitchen to feed Em and begin cooking dinner. He knew it was stupid to be thinking like this, especially since they'd just met. But the idea of having an actual excuse to keep in touch with Beth Bowen was making him happier than he'd felt in a long, long time.





Beth had tears in her eyes when she said, “It’s beautiful, Cal.”

They’d just taken a tour of her nearly remodeled four-story home which overlooked Stone lake.

“It’s a lot of house,” Cal answered, smiling.

Sometime during their walk, he’d grabbed Kyle’s hand and was keeping him in line for Beth with hardly any effort. She could count on one hand the number of times Jim had attempted to help her with Kyle. In fact, he’d downright avoided it, even when she’d obviously had her hands full on the weekend after working all week, catching up on chores around the house while cooking for *him*.

She hesitated, as her eyes searched the kitchen, which was still completely unfinished. “I hate to point out the obvious, but I was really counting on moving in here right away.”

Cal’s smile became wider, waving at the back door. “Ah, I know. But it’s time to show you the surprise that I mentioned, when I was talking with you on the phone last night.”

Opening the door, she walked outside onto the porch.

Cal asked loudly, “See that house that’s lit up over there, extending over the top of the boathouse?”

Her eyes went wide when she turned to stare at Cal. “*That’s* the rental house? The one that you told me would bring in a little extra income every month? It’s *huge!*”

Cal began to laugh. “And completely finished. The main house here should be move-in ready within two or three months, and you and Kyle won’t have to live amidst construction.”

“Oh, Cal. I expected some dinky little one-bedroom house, when you talked about a rental.”

Cal murmured, “There are three bedrooms, and it even has a basement. The family room extends over the lake, so Kyle should get a real kick out of it. It used to be another vacation property before the homeowners decided to buy the house, so they’d have more privacy. Then the next owners tried to turn the entire place into an inn, while they lived in the house next door.” He shrugged. “But that went belly up twenty years ago, before Jake Loughlin remodeled the Dragonfly Inn, making this town a prime vacationing spot again.”

Still staring at the rental, Beth nodded her approval. It looked so cute, clad in the same light green siding she’d chosen for the main house. “So it’s move-in ready?”

He nodded yes. “I know I switched up your directions a little.” Cal grimaced. “I just thought – why not have the rental house ready to go, so you can rent it out as soon as you move into the main house? Then you can use the extra money you make for additional improvements here, in case your house in Bloomington doesn’t sell right away.”

“I couldn’t be happier.” Beth grinned. “I’d hug you right now, if you weren’t still holding onto Kyle. I’ll admit, I’m starting to feel pretty worn out from that drive, and it’s nice to have a little help with him.”

Still holding onto Kyle’s hand, Cal laughed again as he led him through the doorway and onto the porch. “Well, come on then. Let’s get you two settled in.”

Beth laughed along with Cal, following him and Kyle down the steps from the porch and along the path.

SHE AND KYLE WERE SETTling in nicely, Beth decided, as she stood sipping coffee in the family room. It had been nearly a week now since they'd arrived in town. Preparing for their move into the main house in February, she'd only unpacked winter clothes, along with the bare necessities. The last few days they'd been decorating for Christmas, and after they attended the party they'd been invited to at the Dragonfly Pointe Inn this afternoon, she and Kyle would go pick out a Christmas tree at a farm nearby.

This second house on her property was nearly as big as her home in Bloomington, and even though she hadn't had any input about the remodeling of this home, she wouldn't have done anything differently than Cal had done, Beth had reassured him. Cal had wanted to surprise her, and he'd been hoping he had a good enough grasp about her design and color choices to make her happy with the results.

Located above the boathouse, the family room's three outer walls were encased in thermal glass, and a gas fireplace, which had been tiled in shades of blue and seafoam glass, gave extra warmth to the room despite its vaulted ceiling.

And what a view, she thought, staring across the lake through the glass. In fact, Beth had loved this room so much that Cal would be creating a similar space in a lakefront addition at the main house, after gutting the sorely neglected porch.

Snow was in the forecast and was beginning to trickle down across the semi-frozen lake. Beth had mounted a bird feeder outside of the family room on a sturdy oak. Preparing for the harsher weather coming in, blue jays and sparrows were battling over the seed, and a couple of squirrels scampered along the branches of the tree, patiently awaiting their chance to dig into the seed once the birds were finished.

Beth grinned. Kyle was unusually animated because of all the visual stimulation and his nose was pressed against the glass. She kind of hated to leave the house today because of the weather. But she'd only made it into town a few times this past week. She and Kyle had eaten dinner with the Callahan family, before Beth had driven to the store and stocked up on groceries while Cal and his wife, Jenny, had kept an eye on Kyle. Beth was able to make short trips to the grocery store with Kyle, but if she had more than a few items to buy, Kyle would invariably misbehave because of his short attention span and he'd become disruptive by grabbing other items from the shelves, or trying to leave before Beth had a chance to pay for her groceries.

"Okay, kid." Beth smiled at Kyle. "Are you ready to go to a party, and make some new friends? You're going to get to meet all your new teachers, and some of the kids you'll be going to school with."

Kyle was definitely becoming excited when he smiled at her before waving his arms and jumping up and down.



Zach was holding his breath. According to the school administrators, she was probably coming to the party with her son today, so he'd been watching everyone coming through the doorway leading into the solarium for at least a half an hour now. He just hadn't been able to help it. Zach hadn't stopped thinking about Beth Bowen since they'd met.

He hadn't had a reaction like this to a woman since...

Zach blinked, startled to realize the answer was *never*.

Dazedly shaking his head, he scolded himself. *Quit being such an idiot!*

Taking in a deep steadying breath, Zach turned, resuming his conversation with friends. Luke had an arm wrapped around his fiancé, Kelly, and he was wearing a huge smile on his face as he glanced around the room.

After losing a limb in Iraq, Luke had somehow survived burns covering sixty percent of his body. But he'd undergone several surgeries to remove scar tissue and regenerate his skin. The number of operations Zach would require wouldn't even come close to the number Luke would need.

Looking at how well Luke had adjusted after so many debilitating injuries, Zach was suddenly ashamed of himself for the way he'd been behaving. He'd always been kind of a loner, but during this past year, he'd avoided going anywhere in public. Plus, he hated to admit it, but he'd been suffering through some pretty deep bouts of depression too.

But that's why he'd moved to Crystal Rock, at Luke's suggestion. It was a great town, and with the new wounded warrior facility about to open, Zach had finally begun sessions with the psychologist, who'd be in charge of the head-shrinking aspects of the program, while a rotation of doctors would be in and out of the clinic on a weekly basis to take care of the patients' medical issues.

Kelly asked, "Have you finished shopping for everything you're going to need for your new office, Zach?"

Zach had been picking up office supplies, even discovering a massive oak desk at a second hand furniture store which Kelly's father, Cal, had recommended. The construction of the wounded warrior facility would be completed sometime during the next month, and everyone working there had agreed to pick up their own supplies and furnishings, since the facility's funding was still somewhat limited.

"I think I've found pretty much everything I'm going to need, Kel. I might have to pick up a filing cabinet eventually, though."

"I'll be on the lookout for something you might be able to use," Kelly murmured.

Zach continued, "Thanks again for letting me store everything in your garage."

"Not a problem," Kelly answered.

Luke squeezed Kelly with the arm he still had wrapped over her shoulders.

Zach couldn't get over how lucky Luke was to have found someone who seemed to understand him so well. Plus, somehow, Luke had become engaged to the most incredibly beautiful woman Zach had ever seen. Well, she'd been a model, he'd heard, and she was tall and thin, with white-blonde hair.

In fact, she reminded him a little of Beth Bowen, Zach thought suddenly, although Kelly was quite a bit younger. But, wow, what Zach would give, to have a woman look at him the way Kelly looked at Luke. Sometimes, it kind of took his breath away.

Especially since Luke had never exactly been considered handsome, even before his injuries.

Zach grinned at Kelly, scratching his chin. "I don't get it," he said, turning to stare at Luke. "What do you see in this guy?"

Luke barked out a laugh, rolling his eyes upward.

"I was never able to help myself." Kelly's smile was definitely wry, when she answered Zach.

Gazing at Luke, she continued softly, "And it's been that way ever since I can remember."

Her feelings were obviously mutual, because Luke gave Kelly a tender smile, pulling her a little closer to his side.

"There she is," Kelly said, staring at the door and waving her hand in the air.

Turning and glancing at the woman waving back, Zach started. Kelly had been waiting for *Beth*?

Beth smiled, and tugging on Kyle's hand, she began making her way through the crowd.

But obviously noticing *him*, she hesitated for a moment before coming closer.

Hmm. What did *that* mean, Zach wondered? And what the heck was wrong with him? He was having the same kind of stupid reaction that he'd had when he'd met her the other day.

But, *whoa*. She really looked lovely today, wearing a furry white coat, with matching earmuffs and tall boots that nearly covered her knees.

Kyle had on his bulky parka again. He sure was a good-looking kid, and although he towered over his mom, since he was about six-foot two, he looked just like her, with white-blond hair and big blue eyes.

After Beth and Kyle managed to make their way through the crowd and were finally standing beside them, Kelly smiled, reaching for Kyle's hand. "Hi, Kyle."

Kelly motioned at Zach. "Zach, I'd like for you to meet my cousin, Beth. She'll be taking over the accounts at Callahan Construction after the first of the year. And this is her son, Kyle."

Zach and Beth answered in unison, "We've met."

Zach smiled sheepishly at Beth.

Kelly's gaze was definitely speculative when she looked at Zach. "Really?"

Zach frowned at Luke, who was grinning and rolling his eyes upward.

But then Beth spoke, in that breathless voice of hers, and it started doing all kinds of crazy things to his insides again. "The first day I arrived in town, I drove over to the beach at Dragonfly Pointe, to check things out, since I used to spend a lot of time there as a kid."

"And I was taking a jog with Em along the beach," Zach cleared his throat, "when I got run over by a tank."

Luke and Kelly were both visibly curious, so Zach looked at Beth and grinned.

"The tank was Kyle." Beth grimaced. "He knocked Zach off his feet to the sand and sat right down on top of him." She rolled her eyes. "I think he was trying to say *hi*."

Kelly snickered, staring at Luke, who blinked and snorted before they both began laughing loudly.

Shaking his head at Beth, who was smiling widely, Zach grinned wryly, turning to Kyle. "Guess what, Kyle? I'm actually going to be the one working with you, when you begin the program at Crystal Visions."

Beth started. "Really?"

Zach nodded his agreement, looking deeply into her eyes. They were a sapphire blue, with silvery flecks, and even more beautiful than he remembered. Just as he was about to say something more, Jake Loughlin's voice shot out from across the room, and everyone began taking their seats at the rows of tables which had been set up inside the solarium.

Kelly was obviously manipulating the situation, Zach noticed, because he found himself seated next to Beth. Kyle sat between him and Luke, while Kelly took the chair next to Luke near the end of

the table.

When Beth slowly tugged off her coat, Zach's breath began to seize. She was wearing a creamy silk blouse tucked into jeans riding low on her hips, and looked to be as thin as Kelly, who was probably nearly half her age.

And, yes, Beth's figure was just as...

*Stop it*, Zach thought to himself, shaking his head dazedly.

But Beth looked younger than he was, Zach thought, definitely no older than thirty. Although he'd ticked off the numbers in his head when he'd first met her, Zach had been a little shocked to discover she was actually forty-five, after he'd received Kyle's academic files and history this past week.

Zach had been reassured because Beth was only eight years older than him.

It was no big deal.

Zach started, squirming in his seat. What the *hell* was he thinking *now*?

"Even though I know there's a coat check in the lobby," she said, giving Zach a smile. "I like to hang onto our coats, just in case Kyle begins acting up."

Zach nodded agreeably.

She hung her coat over the back of her chair, before helping Kyle remove his.

The servers began handing out food at the table, and quiet murmurs echoed throughout the room while everyone ate. With a five-star rating, the Dragonfly Pointe Inn had one of the most popular restaurants in northwest Wisconsin.

"This is delicious," Beth said, as she forked another bite of ravioli.

"Hamburgers even taste like steak here," Zach answered, with a grin.

The school's planning committee had gone with simple fare today. Many of the kids who were here had disabilities and required some assistance while eating.

Soon the kids were gathering around the huge Christmas tree, because Santa had arrived with presents for each and every one of them.

Kyle had a huge smile of excitement on his face, and Zach watched him closely. He got along well with the other kids, which was a very good thing since many of the other mentally impaired kids from the school sometimes remained isolated, and had difficulties interacting with others. But Kyle seemed to be unusually outgoing.

Unless he tried to pull a stunt like he had the other day, when he'd jumped on top of Zach.

Zach smiled wryly, as Kyle began opening his gift. Zach would have to keep an eye on Kyle to prevent anything similar happening in public and especially at school. Kyle was big, and kind of muscular, while a lot of these other kids were much smaller, and more vulnerable, and some could easily be hurt.

"Oh, *wow*." Beth bent over to take a look at the digitalized keyboard Kyle was unwrapping with Zach's help. "Isn't that nice? Someone must have known about Kyle's interest in music."

Zach smiled sheepishly.

"*You*?" Beth gave him a huge smile, and Zach's heart began hammering hard against his chest.

*Again*. It had been beating at an irregular pace the entire afternoon.

"Most of us who work at the school donate the gifts for the exchange. The keyboard's got a built-in radio too." He gave her a wry grin. "I figured I might as well give him a gift that was useful, in case he never learned how to play it."

Her laughter sounded like music in his ears.

The party was beginning to wind down, when Luke and Kelly finally approached them to say their goodbyes.

“You guys need to come over for dinner sometime and see our place. It’s pretty cool,” Kelly said. “We live right on Dragonfly Pointe.”

“We’d love to.” Beth grimaced. “Are you sure you can handle us?”

Beth was watching him with Kyle, and a beautiful smile suddenly lit up her face.

Zach was trying, with difficulty, to concentrate on what he was doing. He’d managed to find a plug in for the adapter of the keyboard nearby, and Kyle was busy running his fingers over the keys. Zach sucked in a deep breath and began playing a simple tune for Kyle.

Kelly answered Beth with reassurance. “Of course, we can!”

“We’re family,” Luke said to Beth. “If you can’t turn to people like *us* for help with Kyle, who *can* you turn to?”

Kyle was smiling widely at Zach while Zach continued playing *Jingle Bells*.

But Zach was listening intently to the conversation Beth was having with Luke and Kelly.

“I was going to have the tree delivered tomorrow. Your dad told me about the tree farm nearby, so Kyle and I are going to drive out there, when we’re finished here today.”

Since Kyle wanted to try to play the tune himself, Zach handed over the keyboard before standing up and joining in the conversation.

“Well, I’ve got a truck. I could load up the tree for you today, so you could begin decorating it tonight, if you’d like?”

After Zach said it, he couldn’t believe the words had come out of his mouth.

Luke looked a little surprised himself.

Kelly smiled broadly, giving Zach that speculative look again when she added, “And Zach could drive you out to the farm. The roads leading out there aren’t very well marked.”

Beth looked hesitant, turning to Zach. “Are you sure you don’t mind? You’ve already devoted the entire afternoon to Kyle, as it is.”

“Nah,” Zach answered, giving her a wry smile.

“Well then, come on Kyle,” Beth said, reaching down and tugging Kyle to his feet. “Zach won’t let anyone walk off with that keyboard,” she added, when Kyle tried to pick it up and take it with him.

“I’ll keep an eye on it, Kyle,” Zach murmured, wearing a smile.

Beth grinned at Zach. “Let’s go meet a couple more of the teachers and say thank you to the Loughlins for everything they’ve done for us.”

Beth clasped Kyle’s hand as they began strolling through the room.

A few moments later, Zach glanced furtively at Beth and Kyle, making sure that they were far enough away before turning to Luke.

“Alright,” Zach muttered, grimacing. “You’d better tell me quick. Where’s that Christmas tree farm?”

Luke barked out a laugh as Kelly began giggling.

• • • •

“SHE’S A LOT OLDER THAN him.” Luke glanced at Kelly, where she sat behind the wheel of the truck as they made their way home from the Dragonfly Pointe Inn. Their house was only a skip and a jump away, but with the snow coming down hard, Kelly hadn’t wanted Luke to risk the chance of slipping while he was wearing his prosthetic. He hadn’t had much practice walking with his artificial limb in these kinds of conditions yet.

“Not *that* much, Luke,” Kelly said, peering through the windshield. “He’s *definitely* attracted to her. And besides, when was the last time you saw him with a woman?”



Luke watched through the window as Kelly slowed down, after the truck began sliding across some patchy ice.

He frowned. "They'd better get some salt on these roads, soon."

Luke became thoughtful. "Let's see...the last time I saw Zach with a girl?" Luke became somewhat grim. "Probably back in Madison, before we went off on that final mission."

Kelly nodded, carefully turning the truck into the driveway and steering along the incline toward the garage. "He just seems *so* lonely."

Absentmindedly, Zach pressed the button for the remote of the garage door opener, hooked over the visor above. "He's always been a magnet for women, you know. Even now, although he doesn't really see it."

Kelly slowly pulled the truck into the garage.

When she shut down the engine, she turned in her seat and looked hard at Luke. "You know, he doesn't let *anyone* see those scars. He's so self-conscious. If he continues like this, I doubt if he'll ever let any woman get close to him again."

Luke grimaced. "Yes, I think you're right. Even though I had the scars, with me, it was all about the missing leg."

She nodded her agreement. "But you eventually accepted it. You've had an equal amount of time to adjust. It seems to me that it's time for Zach to move forward and accept himself for who he is now. After all, *you* finally did, Luke."

"But that was different, babe," Luke said softly, staring into Kelly's eyes. "I had *you*."

"That's what it is exactly, Luke" she said quietly, reaching over and squeezing his hand. "Beth wouldn't care about Zach's scars. She's the kind of woman who'd fall in love with a guy for who he is inside." Her smile was tender when she gazed into his eyes. "And nothing else would matter."



God, he was so good-looking, was the first thing she'd thought, when she'd first laid eyes on him again. The second thing she'd thought about was how good he *smelled*.

And inwardly, she'd smiled. There was something really strange about the fact that she loved his scent. Was it his soap or cologne? What would he think if he knew she'd been dreaming about him every single night since the day they'd met?

Beth frowned. It was kind of warm in the room. But for some strange reason, Zach seemed to be overly dressed and bundled up, wearing a gray fleece pullover, with a high zipped collar covering his neck. She noticed he looked slightly uncomfortable, tugging at his collar as he talked with one of the school administrators.

The three of them stuck around the inn for another thirty minutes after Kelly and Luke took off, and Beth had some difficulty separating Kyle from the keyboard when it was time to depart. It was strange, maybe she was just imagining it? But Kyle seemed to be making lots of sense with his choice of keys when he was playing. His fiddling around almost sounded like actual *music*.

"You can play with it again as soon as we get home, Kyle," Beth said.

Kyle had struggled a bit with Zach, when he'd attempted to slide the keyboard back into its box.

Looking slightly uncertain, Kyle stood up on his feet.

"How about we go and pick out a Christmas tree?" Beth asked.

Kyle began jumping up and down, ready to be on the move again.

Once Beth had managed to bundle him up into his winter coat, Kyle was giggling uncontrollably by the time they were trudging through the snow into the parking lot.

Zach hesitated. "So, *where* are you guys living?"

"On Stone Lake," Beth answered.

"We'll be going north to the farm," Zach said, glancing at the sky. "Looks like the weather's eased up a little, for now. Why don't you follow me through town in your SUV? You can park it in the grocery store lot, since it's at the junction of the road leading toward Stone Lake. Let's just take my truck to the farm, okay? It's probably got better traction over the snow and ice."

Beth nodded agreeably. "Sounds good. I brought along some extra gloves, hats and scarves."

When Zach grinned before answering, Beth's heart skipped a beat.

"Bring them along," he said. "I'm not sure what I've got in my truck."

Soon after warming up the SUV, Beth was following Zach's truck carefully along the snow-covered road as they drove through town, and then finally into the parking lot of the grocery store.

She parked the SUV, stepping out and sliding open the back door.

"No, Kyle," Beth muttered firmly. "We don't need to bring the keyboard along where we're going."

Zach barked out a laugh from where he stood waiting nearby, standing outside and leaning against his truck.

Even though Kyle was still revved up when he was loaded into the back seat of Zach's truck, they somehow managed to quickly be on their way.

Although Zach and Beth remained mostly silent, it was a magical twenty-five-minute drive. The trees were coated with ice and there was a family of deer wandering beside the road when they pulled into the entrance of the farm.

The three of them bundled up tightly in their coats, and were each wearing hats, scarves and gloves, before making their trek along the paths through the trees. Kyle laughed and giggled the entire time. He was sure loving his new life in Crystal Rock.

After twenty minutes of studying the trees, Beth finally made her choice. She turned to Zach, who had somehow ended up holding Kyle's hand while Beth had been wandering ahead of them along the path.

She pointed at a lovely eight-foot Blue Spruce. "This one here," she said excitedly. Its needles were sharp, but it would definitely discourage Kyle from fiddling with the ornaments once the tree was decorated.

"Ohh-kay." Zach grinned. "If you don't mind me saying so, it doesn't look much different from the other one you looked at first." Letting go of Kyle's hand, he dropped down to his knees near the tree and began sawing at the base of the trunk.

Beth grimaced as she studied the tree. "No, it really doesn't, does it?"

When Zach's eyes met hers, they laughed.

In a matter of minutes, the tree was felled, and she and Zach were discussing the easiest way to haul it along the path. Zach wrapped Kyle's hand around the tip of the tree before grabbing a hold of the base of the trunk, alongside Beth.

They pulled off their gloves, to get a better grip on the trunk.

When Zach's hand brushed accidentally over hers, Beth stilled as her eyes met Zach's.

Was that *desire* she saw in his eyes? All Beth knew was whatever this was, it was filling her with a longing that she'd never *ever* experienced before.

Zach cleared his throat, asking, "Ready?"

"Ready," she answered, feeling dazed snapping out of her trance.

Beth gave Zach a side glance as they slid the tree along the snow coated trail. Soon the enchanting afternoon would be over, she thought regrettably. She'd never laughed as much with a man in her entire life.

Other people seemed to think of Kyle as a burden, whereas she chose to think of him as a blessing. He was as he was, and what-ifs weren't going to change him *or* the situation. It was wondrous sometimes, looking at life through Kyle's eyes, like the first time he'd ridden on a merry-go-round, or had gazed into the sky to see fireworks. So many people took the simple joys in life for granted.

And the most astonishing thing of all? Zach seemed to understand, and to feel exactly like she did.

Beth, Kyle and Zach finally reached the path leading back to the greenhouse. After they left the tree to be wrapped and loaded into Zach's truck, Kyle grabbed Zach's hand, attempting to pull him inside

Zach grinned at Beth. "Want to take a look at the Christmas decorations in the shop?"

She hesitated. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Nah," Zach answered. "Come on. It looks like they've got a lot of cool stuff for sale."

Apparently, the weather hadn't interrupted everyone's preparations for the holidays, because a couple of other trucks pulled into the parking lot while the three of them wandered around the greenhouse, studying the decorated wreaths and ornaments for sale.

Beth turned to Zach when she noticed some outdoor ornaments fashioned from bird seed. "Kyle's fascinated with watching the birds and squirrels through the windows in the family room. I think I'll get a few of these to use when the weather's bad. I can hang them outside of the window without having to make a trip through the snow to fill the feeder."

When she and Zach reached up at the same time to grab a handful of prepackaged ornaments, Beth found herself nearly wrapped within his arms. And there it was again, Beth thought, when she searched Zach's eyes.

She held her breath. Was he going to *kiss* her?

Zach broke the spell when he abruptly pulled away. "Sorry."

As Kyle began wandering down the next aisle, Zach scrambled to catch up with him.

Why was she suddenly feeling so disappointed? She barely knew the guy, Beth admitted halfheartedly.

After counting out a half a dozen ornaments, she took in a shaky breath before strolling over to where Kyle and Zach stood waiting near the checkout counter.

Before long, they were back on the road, with the radio switched onto a channel exclusively featuring Christmas music.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store, Kyle was asleep in the backseat of Zach's truck. Lifting his finger to his mouth, Zach motioned at the SUV with a nod of his head.

In silent understanding, Beth grinned, leaving Kyle with Zach in the truck.

Twenty minutes later, she was pulling the SUV into the driveway of her lakefront property, with Zach following closely behind.

When Zach stepped out from the truck, Kyle was beginning to stir, and reaching into the backseat, Zach hoisted Kyle into his arms.

Beth laughed, watching Zach wobble from side to side as he trudged through the snow, nearly dropping Kyle.

"He can *walk*, Zach. Didn't you say you have a bad leg? Besides, it's way too early to let him sleep. He'd be waking me up in the middle of the night."

Zach grunted and grinned, letting Kyle's feet drop to the ground.

Kyle must have remembered the keyboard, because he was suddenly wide awake, and running over to the SUV and sliding open the back door, he grabbed the box.

Watching Kyle, Zach smiled and muttered, "I think I'd better just bring in the tree."

"Both of us will get out of your way," Beth said, pointing at the door leading directly into the family room. "You can bring it into the house through there. I'll need to unlock the door from the inside. I've got keyed deadbolts on all the exterior doors, because of Kyle."

Zach grimaced. "Good idea."

"Yes." She gave him a rueful smile. "But I really wish I hadn't learned the hard way that I needed them."

Zach grinned, answering dryly, "I've got a feeling there's a story or two behind *that* observation."

"*That's* for sure," she said, laughing as she walked towards Kyle, where he stood waiting for her to unlock the front door. "I'll get that porch door open for you in a minute."

As Beth unlocked the door, Zach made his way to the rear of the truck, pulling down the hatch.

• • • •

*WHAT A PLACE*, Zach thought, dragging the spruce inside through the wide opened doors from the deck. Even at dusk, the view across the lake of the vibrant setting sun was absolutely amazing.

Beth helped him place the tree into the stand she'd already set up near the fireplace. Once they were finished, she stood back to make sure it was straight, obviously admiring the tree.

Her question came out of the blue. "Do you happen to know anyone who'd be interested in renting this place, when I move out of here in a couple months?"

“Me,” he answered without thinking.

“Really? Cal is still working on my house. But it should be move-in ready in a couple of months.” She pointed through the window at the huge Victorian home next door, and grimaced. “The house needed a lot more work than Cal realized.”

“Just you and Kyle are going to live *there*?” Zach grinned. “That place is *huge*.”

“Yes, once I actually saw it, I was kind of worried about what I was getting myself into. It used to be an inn, I guess. It was more of an investment property.” She gave him an impish grin. “It’s always been my dream to refurbish and live in an old Victorian home.”

“Really?” He hesitated, wondering about how much to say about himself, and his reasons for moving to Crystal Rock. With all the physical activity this afternoon, he was beginning to feel lots of discomfort from the fleece he’d been wearing around his neck all day. He’d say nothing, he decided, suddenly feeling disheartened. “I knew I wanted to stick around Crystal Rock and make it my home after visiting Luke. It’s time to get my stuff out of storage, though. I need to move out from Luke and Kelly’s guesthouse.”

“Well, if you’re really serious about moving in here, you can talk to Cal. I have no idea about what to charge for rent for a place like this. I’d just like to rent it out as soon as possible, because I’m still waiting for my house in Bloomington to sell. Of course, you’d have your privacy. We’re far enough away where Kyle wouldn’t be able to bug you. Besides, you’ll probably see too much of him at school and in the work program, anyway.”

Understandably impatient for his mom to begin decorating the tree, Kyle rushed over to Beth, grabbing her hand and attempting to lead her toward the tree. When he began fiddling with the jeweled Christmas tree pin attached to her collar, Beth gave Kyle a tender smile, before glancing at Zach and smiling at *him*.

Zach felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

It was right at that moment he knew, this time, he was really in trouble. It had taken thirty-seven years to find a woman he felt like he could actually relate to.

And, for the first time ever, he knew it was actually *love*.

• • • •

ZACH HAD STUCK AROUND and helped them decorate the tree. Well, Beth had kind of insisted upon it. She’d brewed some coffee, and they’d sat and talked while Kyle played with his keyboard after drinking hot chocolate.

Zach was a retired pilot who’d been in the air force but had been working part-time at Callahan Construction since the fall. He’d decided to stay in town, after he’d been asked for his input about the wounded warrior facility being built. Even though she hadn’t noticed anything other than a limp, apparently, Zach’s injuries in Iraq had prevented him from continuing with his planned military career. Although he’d been offered the opportunity to work from behind a desk in D.C., he’d decided it just wouldn’t be enough for him.

“Why?” Beth asked, as they sat beside each other on the couch.

“The work they were offering seemed pretty boring. Plus, I wanted to do something where I’d actually be getting some exercise during the day.” He hesitated. “Sometimes, I have a little trouble with my leg, and I can’t stand it when I don’t move around enough.”

“And you’ll be able to do that while you’re working at the wounded warrior facility?”

“Yes, I will,” Zach answered. “I’ll be scheduling and coordinating the programs, but I’ll also be interviewing some of the patients beforehand as an advisor and asking questions about their injuries.”

He grimaced. "The doctors have reassured me that these men and women are better off talking to someone who's been there and knows what it's all about overseas."

"Ahh," Beth said. "And as an assistant to kids like Kyle, you'll also be working in the community, and getting some of that exercise that you seem to need too?"

Zach nodded. Somehow, he'd been caught up in the day by day operations at Crystal Visions and had apparently decided he wanted to be part of that as well. "Plus, our funding for the wounded warrior facility is somewhat limited right now, so we won't have many patients to begin with."

*Wow*, was all Beth could think. He became so animated when he began talking about the projects he was involved in. She frowned when she noticed him fidgeting with his high collar. Why wasn't he taking off that jacket, she wondered? Maybe he wasn't wearing a shirt underneath the fleece?

She took in a deep breath when he became silent, asking hesitantly, "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

For some strange reason, his expression suddenly turned grim. "I really should get home," he answered rather abruptly.

*Why?* She wanted to ask. But she and Kyle had been with him nearly the entire day already, and she really couldn't expect him to give up any more of his time.

Although it was a shame, she thought, because for about the millionth time that day, she'd really felt like they'd shared a connection.

When Kyle began playing a tune on the keyboard, Beth and Zach's eyes met in mutual astonishment.

Beth began, "You don't suppose...?"

"That he could be one of those autistic kids with latent talent?" Zach grinned. "Maybe. I'll have to give him a few lessons. I used to play a pretty mean keyboard at one time."

When Beth lifted a brow, Zach appeared sheepish. "I was in a high school band. Amateur stuff, really."

Beth grinned. "I used to sing soprano, myself."

Zach's smile lit up his eyes. "We'll have to have some fun with that sometime." He suddenly looked serious again, and standing on his feet, he headed toward the door.

Beth followed him through the doorway and stepped outside with him onto the deck.

• • • •

"ZACH?"

Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was mussed, but Zach had never met another woman who'd looked as lovely.

"Thank you so much," she said softly.

And then he groaned, finally giving in and reaching out for her. He'd been wanting to kiss her the entire afternoon. He held her face within his hands, staring deeply into her beautiful blue eyes. Bending down and laying his mouth over hers, Zach eased Beth gently into the kiss.

When her lips finally parted with a shudder of anticipation, his tension melted, and Zach deepened his kiss, hungrily wanting more.

*Needing more...*

Zach crushed himself against Beth, her lips parting further under the force of his kiss.

Her tongue met his and explored with an urgency that sent fire shooting straight to his toes.

Not to mention another part of his anatomy.

He suddenly broke away. And with something akin to horror, Zach looked down at Beth in absolute disbelief, muttering, “*Oh, my God. I’m so sorry.*”

Beth seemed dazed, her hand covering her lips, and when she looked back at him, clearly puzzled, her big blue eyes were shimmering with tears.

*He had to get out of here*, before he did anything else he’d regret.

Rushing down the steps from the porch, he made his way around the house and quickly approached his truck, opening the door and stepping inside.

Once he’d started the engine, he laid his head against the steering wheel, waiting for the truck to warm up. Finally, he yanked down the zipper of his pullover and studied his neck grimly in the rearview mirror. Even in the dark, the lumpy scars stood out like welts crisscrossing his skin.

He shook his head dazedly, jerking the clutch into reverse.

He’d just have to avoid her, Zach decided, as he pulled the truck onto the main road. He couldn’t stand the idea of Beth ever having to look at him like this.





It was difficult after what had happened with Zach, but Beth attempted to get wrapped up in the spirit of the season since Kyle was so excited. After purchasing a bunch of gifts for him, she hid them in the main house.

But all she kept thinking about was Zach, and that beautiful kiss they'd shared the week before. She just couldn't understand what was going on. If he wasn't interested in beginning a relationship, *why* had he kissed her? He'd run away from her that night like a bat out of hell, *and he hadn't even said goodbye.*

Could it be her *age*? She frowned, feeling somewhat insecure. She was probably about seven or eight years older than him. But she'd always taken pretty good care of herself, as a single mom of a kid like Kyle. After all, Kyle's future was in her hands. His father had passed away ten years ago, although he'd never been any help as far as Kyle was concerned. All she'd received from Greg was a little bit of court-ordered child support, since he'd moved from job to job.

It was Christmas Eve, and Beth was getting Kyle ready to make the rounds with friends and family. First, they'd visit at Luke and Kelly's house, and then they'd have dinner with Cal and his family.

*Would she see Zach tonight?*

She'd actually bought him a gift, which was kind of funny. She hadn't even purchased a present for Jim last Christmas. Why bother? During their five-year relationship, he'd never given anything to her.

When Beth pulled the SUV into the driveway of Luke and Kelly's house, the first thing Kyle saw were skaters whizzing across the iced over bay. Apparently, the Dragonfly Pointe Inn maintained an ice rink for visitors, and even sponsored a local hockey team.

Kyle's arms went whipping up and down in excitement when he stepped out from the SUV, and he suddenly began jumping in place. Since he had no verbal skills, Kyle used his hands for *everything*. He was even pretty skilled with sign language, and Beth had picked up a lot of the signs herself. But she and Kyle's teachers had discovered years ago that pictures were the most effective way for communicating his needs more quickly.

She heard the sound of Christmas music echoing from inside, so she knocked, and entered the house through the back door.

*Wow*, what amazing views, Beth thought, as they made their way through the doorway and into the kitchen. Although there were windows everywhere, it was warm and cozy inside because of the roaring fire blazing in the fireplace.

"Finally. Here they are." Luke was grinning when he approached, carrying a heavy coat in his hand. He winked at Beth, looking down at Kyle. "I see you're wearing heavy sweats, Kyle. Perfect for a first-time skater."

Beth grinned. "Thanks for doing this Luke."

"It'll be fun. We're going to swing by the guesthouse first and see if we can talk Zach out of his sulking."

Beth was taken aback. "Sulking?"

Luke stared into her eyes somewhat intently. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, cuz?"

"Well," Beth answered, hesitating. "I'm not sure, Luke. I thought we were getting along great..."

Luke cocked a brow. "But?"

She knew she was blushing when she answered, "He kissed me."

Luke started.

And then he began studying her quizzically. "And I take it, you didn't object to this?"

She answered rather breathlessly, "Not at all."

Luke began to laugh. "Kelly was right then."

Beth was puzzled by the cryptic remark.

Finally, he sighed. "Be patient with him, Beth. I wish I could say more, but his story isn't mine to tell."

Beth was startled. *Story?*

She began thinking back about the conversation they'd had last week. Zach had mentioned he'd taken charge of coordinating the new wounded warrior program. But what made Zach *qualified* to run the program, besides the fact that he'd served overseas?

And it suddenly occurred to her.

Was he injured?

*He couldn't be.* Could he? Besides his leg, there weren't any obvious problems on the outside, like there were when you looked at Luke.

"Let me guess. He's *part* of the wounded warrior program, Luke? And not just coordinating it?"

After glancing nervously through the room at some of the guests, Luke nodded his agreement grimly. "So, just give him some time, Beth," he muttered, looking back at her. "I never would have come around myself, when it came to accepting Kelly into my life, if it hadn't been for one of my friends talking some sense into me."

Giving Luke a rueful smile, Beth slowly nodded her acceptance.

Taking in a deep breath and squaring off her shoulders, she turned to Kyle. "Are you ready to go skating?"

She'd caught his attention just in time. He looked like he'd been ready to pounce on the food spread out on the buffet.

Kyle giggled, and began jumping up and down.

• • • •

HE LET THE BLINDS FOR the living room window drop back into place. "Well, they're both over there Em," Zach muttered, looking down at the dog. He found himself talking out loud to her quite a bit these days. With that perpetual look of concern on her face, she reminded him a little of his therapist. "So, do I put in an appearance or not?"

Emily cocked her head, definitely appearing to be considering the question. She suddenly barked, and Zach had his answer.

"Alright, already. I guess I can't hide away from her forever?"

Zach grinned, when Emily barked again. She sure was a sweet little dog. When Danielle Loughlin had talked him into adopting a dog from the no-kill shelter, once he'd decided to stay in town, Zach had envisioned himself with a lab or golden retriever. The last thing he'd expected to do was walk out of the place with a *basset hound*.

When someone began knocking at the front door, Zach jumped nervously when Emily began to howl.

He gave her a rueful smile. Em still had a few bad habits that he'd really like to break her out of.

Zach answered the door and blinked.

*Speak of the devil*, Zach thought, when Kyle plowed inside through the doorway.

Zach held his breath, peeking outside to search behind Kyle.

“Just me,” Luke said, appearing from around the corner of the house.

Studying Zach intently, Luke grinned, cocking a brow.

Just then, Luke’s black lab Hawk came barreling along the path, and Emily ran outside through the doorway to greet him.

“He looks bigger every time I see him,” Zach mumbled, grinning.

“Yeah,” Luke muttered. “That’s the same thing I just said to Kel.”

“Well, don’t just stand there. Get in here.” Zach wasn’t really sure who he was talking to when he said it.

But inwardly, he was scolding himself. Why was he so disappointed?

*Because Beth wasn’t with Kyle?* Zach had never been this infatuated with a woman before in his life.

Emily scrambled inside through the doorway with Hawk on her heels, and Luke strolled into the living room behind Hawk.

When Hawk began licking Kyle’s hands, Kyle dropped onto the floor so Emily could climb into his lap.

Both Hawk and Emily began licking his face, and Kyle started giggling madly.

Zach rolled his eyes upward. “And you guys are here *because...?*”

Luke was laughing, and Zach couldn’t blame him. The living room had been turned into a three-ring circus, just like *that*.

“*Dude*, get yourself ready. We’re all going skating.”

Zach stared down at Luke’s prosthetic leg. “This ought to be interesting,” he muttered dryly.

Luke just laughed harder.

• • • •

BETH WAS ENJOYING HERSELF with Kelly and Luke’s friends, she decided, as she sipped on some wine and loaded a plate with chips and dip. It was nice to get a little time away from Kyle, even though that would all change in about a week, when she’d take up her accounting duties at Callahan Construction while Kyle went to school.

The best thing of all about her job? The hours were flexible. If Beth finished what she needed to do for the day, she could leave, according to Kelly, who’d been handling the family’s accounts even before she’d attended college.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, Beth started thinking about looking for Kyle, because they were expected at Cal and Jenny’s for dinner soon.

Kelly must have noticed Beth glance at her watch, because she walked through the hallway and opened the closet, grabbing Beth’s coat along with her own.

Beth had her camera ready when she walked down the path towards the lake with Kelly.

The first thing Beth noticed was Luke wobbling and laughing, as he struggled to stand upright.

Kelly gasped, as soon as she noticed Luke. Covering her mouth in obvious horror, she ran onto the ice to steady Luke.

Beth grinned. What would it be like to have a guy look at her like *that*? And then her eyes moved over to the handsome man standing beside Luke.

*Zach*. He was grinning too. And he was also holding onto Kyle’s hand so Kyle wouldn’t slip on the ice in his skates.

Lifting her camera, Beth snapped a quick shot.

Zach was looking a little uncertain when Beth approached them.

“How’s he been behaving?” she asked.

Kyle was still excited, and happy to see her too, but he definitely seemed tired.

“Good,” Zach answered softly.

“We probably need to get over to Cal’s pretty soon, for our Christmas Eve dinner.”

Zach motioned at Kyle with his head. Kyle and Zach already seemed to have their own way of communicating, and Kyle began hobbling slowly across the ice.

“I can’t believe he’s standing up,” Beth murmured.

“Oh, he’s fallen down quite a few times,” Zach muttered, grinning.

Zach and Beth followed Kyle toward the blazing bonfire, entrenched in a pit near the edge of the beach.

Kyle sat down on a bench, and started fumbling with the laces of his skates, so Zach bent over and began untying them.

Once he saw Zach was finished, Kyle pulled his boots out from underneath the bench and switched them for the skates on his own.

Zach seemed to be searching for something to say, so Beth took up the slack. “Kyle picked out a little something for you for Christmas.”

Zach seemed surprised, but he grinned at Kyle. “Thank you, Kyle.”

Kyle smiled.

Beth murmured, “I’ve got the bag in my van.”

Zach cleared his throat. “Do you have all your things from inside the house?”

Beth nodded yes.

“I’ll walk you both to your van, then.”

Kyle stood up, and soon, they were hiking along the path from the beach and strolling around the house.

“God, what a beautiful place this would be to live,” Beth said, looking at Zach.

He finally smiled. “Your place isn’t so bad either.”

She grinned. “Yes. I’m pretty excited to be living beside the lake.”

He hesitated. “I said something to Cal about renting your house.”

Beth was surprised. She’d assumed...well, she’d been trying hard not to think about it one way or another.

They were standing near the van, and reaching for the handle, Zach slid open the back door for Kyle.

After Kyle was settled inside, Zach turned to Beth, looking rather uncomfortable. “About that kiss...”

She covered his mouth with her hand. “We’re not going to talk about that right now,” Beth said firmly. “Since you’re not going to tell me what I really want to hear, *don’t* say anything else.”

Beth reached for the door handle, tugging open the door. “Unless you’re ready to tell me something I *do* want to hear?”

Zach looked startled.

Grinning, she reached inside the SUV, grabbing a gift bag from the passenger seat and handing it over. “This is for you.”

And then she winked, before stepping inside the van.

Zach just stood and stared as she started up the engine and pulled the SUV onto the road.

Beth grinned when she peeked at him through the rearview mirror as she drove away.

Zach was studying the festive fleece pullover, along with the matching doggie sweater, that he'd pulled out from inside the bag.

And he appeared to be laughing loudly.



It was Christmas day, and after Zach had taken Emily for a short walk along the snowy beach, he'd returned her home. Zach was strolling along the road heading toward the Dragonfly Pointe Inn to eat his Christmas dinner. Although Kelly and Luke had invited him over the Callahan's, he didn't want to intrude on their family Christmas.

Zach looked down at the colorful fleece he was wearing and grinned. Emily had also loved her winter coat. The bright blue and gold colors of the fleece had kind of reminded him of the clothes he'd worn back in high school, and weirdly, Zach had suddenly recalled some of the arguments he'd had with his dad about the way he'd dressed.

Of course, that had all changed once Zach had enlisted, and he and his dad had become closer through the years. His father was an air force colonel handling sensitive matters for the government, and now he was stationed and living in Europe with Zach's mom. Zach made a mental note to give them a call and wish them Merry Christmas as soon as he returned home today, because of the difference in the time zones.

It was pretty quiet inside the inn today, Zach discovered, after stepping into the dining room and grabbing an empty plate from the buffet, and only about a third of the tables appeared to be in use.

Zach settled onto a seat near a window and began to eat. After helping himself to a second plate and finishing with dessert, Zach scooped up his check from the table and went to pay the cashier.

Once Zach was finished, he headed through the lobby and down the hallway encased in glass. Apparently, everything for sale in the gift shop was designed by local artisans. He'd had this destination fixed in the back of his mind, he supposed, since he'd awoken this morning from a night with little sleep. Once again, Beth had invaded his dreams.

He saw what he wanted right away, when he looked through the glass at the jewelry on display.

"I'm surprised you're open today," Zach admitted, walking into the shop. "You're the owner and designer, aren't you? I talked with Kelly Callahan last night and she said I should stop by because you were probably going to be open."

"Yes. Kelly's a good friend." The pretty dark-haired woman behind the counter smiled. "I'm Dawn Wellman. Usually, the shop would be closed, but I had some work to do today for my year-end inventory, so I figured I'd open up the shop for a few hours."

"I'm Zach," he murmured.

Dawn pursed her lips. "It looks like you already know what you want, Zach?"

When he pointed at the piece in the storefront window, Dawn grinned, asking, "Would you like it wrapped?"

"Yes, please," Zach answered gruffly.

Once it was wrapped in shiny silver paper, she smiled at Zach. "How about a card?"

He hesitated. *What would he even say?*

Zach cleared his throat. "Nah. It'll be fine like that."

When Zach left the gift shop with the box in hand, he was wearing a rueful smile on his face. He'd made a few decisions during the last few days, when he hadn't been able to quit thinking about Beth.

He wasn't going to put off his reconstructive surgery any longer. If the scarring had covered his back or even run over his shoulders, like Luke's, he probably would have been able to cope a little better with the sight of his naked body in a mirror. He'd had one operation so far, along his lower



belly, and it looked to have worked pretty well. The trick was to remove patches of healthy skin from other parts of his body, and then insert it around the edges of his scars regenerating tissue growth.

But, unfortunately, the most severe scarring was on his upper chest. Zach thought he looked *hideous*. Since that area was not only central to his burns, but the most sensitive, the final operations would be a little trickier. He'd also be looking at some reconstructive surgery, much like what was done after a woman's mastectomy, he'd been told.

Meanwhile, he didn't know what he was going to do about Beth. All he did know was that *he couldn't stand the idea of her seeing him like this*.



BETH AND KYLE HAD A lovely Christmas. Cal and Jenny's two oldest kids were at the Callahan house with their spouses and families when Beth and Kyle arrived to celebrate Christmas Eve with them. Beth's other cousins had apparently joined the entire family on Christmas Day. Although she and Kyle had been invited, Beth had chosen to spend the day at home with Kyle. She'd be going to work all too soon, and Kyle would be in school and vocational training, even during the summer, so she wanted to spend as much quality time with him as possible.

She'd called and talked with her entire family in Arizona. Next year, they'd all be coming here to celebrate Christmas with her and Kyle.

There had been several more inches of snow accumulating during the following week, and Cal had arranged for a friend to regularly plow her driveway.

But the snow kept falling down. Beth had gone outside to shovel a little bit wider path around the back door when she'd discovered a bag, containing a gift, hanging from the doorknob.

Even now, Beth fingered the lovely pendant hanging from her neck. It was a simple design, with two dragonflies encircled by a silver filigree heart. But it was the most exquisite piece of jewelry that she'd ever seen.

There had been no card with the gift, and she was becoming more confused. Although his intentions remained unspoken, Beth knew that it had to have come from Zach.



It was February now, and Kyle was going to school, where he was thriving.

Beth had been told by Kyle's teacher that he wouldn't begin in the vocational program with Zach until late spring. There was only one other student Debbie Abrams was working with, so she could give Kyle and his classmate her undivided attention. They'd slowly begin initiating Kyle into the work program for a few hours every afternoon during his school day, and having him spend more time on the job would be dependent on how well he trained, as well as his behavior.

It took every effort in Beth's power to keep Kyle awake during the evening until ten though, so he wouldn't wake up too early in the morning. He was increasingly excited for each new day to begin.

After working and keeping accounts for a huge company, Beth found her job at Callahan Construction to be much less stressful. Kelly Callahan had overhauled the entire company accounting system during the past five years, and Beth's method of accounting was wholly compatible with Kelly's. This left Beth the time to get to know her fellow employees and their families and make a bunch of new friends.

The construction work inside her house was nearly done. Even though much of the house would still need some finishing touches, the kitchen had finally been completed, so she and Kyle had been able to move in.

After receiving the dragonfly pendant, Beth had been secretly hoping the situation between her and Zach might change after the holidays.

But, no. She hadn't spoken with him since Christmas Eve. Since the house in Bloomington still hadn't been sold, Beth was relieved to discover Zach was still planning on moving in next door though, on the first of March.

And then she got the shock of her life, on Valentine's Day, when she had an unexpected visitor at work.

"*Jim?*" Her mouth gaped open when he strolled into the office. He looked thinner, and wearier than he had the last time she'd seen him.

"Hi, Liz." He walked up to her, apparently expecting her to stand up and welcome him with open arms.

Amazing, considering she hadn't even heard a word from him since she'd moved here. Why *hadn't* he called? It's not like he didn't have the number for her cell.

When she remained seated at her desk, he began looking uncertain. "I thought I'd take you up on that offer and move in with you."

Beth's mouth gaped open further. And then she quickly pulled her thoughts together and spoke. "I'm sorry, Jim. That plan's not going to work for me anymore."

When Jim dropped into the chair beside her desk, he was looking wearily defeated. "But...*why not*, Liz?"

It was time to be firm and tell him the truth. "Because we don't have the same priorities, and you wouldn't know how to be a good father for Kyle." She hesitated. "Besides, I'm *not* in love with you. I didn't have the heart to tell you before I left Bloomington."

"Ouch." Jim grimaced, suddenly bending over and dropping his head into his hands.

"Okay, Jim. What's this *really* about?"

And then he told her.

ZACH CHECKED HIS WATCH as he stepped out from his truck and began approaching the house overlooking the lake. Cal would be meeting him here momentarily to give him a tour of the house, while Beth was at work.

What a view, Zach thought as he stepped onto the deck surrounding the family room. Stone Lake was miles wide and connected to a chain of lakes that extended nearly one-hundred miles north.

“Who in the heck are *you*?”

Zach started, turning to stare at a stranger who was standing in the doorway leading outside from the family room.

Zach frowned. “I’d like to ask *you* the nmsame question?”

All of a sudden, Cal appeared from around the corner of the house. As he made his way up the staircase and onto the deck, Cal murmured, “Jim, I presume? Beth told me you were staying here. This is Zach. He’s going to be renting the house.”

Looking uncertain, the man held out his hand to shake Cal’s. “Oh. Beth didn’t mention anything about it to me this morning.”

Jim turned, and appeared to be sizing Zach up.

“Here for a visit?” Zach asked politely.

“Yeah,” Jim growled.

And then, strangely, he smirked at Zach. “I missed Beth. We’ve been dating for over five years, and my life hasn’t been the same since she left.”

*Dating?* Zach took a closer look at Jim. The guy was older than Beth, with a receding hairline and a slightly thickening waistline. But Zach supposed he wasn’t half-bad looking for someone who had to be close to fifty.

*Did that mean Jim was living here with Beth?*

For a minute, Zach felt like punching Jim out. Instead he just glared at him, before following Cal through the doorway into the family room.

Zach paid little attention to Cal as he led him through the house. They made their way through a huge kitchen attached to the family room, and down a staircase into the basement. A laundry room was located underneath the staircase. Inset into a cliff, the basement had a unique layout with a bar, a huge picture window overlooking the lake behind it.

But there was only one thing Zach was interested in when they were traveling up the staircase toward the bedrooms. How many of those three bedrooms were in use?

Zach recognized Kyle’s room right away, since it was loaded with stuffed animals and toys. Peeking into another bedroom situated beside Kyle’s, Zach noticed it was devoid of furnishings.

Last on their tour was the brightly lit master bedroom and bath further down the hallway. And Zach couldn’t believe how upset he was, when he saw the open suitcase laid out on a chair.

Because it definitely belonged to Jim.

• • • •

IT WAS THE THIRD WEEK of February, and Zach had been recuperating nicely from the surgery he’d had nearly two weeks ago, until he’d visited the house he was supposed to rent from Beth.

Kelly had sent over something to eat, and as Zach laid resting on the bed in the guesthouse, Luke was staring down at him with concern. “Feeling better today?”

“Yeah,” Zach answered. “Those damned pain killers really knocked me out.”

Luke grimaced. “You sure it doesn’t have anything to do with what you saw the other day?”

“So, what? She has a boyfriend, and he’s staying at her place,” Zach muttered, trying really hard not to let the situation bother him.

*Yeah, right,* Zach thought, giving Luke a humorless smile. That’s why he’d been hiding away from Luke and Kelly since he’d discovered Jim living with Beth.

Luke grinned. “Hey, man, you’re sneering.”

Zach growled.

“Well, I just thought I’d let you know that you were misinformed. Jim’s not actually staying with Beth.”

Zach sat upright in the bed. “What do you mean? I saw Kyle’s stuff in one of the bedrooms. And Beth’s clothes were definitely hanging in the closet of the master bedroom, because the doors were wide open.”

Luke shrugged. “Beth and Kyle had already moved into the main house a few days earlier. I guess she hadn’t finished moving everything over there yet. Apparently, Jim’s returning to Illinois within a week or two. Supposedly, Beth broke it off for good with the guy even before she left Illinois.”

Immediately beginning to feel more energetic, Zach slipped off the bed. Besides, Kelly was an *excellent* cook. “So, what was it you said Kelly sent over for me to eat?”

Luke began laughing.

• • • •

A FEW HOURS LATER, Kelly stepped into Luke’s home office, asking, “Is Zach any better?”

Luke and Kelly were working together with Jake Loughlin to reopen the Crystal Rock Airport, so Kelly had her own office headquarters inside of the Dragonfly Pointe Inn where she served as a liaison, while Luke worked from home.

Luke grinned. “Yeah, he perked up right away when I told him Beth’s ex-boyfriend was returning to Illinois. Zach’s surgery went well, I think, and he was already up and moving around before he decided to drive to Stone Lake, and take a tour of the house before moving in.”

He sighed. “I was hoping when he discovered Beth had a boyfriend, Zach would go back over there later that day and confront Beth.” Luke rolled his eyes upward. “I didn’t expect him to hide away in the bedroom all week. *God, I hate seeing him like this.* The guy’s lost all his confidence.” Luke hesitated. “I tell you, Kel, if you could’ve seen what Zach was like in Iraq? All of us under his command would’ve done *anything* for the guy!”

“Well, I didn’t exactly have it easy with you, you know.” Kelly frowned. “The scars must look pretty bad?”

Luke started, staring hard at Kelly. “You know what?” He shrugged. “*I don’t know.* I’ve still never actually seen them.”

Kelly stilled, finally moaning, “Oh, Luke. They must look pretty awful?”

“Probably, babe,” he answered, with a grimace.

“We’re just going to have to keep on trying,” she said firmly, settling down onto his lap.

Luke had rolled his wheelchair behind his desk, and she wrapped an arm over his shoulder and around his neck.

“It’ll be your turn to think of something next.” But Luke was distracted, gazing into Kelly’s eyes.

“Alright,” she answered, looking thoughtful as she stared outside through the window. “There’s got to be a way to get them to spend more time together. It should help that he’s finally moving into the house next door to hers.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “But Zach says Beth’s promised him his privacy, since he’ll be spending a lot of time with Kyle in the work program.”

“Hmm.” Kelly snuggled deeper into his lap and laid her lips over his.

Finally breaking away from the kiss, she muttered. “I’ve got an idea. We’ll have to wait until the weather gets a little warmer first.”

But Luke was too busy pulling her closer and kissing her again, to ask what she had in mind.



February turned into March, and soon Zach was moving in next door. But two weeks later, Beth had yet to talk with Zach.

It was a hazy Friday night, and a winter storm watch was in the forecast for the weekend. Beth had seen Zach pull into the garage next door in his truck a few hours earlier, and she'd bundled up Kyle tightly into his winter coat, and they were walking along the shoreline as large wet flakes of snow began dropping like crazy from the sky. Kyle was giggling madly, of course, and stopping and spinning around on the heels of his boots with his arms stretched upward.

Beth heard a shark yip, and there was Emily scampering along the icy shoreline, jogging as fast as she could on her short little legs, trying to catch up with Kyle. Beth grinned, because Emily was wearing the festive doggie sweater she and Kyle had gifted Zach at Christmas.

Beth turned and studied the pathway, searching to see if Zach was following on Emily's heels. And trying hard not to feel disappointed when she didn't see him, Beth sighed as she and Kyle continued their walk. The temperature was dropping quickly, and a sharp breeze was blowing in. They would have to get back to the house soon anyway.

The vegetation along the edge of the shoreline was definitely in need of a heavy trim. She and Kyle moved further along, and when Beth saw a heavy birch branch laying on the ground and blocking their way, she decided it was time to turn back.

Reaching for Kyle's hand and spinning around, she was surprised to see someone walking further along the shoreline in the opposite direction. It definitely wasn't Zach, because whoever it was had a stocking cap pulled over his head and a chain saw in his hand. In fact, Beth was disappointed not to run into Zach, since she'd noticed he had a habit of jogging along this path on a daily basis.

The wind was gusting fiercely, and the temperature was dropping quickly as they struggled to reach the staircase leading up toward the house. A cacophony of sounds echoed through the woods and across the frozen lake. Branches from trees were becoming heavy and when they became laden with ice, they were literally snapping from the trees and dropping to the ground.

It was when Beth began following Kyle up the steep staircase when trouble struck. She heard a sharp crack, and before she could escape completely from its path, a huge pine came barreling down, smashing into the staircase, and pinning her leg underneath the broken steps.

*Oh, no.* What was she going to do? Luckily, she'd escaped any real damage. She could wriggle her leg, foot and toes just fine.

Emily stuck her snout into the air and began to howl, as Kyle stared at Beth uncertainly from the top of the staircase.

*Zach.* Hopefully, he'd be able to pull her out? Kyle knew Zach was living in the house next door, because he'd been trying to sneak over there during the last few weeks. Of course, maybe Kyle was slightly confused after moving to another new house, but would he be able to fetch Zach? Well, she really didn't have any other choice, she thought.

But before she could decide how to best direct Kyle, Zach suddenly appeared at the top of the staircase, and Beth sighed with relief.

*"Beth,"* Zach roared. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She grimaced. "But I seem to be *stuck*."

Turning to Kyle, Zach layed his hands over his shoulders, moving him away from the staircase as Emily followed closely behind. "You stay here with Emily, Kyle."



Beth watched as Zach made his way gingerly down the staircase, obviously making sure each step was secure before putting his full weight down.

He studied the thick broken railing she was leaning against. "Can you stay balanced without the railing?"

Beth rotated her shoulders.

Zach reached around her and took a hold of the railing. Twisting and yanking, he pulled apart the long board from the base of the staircase.

"Okay. I think I can use this railing to prop up the trunk just long enough for you to slip your foot out from underneath." He frowned. "Otherwise, I might have to attach a chain to my truck and hook it around the tree trunk. Hopefully not, because the ground is a sheet of ice, and I'm not sure how much traction I'll have, even if I manage to get the truck close enough to the edge of the cliff."

Beth watched as Zach took the thick eight-foot board, inserting it under the trunk of the pine near the edge of the staircase. Walking down the staircase and positioning himself behind Beth, he steadied her with a hand underneath each arm. When he stepped on the end of the board, putting his full weight down, he continued to hold onto Beth as she wriggled her foot free from beneath the pine's trunk.

"Oh, *thank you, Zach.*" Spinning around, Beth wrapped her arms around him. "I don't know what I would have done, if you hadn't been here tonight."

"Yeah, you really gave me a scare," he muttered into her ear. "What the heck were you guys doing down here, anyway, in this kind of weather? We had a couple of tornadoes pass through last summer, and it doesn't look like any work was ever done to clear away the debris."

For a moment she stilled. He seemed to be angry, but staring into Zach's eyes, Beth could see they were filled with obvious concern.

"That's my fault," she said. "I told Cal not to worry about the exterior property until spring."

For some weird reason, Zach looked at her again and froze. Slowly disentangling himself from her arms, he tied his hood more securely around his neck.

Stepping down to the ground beside the staircase, he reached for Beth's hand.

Beth grimaced as they struggled to climb the icy bank. Although she'd been wearing boots assembled with extra thick padding inside, her foot was beginning to feel sore.

Zach must have noticed, because when they finally reached the top of the cliff, she suddenly found herself being scooped into his arms.

Kyle began giggling, and he and Emily followed behind Zach while he carried Beth toward the main house. Beth was ready to protest before looking into Zach's eyes, which definitely held a warning. *No way* would he be putting her back down.

Beth grinned. Why complain? After all, this was exactly the kind of situation she'd been secretly hoping for, so she could spend some time with Zach.

Kyle opened the front door for them as they approached the house, and Emily scampered inside after Kyle.

"Where to?" Zach asked, carrying her through the doorway into the huge entryway.

"The family room is down the hallway, near the kitchen," Beth answered. "That's alright, I can walk. You can put me down now."

"Not a chance," Zach muttered, looking grim.

Reaching the family room and making his way toward the fireplace, Zach settled Beth onto the end of a sectional couch, propping her foot atop the matching ottoman.

He pulled off her boots carefully, while Beth began wriggling out of her heavy winter coat.

Zach must have noticed where Kyle had hung his coat on a hook near the kitchen door, because he picked up her boots and coat, making his way through the family room and into the kitchen. After resting Beth's boots on the floor next to Kyle's, he hung up her coat.

Kyle had switched his boots for slippers and was sitting on the floor with Emily on his lap.

Beth grinned, when Kyle began to giggle. Emily was licking his face, and it didn't look like she was ever going to stop.

Zach was smiling too, she noticed, when he returned to the room.

"Would you like me to get a fire going?" he asked, nodding at the fireplace.

Beth pointed at the wall switch near the mantle. "Just flick on that switch. I had gas piped into this room to save on the mess, because eventually, it's going to be my dining room."

"That will be nice," Zach murmured, flipping the fireplace switch.

Grimacing, Beth continued, "I splurged in the new family room, overlooking the lake. Along with an outdoor kitchen, I'm having an indoor-outdoor fireplace inserted into the exterior wall. It's really going to be cool, if it ever gets finished."

"I was wondering what all the other construction material was for," Zach said, warming his hands near the fire. "I saw Cal unloading more lumber inside of your garage just the other day."

"Yes. Kyle loved the family room so much over there in your guesthouse, I decided it was definitely worth building something similar here. He has such a short attention span. The visual stimulation helps keep him occupied. Some days, I don't have as much patience with him as others."

Zach nodded, and Beth noticed he seemed uncertain as he stood on his feet.

She stared into his eyes. "You'll stay for dinner, won't you? I made a huge batch of potato soup."

Beth held her breath, because Zach definitely seemed hesitant.

But he finally nodded his agreement. "I'd like to keep an eye on you for a little while, and make sure you're okay."

"Oh, I'm fine," she mumbled.

"*Oh, really?*" he answered.

Stepping towards her and bending over the ottoman, he carefully removed her sock.

"*Whoa,*" she murmured, startled. Her foot was swollen to nearly twice its size, its color an ugly black and blue.

She shook her head in consternation. "How did *that* happen?"

"I'm pretty sure it's just bruised." Zach grimaced. "Usually, I'd say go to the doctor. But not in this weather. Besides, it's obviously not broken. Better to just stay off of it as much as you can during the weekend. It'll probably look better after a day or two."

Beth nodded.

• • • •

NO WAY WAS HE LEAVING her alone tonight. No doubt, the first thing she would do was try to stand up.

Ever since he'd moved in next door, Zach hadn't been able to stop watching out for her whenever he was home. Whether she was taking a walk with Kyle or shoveling snow, she never seemed to sit still. Zach had even seen her moving furniture through the windows when he'd been outside walking Emily one evening last week. It had sure been difficult to sit back and not offer his help.

With a blizzard in the forecast for tonight, Zach had been settled in the family room with the television on, going through the emails on his laptop computer. Looking outside through the window after arriving home from work, he found it odd to see a stranger climbing down the staircase toward

the bank. The guy had a chain saw in his hand, so more than likely he was one of the neighbors clearing debris along the community path, gathering lumber for firewood before the storm arrived.

Only a few of the homeowners in the area had generators since most of the houses and cabins on Stone Lake were used seasonally. Zach had a routine, and he ran along the trail every day to keep in shape, but the blacktop was also used regularly by snowmobilers.

When he'd seen the pine go tumbling down over the bank a few hours later, Zach's heart had nearly stopped, because he'd watched Beth and Zach travel down that staircase thirty minutes earlier, close to the time Zach normally went on his run.

Barely taking the time to sign off the computer, he'd scrambled through the house to retrieve his heavy coat, gloves and boots, returning to the family room and staring through the window just in time to see Kyle and Emily climb up from the staircase.

Zach had breathed in a sigh of relief, until he'd noticed Kyle gazing downward over the cliff, standing glued in place with Emily beside him.

By the time Zach had made it outside, Emily's howls were echoing through the air. Zach had run toward the staircase, never feeling so relieved to see anyone in his life as he had when he'd seen Beth. Although, outwardly, he'd tried to appear calm, his heart had been pounding rapidly in his chest as he'd studied her.

Something had concerned him about the position of the tree trunk after it fell, as well as the wear and tear of the staircase steps where they'd broke. But he'd decided to puzzle it out the following day, since it was more important to extricate Beth.

And once Beth's foot had come loose, when she'd turned, wrapping her arms around *him*? He'd nearly reached his breaking point. Beth probably hadn't had a clue at how close she'd been to being thoroughly kissed...*again*.

But then he'd remembered his neck was uncovered. Had Beth seen the scars? Probably not, he guessed, studying her now. Her hair was mussed, and her nose was shiny, but she looked so cute wearing jeans and a fuzzy sweater.

"Potato soup, did I hear you say?"

Beth smiled, and his heart did a flip flop. "It's my own recipe, with sour cream, bacon, onions and red potatoes. I'll have you know, I'm a pretty darned good cook."

Zach grinned. "I'll bet."

She wrinkled her nose. "And Kyle likes to help."

Zach laughed. "Yeah. I kind of figured."

"He's getting to be pretty good at peeling potatoes."

"Cool," Zach answered, looking over at Kyle. Emily was really becoming attached to the kid. She hadn't moved from Kyle's lap, and Kyle seemed equally happy having her there.

Beth was studying Kyle as well. "We're getting a break from the keyboard. Usually, it's the first thing he goes to once we're finished with our walk. Well, besides heading toward the kitchen for a snack, that is. In fact, I don't want to keep you here, if you have things to do. Would you like to eat right away? Kyle's probably ready to eat now, too."

"What do I need to do?" Zach asked, moving toward the kitchen.

"The soups on the stove. In fact, it's probably still hot. I turned the burner down before we went for our walk. And the bowls are in that cabinet up on top, on the left side of the sink."

"Wow, the inside of this place is looking pretty amazing." Zach studied the handcrafted cherry cabinets as he pulled out bowls from inside. Dark granite countertops wound around the exterior walls, while a lovely shade of light seafoam glass covered the backsplash. The large island in the

center of the kitchen was designed from a beautifully patterned slab of buttery quartz, complementing the granite.

“Is this a heated floor?” Zach asked, staring down at the tile that was intended to resemble wood.

“Yep,” Beth answered. “Wish I’d have had one of those in my house in Bloomington.”

Soon, Zach had scooped soup into bowls for the three of them. After carrying a bowl for Beth to eat in the family room, Zach sat beside Kyle in the kitchen at the island, where they ate theirs.

Afterwards, Zach prepared them all hot cocoa before sitting beside Beth on the sectional where they watched TV.

When the satellite signal was coming in, that is. The storm was getting worse outside, and he was pretty sure they’d be snowed in until tomorrow.

They talked about Kyle, and about how they would communicate with each other about his progress in the work program. Zach was surprised when he found himself telling Beth a little about his past. Zach had been raised in New Orleans, and had family property there, which had suffered some damage from Hurricane Katrina. His cousin was living there now, overseeing a bunch of repairs since Zach’s father had been assigned overseas.

Beth told him about her past, and how she’d been devastated to move with her family to the town of Bloomington while she was still in high school. She’d never really felt at home there, like she did in Crystal Rock.

Finally, Zach stood up, preparing to depart.

He gazed at her uncertainly, looking for any kind of excuse he could think of to stay longer, he supposed. “Can I help you get Kyle ready for bed?”

“I think we’re just going to sleep here in the family room tonight. It’ll be easier for both of us to use the rest room.” Beth grimaced. “My foot is feeling pretty sore.”

“Have you got some ibuprofen? That should help a little.”

She nodded yes.

Zach murmured, “I can get it for you.”

“It’s in the kitchen, over the fridge, in a cabinet with a child guard lock. But I can get it. I need to use the bathroom anyway.”

“That’s alright,” Zach answered. “I’ll find it for you while you’re in the bathroom. Can I brush Kyle’s teeth, get him into pajamas, or do anything else to help you out?”

She studied him uncertainly, clearing her throat. “You don’t *have* to leave, do you? I mean, have you got things you need to do at home? Or maybe you’d rather have something more to drink than hot chocolate? There’s beer or wine in the fridge, you know.”

“I…” Zach couldn’t believe he was actually thinking about staying and keeping Beth company. The last thing he really wanted to do was go home to an empty house. “Ah, no. I don’t have to leave. And hot chocolate is fine. I’m not as much of a drinker these days.”

In fact, the last time Zach had a few extra beers, he’d become incredibly depressed, and had begun feeling sorry for himself.

He finally continued, “I’ll stay in case you need some help with Kyle.”

Zach grinned, looking over at Kyle. He’d been making music for a while on his keyboard, but now he was looking sleepy, sitting in a huge chair near the fireplace with Emily in his lap. “A sleepover, huh?”

Beth was looking slightly sheepish. “Well, truthfully? It’s not so much that I really need your help, as much as it is that I like your company.”

Zach started. Was she *blushing*? It was too difficult to tell as she stood up from the couch, hobbling toward the bathroom.

But Zach grinned.

• • • •

WHEN BETH RETURNED to the family room, Zach already had Kyle in hand and was changing him into the pajamas he'd apparently managed to retrieve from the laundry room, located beyond the kitchen near the back door.

Settling on the couch, Beth swallowed the ibuprofen, drinking the glass of water Zach had left resting on the coffee table.

Zach quickly refilled the water bowl he'd laid on the floor for Emily at dinner before leading her outside.

A few minutes later when Zach and Emily were back in the family room, Beth thought how heartwarming it was watching Zach with Kyle and Emily, tucking them into the chair near the fireplace under a heavy blanket.

When he'd pulled off his coat earlier, Beth had gotten a kick out of seeing Zach wearing the festive fleece pullover Kyle had picked out for him at Christmas.

Somewhat nervously, Beth looked at Zach when he was finished. Where was he going to sleep?

After hesitating momentarily, he settled in beside her on the sectional, pulling a blanket over the two of them.

Beth rested her head against his shoulder. And, much to her surprise, after picking up the TV changer from the coffee table and surfing through the channels, Zach wrapped an arm over her shoulders.

The day must have been catching up with her, because she began dozing off immediately.

"Glad you like the fleece," she muttered softly.

She could hear his muffled laughter, as he tugged her closer beside him.

Where she felt warm, contented and oh so secure.

She clung to him throughout the night, and she was certain he was holding onto her as well. Beth barely recalled moving from her upright position on the sectional and laying down beside Zach through the night, where he kept his arms wrapped tightly around her.

But the next morning, Zach was gone. It was almost as if he'd never been there at all.



Zach didn't know what to do about his feelings for Beth, so he decided to concentrate on learning about his new job at the Crystal Rock Wounded Warrior Home, which would begin after the first of the year.

Zach would share an office with the visiting shrink, who would only be here at the home a few days a week after the facility opened. Once the home was open longer and became established with more patients, Dr. Wes Endicott might become a permanent fixture. About the same age as Zach, Wes came highly recommended by Luke, who was one of his patients, so Zach had begun seeing him too.

"So how do you *feel* about that?" Wes asked, during one of their sessions.

Zach started to laugh.

Wes blinked. "What's so funny?"

Zach answered, "What have we had – about fifteen sessions now? That's the first time you've asked that question. I expected to hear that one during our first session."

"I'll admit that the question's slightly overused on television and in the movies," Wes answered dryly. "But?"

"Oh, yeah, right," Zach muttered.

"So, you were trying to distract me?" Wes asked gently.

"I think that I'm falling for her. Hard. So, it scares the hell out of me," Zach mumbled.

Wes raised a brow. "Why?"

"Besides the unexplained accidents? You know why," Zach answered.

Looking thoughtful, Wes crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair. "She's going to have to know about your injuries sometime if you intend moving forward."

Zach sighed heavily. "I know if she's someone who I care for, I shouldn't be thinking like this. But I can't stand the idea of being rejected."

"Then wait. Neither one of you are going anywhere. Give yourself some time and get to know her better." Wes pursed his lips. "But you might be surprised."

Zach grimaced, standing up. "Thanks, Doc."

Wes grinned. "You're cutting out five minutes ahead of time."

"I'm supposed to see Jason Matthews about my schedule," Zach answered. "Plus, I wanted to fill him in about what was happening in New Orleans before I arrived in Crystal Rock."

"Good. It's better if tell someone else besides Luke and me, especially since you're not living in Luke's guesthouse any longer. And I'm glad you're moving forward with the surgery. But remember there won't be significant changes to your appearance for a long while, and even then, you might not like what you see."

Zach grunted, nodding his agreement tightly as he walked toward the doorway.

"See you next week," Wes said.

"Thanks, Doc," Zach answered, pulling closed the office door behind him.

Zach was getting to know a few of the people working behind the scenes. Two nurses would begin their rotations next week, handling the patients who would be moved from other facilities once the doctor arrived, and physical therapy was already in session in the new gym, where Steve Ryder, Luke's physical therapist, had been hired to head up the program.

Zach continued through the hallway until reaching the doorway at the end. Opening the door leading into Jason's outer office, Zach walked inside and over to Jason's door, which was open wide.

Zach grinned, studying Jason as he worked behind his computer at his desk. “You wanted to see me, *Colonel Matthews?*”

Jason looked up, rolling his eyes. “You heard, huh?”

“About your special promotion? I sure did,” Zach answered.

Jason stood, motioning at a chair placed near his desk. “Come on in Zach. Help yourself to coffee if you want and sit down.”

A few minutes later, Zach settled into the chair with a cup of coffee. “That’s pretty impressive, Jase, making colonel at such a young age. You’re only like what – thirty-two?”

Jason studied him suspiciously. “You were one of the men who recommended me, weren’t you?”

Zach smiled widely. “I also put in a good word with Dad.”

Jason shook his head, and then smiled wryly. “I had the best Christmas I’ve ever had. I ran into a girl I was crazy about as a teenager. She’s moving here and starting a new business in Crystal Rock, and then I found out about this big promotion.” He frowned. “I was surprised to hear you wanted to retire.”

“I loved the action, and the flying, but I don’t know...knowing I’d have a lot to overcome physically? I didn’t want to be stuck in an office full time, when I wasn’t recovering from all the surgeries I’m supposed to have,” Zach murmured. “I felt like I needed something new in my life, and it was time for me to leave.”

“Maybe you just need *someone* new in your life?” Jason asked, grinning.

Something about the expression on Zach’s face must have given him away.

“Ah, hah? You have met someone, haven’t you? Is it someone here in Crystal Rock?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Zach muttered. “It’s someone I just met who recently moved to town. We barely know each other.”

“Maybe we can all go out sometime? I’m still going to be traveling a lot, but Crystal Rock will definitely be home base.”

Zach blinked. “It’s too soon to say.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Zach I used to know,” Jason answered, his expression definitely thoughtful.

Zach decided it was time to change the subject. “So, what kind of schedule have you come up with for me?”

And Jason explained to him that his hours would be flexible, depending on how many incoming patients began to arrive. Zach would assist with paperwork, give tours of the home and accompany the patient’s family into town to their hotel if they were planning on attending family therapy.

Jason asked, “Will it be a problem to be on call?”

“Only when I start over at Crystal Visions with my student in the vocational program. It’ll be anywhere from four to six hours a day.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “When does that begin?”

Zach murmured, “Either March or April, depending on the weather.”

“We should have some volunteers working for us by then, who could assist you, so we can work with that. There will be blocks of time you won’t have much to do, until we start operating full scale.” Jason pursed his lips. “Did I mention you’ll have to take some certification courses?”

“I don’t mind,” Zach answered.

“And if this doesn’t work out, Zach, there will be other jobs opening up. I guess what I like is having someone who’s been there and understands what it’s like being a wounded warrior. People have always warmed up to you. How many times did the men turn to you instead of me?”



“That’s probably cause I was older,” Zach answered dryly.

“I always thought you’d be the one in charge, Jason.”

“I don’t think Dad is disappointed. I’ve always been looking for something, but I’ve never really found it.”

At that moment there was a knock on the outer office door.

Jason stood up, calling out, “Come in.”

Jason turned to Zach. “I forgot to tell you. A friend of your fathers is here today, touring the facility. He asked if you were going to be around today.”

Trying not to appear as shocked as he was feeling, Zach stood up slowly as Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Jackson walked into the room, nodding curtly at Jason. “Good to see you, Matthews.”

Jason nodded back. “Sir.”

Out of habit, Zach stood, saluting the Colonel.

*How had he discovered Zach was here, miles away from New Orleans?*

As if he sensed there was trouble, Jason appeared thoughtful as he stared between Zach and the Colonel.

It was as if he read Zach’s mind when Jason said, “When you’re done giving the Colonel a tour, why you don’t return to my office so we can finish talking about the extra duties I’ll be expecting you to handle?”

“Sounds good,” Zach answered, turning to the Colonel. “What would like to see first, Colonel Jackson?”

“I’ll leave that up to you, Zachary,” he answered, walking back through the doorway into the hallway.

Jason looked concerned when Zach grimaced before following the Colonel.



Each time she ran into him during the next several weeks, Zach seemed to be genuinely happy to see her, but made a point of escaping from her as fast as he could. She really didn't know what to think sometimes. Had she just imagined their near relationship?

Apparently escaping from Josh a few times, Emily came over and visited her and Kyle several times. But Zach really wasn't at home very much anymore. He was working a lot of hours on behalf of the Wounded Warrior facility, according to Luke and Kelly.

Kyle was getting ready to begin his vocational training, so Beth was busy herself, attending meetings at the school and filling out tons of paperwork. But no one had bothered to tell her that thanks to Cal, Kyle would be working at Callahan Construction.

By the time April came along, Kyle was outfitted for his new job with work clothes and steel-toed boots. He'd begin his job in the warehouse, helping load lumber and supplies on the trucks. And if that went well, he might be able to work on site someday, not only to drop off lumber, but to assist with numerous odd jobs.

By the end of April, Kyle was on the job five days a week, for two hours every day. A notebook would go back and forth between her and Zach, and Beth would keep him informed about any behavior issues Kyle was having, so that he would know what to watch for if Kyle was having a bad day. Sometimes, she'd have to adjust Kyle's medications because of all the changes he was undergoing in his life. In turn, Zach would write Beth about any problems Kyle had been having at school or at work during the day.

She always kept trying to read between the lines in the notebook. Zach's handwriting was surprisingly neat and precise, while Beth wrote with a nearly-illegible, squiggly scrawl. With their constant communication, she was still thinking about Zach way too much.

Soon it was May, and finally northern Wisconsin was coming into bloom nearly a month behind central Illinois. It was Mother's Day today, and Beth peered through the kitchen window, staring at the house next door.

Seeing no sign of Zach, she sighed.

When Beth heard the timer buzz on the oven door, she made her way across the kitchen, pulling out the cheese potatoes and leaving them cooling on the stovetop. She and Kyle were heading to a cookout at Luke and Kelly's this afternoon, and cheese potatoes were one of Kyle's favorites. Beth smiled at Kyle where he sat eating his lunch at the kitchen island. Come to think of it, pretty much *everything* layered with cheese was Kyle's favorite.

Nearly an hour later, Beth was pulling the SUV next to Zach's truck in Luke and Kelly's driveway. Luke and Kelly had gone out for breakfast with their family that morning for Mother's Day, and even though Kelly had said that she and Kyle would be their only guests, why should Beth be surprised to see that Zach was here? It had been pretty evident this winter that Luke and Kelly had been attempting some matchmaking.

When Zach, Emily, and Hawk appeared to help unload the van, Zach gave her what appeared to be a rueful smile.

Beth grinned. "They didn't mention we were invited here too?"

Zach shook his head, and rolling his eyes, he muttered, "Nah. They're at it again."

Beth rolled her eyes too, and they both began laughing.

She pointed at the cooler containing the potatoes, along with the drinks and snacks she'd brought along for Kyle, and grabbing the cooler, Zach carried it into the house.

The view across the bay was amazing, Beth thought, as they sat on the deck of the front porch. It was a lovely afternoon. But even though it was unusually warm for northern Wisconsin, it was still a little too cold today for swimming.

"The water is freezing, buddy," Zach told Kyle, before he grinned at Luke. Kyle had been trying to drag both of them down to the beach ever since he and Beth had arrived.

It was fun to sit and relax while drinking a couple of glasses of wine before dinner. Beth just listened to Zach and Luke talk as they'd recalled some of the most humorous moments from their time in the Air Force.

And that sexy voice of Zach's? It seeped through her senses like honey, and his slow southern drawl was doing silly things to her insides again.

Kyle seemed content as he ran along the pathway through the woods with the dogs, even a few hours later when they'd all finished dinner.

Everyone continued to sit outside and talk, taking in the breathtaking view of the colorful sky as the sun began to set.

When a long loud howl came echoing through the woods, interrupting their conversation, Zach's eyes immediately met Beth's.

"Something's wrong!" they both shouted in unison.

Beth was familiar enough with Emily now to know when that howl of hers meant trouble, so Beth shot up from her seat and began staring down the trail. "Where's Kyle?"

Panicking, she called out his name again and again, and after searching the area, Zach grabbed Beth's hand, rushing her down the steps from the deck, running along the main pathway leading to the guesthouse, following the sound of Emily's howls.

When they finally approached the guesthouse, there was Kyle, giggling madly, wading right through the middle of the in-ground pool, which had recently been filled and heated. He hadn't reached the deeper water yet, but he was nearly there.

Luke and Kelly's dog, Hawk, was swimming beside Kyle in the pool as Emily continued howling with her nose pointed up into the air.

Without hesitation, Zach began removing his clothing while Beth tried coaxing Kyle toward the shallower end of the pool.

But Kyle wouldn't listen, and he was beginning to take in deep gulps of water, when he finally seemed to realize that he might be in trouble.

Suddenly, he began to panic, and his arms went flailing on top of the water.

Stripped down to his underwear, Zach jumped into the pool, first wading and then swimming as quickly as he could to reach Kyle.

Clearly relieved to see Zach coming to his rescue, Kyle jumped on top of him, and wound his arms around his neck.

Zach's head nearly plunged under, and he coughed up some water. He seemed to be having a little bit of difficulty loosening Kyle's grip.

"That's alright, buddy," Zach muttered. "You're hurting me a little here, kid. I really need to get some air."

Kyle still had his arms locked around Zach, but Zach somehow managed to walk with him into the shallower end of the pool, and soon he and Kyle were near the staircase.

Kyle must have finally decided it was safe to let Zach go, because he hurriedly climbed up the staircase on his own from the water.

Beth rushed toward Kyle, and as Kelly ran along the pathway leading back to the house, she called out from over her shoulder, "I'll go get you guys some towels and extra clothes."

Luke had a frown on his face, walking toward them as fast as he could. "Is everyone alright?" He grimaced. "It's times like this that I really regret the loss of my leg."

Beth was looking Kyle over and shaking her head in exasperation. He was soaking wet, still wearing all his clothing.

"What am I going to do with you?" She was nearly in tears when she wrapped her arms around him. "*Sometimes you can be such a dope.*"

Kyle appeared visibly shaken when he clung to her momentarily. But then he quickly pulled away as he began tugging off wet clothes.

Zach cleared his throat. "I left a few of my things here in the guesthouse when I moved out. I can take him inside and get him into some dry sweats and a t-shirt."

And then Beth froze.

Her eyes had gone wide when she'd looked over at Zach. Her gaze traveled down from his face to his neck, and then moved over his torso.

Glancing down at himself, Zach was clearly horrified. Quickly reaching out for Kyle's hand, he rushed him around the perimeter of the pool and pulled him inside of the guesthouse through the doorway.

Beth's eyes were filled with tears by the time she glanced over at Luke, who was looking like he was ready to cry himself.

"I haven't seen the scars either, you know," he said gruffly. "I never had a clue that they were so disfiguring."

Beth sighed heavily.

Luke hesitated, studying her.

"Don't you dare look at me like that, Luke Bryant. It doesn't make any difference at all about the way I feel about him." Beth scraped the tears from her eyes. "*But I really want to kill him for thinking that it would!*"

Luke laughed softly. "Well, Beth. Zach has always been a magnet for the ladies."

"Yeah, I can only imagine," she answered dryly.

"But I've never seen him care about anyone as much as he seems to care about you. Kyle, too. He talks about him all the time. Zach was always a loner."

Just then, Kelly appeared with the towels and a couple pairs of sweats and some t-shirts. She was wearing a worried frown on her face when she stared at Beth and Luke.

Evidently noticing the look of determination upon Beth's face, Kelly stepped up to Beth, handing everything over.

Carrying the towels and clothes in her arms, Beth smiled grimly as she marched around the edge of the pool, entering the guesthouse through the doorway.



Zach was in the bedroom wrapping a towel around his waist when he heard someone coming inside the guesthouse.

Taking in a deep breath, he sat down on the edge of the bed, recognizing Beth's voice when she began talking with Kyle. Kyle had pulled off his wet jeans and sweatshirt as soon as he'd walked inside the living room, and Zach had handed over dry clothing for him to wear.

Zach had already hopped in and out of the shower. The water in the pool was heavily chlorinated and had a tendency to burn his supersensitive skin. He needed to apply antibiotic cream regularly over his skin to prevent infection, and Zach was ready to begin digging his hand into the jar when he heard Beth step up to the bedroom door.

Zach didn't want to look at her face. How much longer would he have been able to hide this from her anyway? He'd always figured he'd stood a better chance with Beth as long as she didn't know about the scars.

And now he was feeling totally bleak about the future, since he'd been having this fantasy in his mind about him and her.

But much to his surprise, a throw pillow from the couch came flying through the air, hitting him square on the head.

Zach looked up, his mouth dropped open, when Beth began flinging another pillow across the room.

This one hit him in the face. "*Hey!*"

*Damn*, she looked angry, her lovely blue eyes flashing fire. She had another pillow raised high in the air when Zach finally stood up and stopped her.

"Beth, *don't*," Zach pleaded, wrapping his hands around her wrists until she finally dropped the pillow.

She stared hard into his face, moving her gaze over his neck and chest.

But then she did something totally unexpected. She wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him tightly.

And then she began to cry.

*Uh, oh*, Zach thought, his heart constricted in his chest.

"What kind of woman do you think I am? *Why would you think it would matter to me?*" The question came out between gulping, heart-wrenching sobs.

"Oh, Beth," he whispered hoarsely. "It's just that you were *so* important to me, babe, I couldn't stand the idea that it *would*."

Zach wrapped his arms around her snugly. He hadn't held a woman for such a very long time. And this was *Beth*, he thought, inhaling the light soothing fragrance of lavender that clung to her skin.

But this whole situation was a little mind-blowing for him to take in, and Kyle was still out in the other room, so Zach slowly pulled away from her arms when her sobs gradually began to subside.

When she smiled at him through her tears, it nearly took his breath away. He'd been in love with this woman since the moment they'd met, and now, with her acceptance, he finally understood *why*.

There were tears in his eyes too, when he kissed Beth, almost reverently, on the forehead.

LUKE AND KELLY HAD taken charge of Kyle and the dogs, leaving Zach and Beth alone in the guesthouse to sort things out.

He and Beth had talked a little, but when she'd picked up the ointment and had begun rubbing it into the skin over his shoulders, and even over the bumps and furrows of what had once been his abs and his chest, Zach's voice had seized in his throat. She was seeing every horrifying inch of him when he began getting dressed, and she wasn't turning away from him in disgust.

When they were ready to depart, she gave him a watery smile, reaching for his hand.

Once they were heading along the pathway, Zach dropped her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they continued walking toward the house.

Luke and Kelly were both smiling at them from the deck outside their house when Beth and Zach returned. Kyle and his toys, along with Beth's cooler and purse, were already packed in the SUV, Luke informed them as they said their goodbyes.

Kyle was obviously exhausted and dozing off in the back seat of the vehicle when Zach attached his seat belt. And smiling at Beth, Zach slid the back door of the van closed after Emily hopped in beside Kyle. Since Zach had moved in next door, Emily attached herself to Kyle like an extra limb every chance she got.

Once he finally left Luke and Kelly's, Zach was still in a daze, following Beth in his truck behind her SUV. As he was driving, he kept thinking to himself, *was this really happening?*

Apparently yes, because Beth waited for him to pull into the driveway first. They'd hardly said a word since they'd left the guesthouse, and they continued to remain silent, even as Zach reached into the backseat of the van to unfasten Kyle's seat belt and assist him into the house.

He, Emily and Kyle followed Beth up the staircase, and into Kyle's room.

"Is there anything I can do?" Zach asked.

She smiled. "Nah. He's pretty exhausted."

Zach stood watching while Beth took Kyle into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face, before changing his clothes for bed.

Soon, Kyle appeared in his pajamas, and hopped immediately onto his bed. After Emily jumped into the bed beside him, Kyle seemed to fall instantly asleep.

Zach blinked. He hadn't even had a chance to say goodnight.

Beth laughed softly. "It's the medication. He sleeps like a log. I'm pretty grateful for it now, even though I never really wanted to put him on medication when it was suggested. He used to have some pretty bad behavior issues, though. He's a big kid, and it was awfully hard to handle him by myself."

Zach nodded his agreement. "I haven't had any issues with him at all. He's been really great."

Beth nodded her approval. "Hopefully, it won't change. Right now, it's the newness of everything. I haven't had a whole lot of trouble with him these last few years, now that the puberty issues are out of the way. But every time I need to change his medication? It's really difficult, because sometimes he becomes worse before he gets better. It usually takes about a month for him to adjust."

Beth closed the door softly behind them when they left Kyle's room.

They made their way down the hallway toward what must have been the master bedroom.

She smiled suddenly. "Well..."

Zach smiled back. "Well...?"

Seconds later, he was taking her into his arms, and it was the most natural, most right thing he'd ever done. He kissed her once, and then he kissed her again, and then he deepened the kiss until the heat of it melted away the last rational thought still left in his head.



He began inching his way into the bedroom, but Beth was making him dizzy, with the way she was kissing him back.

Finally peeking at the room through the corner of his eye, he could see the huge four-poster bed, and for a moment, he broke away from their kiss. "You sure it's *big enough*?"

Beth laughed, staring over at the bed. "What can I say? I got a deal at an auction. Besides, this is a *huge* room, and it needed a big bed."

Zach growled, "Especially with everything I've got in mind to do with you *in it*."

And then he gave her a wicked smile.

Beth's eyes went wide. But then she grinned and led him over to the bed.

When Zach reached over and began tugging at her t-shirt, she lifted her arms so that he could pull it off over her head. He laid his hands over her shoulders, as his tongue ran down the silky soft skin of her cheek, to the underside of her neck, until it reached the deep soft hollow of her throat.

Gently, he pulled the straps of the lacy bra that she wore down over her shoulders while he continued to nuzzle her neck. After unfastening the bra, he let it slip and puddle to the ground.

He gazed over her body with tenderness. "You're so lovely, Beth. I thought so the minute I saw you," he said softly. In fact, he found her body even more beautiful than he'd imagined, studying her soft curves.

She grinned back at him wryly. "When I met you, the first thing that I thought was *man, that guy's so sexy*."

Zach began laughing.

Beth grimaced. "And *way* too young for me to be feeling the way that I was feeling about you."

"There you go again, worrying about something that doesn't even matter," he said softly, shoving her gently on top of the bed. "You *know* that we had an instant connection."

"Take off your shirt, Zach," she said softly.

Hesitating for a moment, he pulled his shirt off over his head, and settled down beside her in the bed.

The tips of her fingers ran over his chest and scars.

"I was getting such mixed signals from you," she said in an unsteady voice.

And then she did something he wasn't prepared for. She ran her lips over his face and down from his shoulder to his chest and began tending each and every one of his wounds.

Closing his eyes, Zach nearly began to cry, because the moment was so emotional that it hurt.

But when she began to unfasten his jeans, he stood up from the bed and stripped them off himself.

"Later," he whispered softly. "Now, it's my turn to take care of you."

Reaching down, he slowly unzipped her jeans, and helped her slip them off.

Beth's breasts were full and firm, and her body was, well...*unbelievable* was the only word he could think of to describe it. She looked so lovely with that white-blond hair of hers spread out on the pillow. And those beautiful blue eyes? Somehow, he couldn't manage to get over the fact that the heated desire burning within them was for *him*.

He bent over her. His tongue ran down over her cheek, to the underside of her neck. And then he moved his mouth down further to the nipple of her breast, before moving over to the other. He felt the pounding of her heart as her fingers slid into his hair. Eventually, when his mouth moved down further still, Beth began to moan as her hands clung to his shoulders.

Her body peaked and broke into tight convulsions, and Zach came into her with a deep hard thrust that carried him immediately over the edge. Buried inside of her, deep and deeper still, he felt fulfilment, even as he hungered for more.

He rode her and filled her, watching as he pushed her step by step closer to the edge. Without breaking their rhythm, he shifted his hips.

And then they fell, hearts thundering, senses surging.

Their ragged breathing filled the air, and a small smile curved the corner of Beth's mouth.

Zach kissed her softly and tucked her against him, thinking that he'd be perfectly happy laying still like this with Beth for the rest of his life.

Although the words remained unspoken, Zach knew that Beth was thinking exactly what he was. Mere words would never come close to describing what they'd found together.

• • • •

DAWN'S LIGHT WAS FILTERING through the room, when Zach turned to her and propped his head up on the palm of his hand.

He cleared his throat. "I don't have anything to worry about with this ex-boyfriend of yours, do I?"

Beth's mouth dropped open.

And then it finally closed. "This sure is a small town." She shook her head dazedly. "Yes, I invited him here when I was still dating him last fall. But when I realized that I actually didn't want him moving here with me, I never bothered to clarify it, because I didn't want to hurt his feelings." She hesitated. "If I ever in a million years would have known he'd actually show up here expecting our relationship to resume, I would have definitely made a point of letting him down easily before I left Bloomington." Beth grimaced. "But he didn't *really* want to resume our relationship."

Zach lifted his brow.

She gave him a wry smile. "*He lost his house*. He got behind on his payments once he was laid off. He worked with me at the car plant, you know. That's how we met. We got a great compensation package, too. He must have been even more in debt than I realized when we were dating."

When Zach began laughing, she sat up and grabbed her pillow.

Zach murmured, "Alright, put down the weapon. I'll quit laughing. But let me guess what happened next. When you said no, he wanted to move into your house in Bloomington?"

Beth started. "How did you guess?"

Zach grimaced. "Well, there was this girl I was dating..." He laughed when Beth picked up the pillow again. "But we really don't need to get into that."

Beth stuck out her tongue at him. "The good news is, my house has finally sold."

"Cool. So, what're we going to do with that boyfriend of yours?"

This time, she did whack him over the head with the pillow before she grinned. "He's moving in with his mother."

Zach gave her a slow smile that transformed him completely.

Beth blinked. She realized it was the first time she'd ever really seen him smile like that, boyish and carefree.

And it made him look ten years younger.

That's when her own insecurities began kicking in again.

Zach must have sensed her change in mood, because he was taking her reaction personally. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You're not...? He's not...?"

"Oh, no. Nothing happened between us when he was here." She hesitated, practically in tears. "Nothing that I ever had with Jim would even come close to what I have with *you*, Zach." She hesitated. "It's just that, well...I'm still *older* than you."

Zach blinked. *“Is that all you’re worried about?”* And then he started giving her that slow sexy smile again. “I’m not really sure how to say this, so I’m just going to come right out with it. Don’t you know that I’ve been in love with you from the moment we met?”

“Then you’re not allowed to smile at anyone else like that,” she said crossly. “You look like a teenager when you do it!”

Zach barked out a laugh. “You ought to see what I look like without a beard.”

Beth grimaced.

Zach sighed exaggeratedly. “I can’t believe I fell for a cougar.”

Beth snorted and began laughing unwillingly.

He snickered. “Don’t worry, babe. We’ll get through it.”

Zach’s gaze became heated as he pulled her into his arms, patting her on the back. But then, he hesitated, whispering into her ear. “What about you, Beth? Have you got anything you want to tell me?”

*“Of course I love you, Zach,”* she answered softly.



It was the end of June, and Zach and Beth strolled slowly along the beach at Dragonfly Pointe, trailing behind Kyle and Emily. Kyle had taken off his shoes and was running in and out of the shallow water on the edge of the beach, while Emily watched over him, occasionally belting out a long haunting howl.

Zach shook his head good-naturedly and began to laugh. “I sure wish that I could break Em out of that habit.”

“*Don’t you dare!*” Beth grinned. “What if Emily hadn’t been there that day, when Kyle hopped into the pool at Luke and Kelly’s?”

Zach’s expression suddenly turned serious as he stared at Beth. “Not to mention a few other things that probably wouldn’t have happened either, like *us*?”

“No kidding,” Beth answered, as she fingered the pendant she was wearing around her neck. “This *was* from you, wasn’t it?”

Zach had his hands stuffed into his front jean pockets, when he looked her over grimly and muttered, “Don’t tell me you’ve gotta *another* boyfriend hanging around somewhere that I’m going to have to worry about?”

Beth blinked, and suddenly laughed, and Zach began laughing along with her as they continued walking along the edge of the water.

Zach was so easygoing these days. It was great to see the real man behind the scars, and Beth was falling a little more in love with him every day. Even though he’d had another skin graft procedure, he’d decided to spread the operations a little bit further apart because of the exercise factor. It was difficult keeping in shape if he was constantly laid up for weeks afterwards.

And it might’ve had a *little* to do with the fact that it was problematic for them to make love, not only because of the positioning of the grafts, but because of the harvesting of Zach’s skin to be used for the grafting...from some *very* inconvenient areas.

And Zach’s other scars? Today, he was wearing a t-shirt. Although the scars along the right side of his neck were clearly visible, he wasn’t nearly as concerned about them anymore.

Abruptly, Zach halted, staring deeply into her eyes. “I think that we’d better get married, Beth.”

Beth knew that her eyes were wide as she gazed into Zach’s. Even though Zach was pretending to be casual when he stated what was obviously a question, she saw right away that he was completely on edge. She felt such a deep outpouring of love for him right at that moment, she almost began to cry.

“Okay,” she answered quickly, and grinned. “Since we’re already living together anyway.”

Zach had explained everything that had been happening before they’d met, and Beth was not going to let it interfere with their future. Although he was still deeply worried about the trouble in New Orleans following him here to Crystal Rock, Zach had moved in with her and Kyle only a few weeks after Mother’s Day. Besides being able to keep a closer eye on all of them in case problems arose, it was silly for him to live next door, when they spent nearly every free moment together anyway. Everything between them just felt so *right*.

His stance immediately relaxed. “It’ll be a heck of a lot easier for you and Kyle with me around to help you out.”

The three of them settled into a routine during the next month. They made regular trips to the beach since Kyle loved swimming so much and toured the surrounding parks and did a little traveling to see some of the sites.

Zach was seeing a shrink regularly, but sometimes he had awful nightmares. He reassured her that it wasn't happening nearly as much as it had in New Orleans, and according to the doctor, he could very well continue having them for the rest of his life.

But Zach told Beth he had a feeling that it was up to him to find a way to resolve what he was seeing in his nightmares, and if they continued as vividly as they had, he might consider seeing a hypnotist, even though he didn't really believe in that kind of stuff.

It was an ideal existence and Beth couldn't have been happier, until one day in mid-July when Zach seemed withdrawn, obviously worried about something. After a brief hello when he walked inside the house, he headed down the staircase into the basement with Kyle.

With the help of Luke Bryant and the wounded warrior home's physical therapist Steve Raynor, Beth had surprised Zach with his own therapy space and specialized workout equipment as a Father's Day gift.

To say Zach had been surprised was an understatement. There'd been tears in his eyes when Beth and Kyle led Zach downstairs.

But Zach wasn't eager to work out like he usually was after coming home from work. When Beth followed him down the staircase, he barely noticed, as he sat in his recliner which was set up in their family room with his big screen TV. Kyle was watching a movie in his play space on the other side of the room with Em laying beside him on the couch.

"How about we all go for a walk and you can tell me what's wrong?" Beth suggested, sitting across from him on the couch.

He gave her a quick smile. "You know me that well already, do you?"

She smiled wryly.

"Okay," he said. "You're right. I do have something I need to discuss with you. I'll grab a bottle of water and wait for Kyle to have a snack and finish watching his movie."

Beth stood back up. "Alright. I'll be upstairs, having another cup of coffee."

Thirty minutes later, they were walking down the staircase leading to the trail that wrapped around the lake.

"It's my parents, Beth. They'd like to meet you and Kyle," he murmured, when they finally began strolling along the trail. Kyle was giggling and skipping ahead of them with his arms in the air while Em scrambled along beside him.

Beth felt deflated. "And you don't want me to meet them?"

Zach halted. "*What? Where did you get that idea?*"

Beth pursed her lips as Zach cupped her chin, staring into her eyes.

"Let me start again." He heaved a sigh. "They want us to come to New Orleans, and I'm scared to death about bringing you and Kyle down there with me after everything that's happened. Since the episode with the tree, nothing's happened here in Crystal Rock or at our home in New Orleans, although when my cousin Marc called me the other day, he told me about some personal information he'd discovered hidden in the house, which he wanted to show me. But I have this terrible feeling that if we all go down there together, I'm just inviting trouble."

"Well, you're just going to have to deal with it, because we're definitely all going." Beth kissed him, and then smiled serenely. "We can't be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives, Zach. If there's a way to resolve this situation, we need to find it."

"Alright. I'll be coming up with a few safeguards regarding your security, then." Zach smiled. "Like I've said a million times before, you're something else, Beth."

"Actions speak louder than words," she murmured, grinning slyly.

And then he kissed her, like he was never going to stop.





On the first day of August, they were on their way to New Orleans by private plane. They hadn't considered the fact that Kyle had never flown before, and rather than letting them fly commercial, Luke had explained the situation to his boss, Jake Loughlin, who was planning on installing adaptive equipment for Luke's prosthetic. Once Luke was recertified he would eventually be able to pilot for him. Jake had offered the use of his private plane and pilot, since Jake and his wife had nothing currently going on.

Beth brought along several toys for Kyle, and he would also be able to watch movies once they were in the air.

Although the takeoff definitely scared him, Kyle seemed to enjoy the flight, and was especially fascinated with the scenery looking down through the window. Thankfully, they'd been able to bring Emily along, because Zach felt much more at ease knowing that Emily, as usual, would be sticking with Kyle like glue during their visit.

When they disembarked from the plane at the airport, Marc was waiting for them inside with a smile on his face.

Zach smiled widely when Marc approached and pulled him into his arms for a big bear hug before turning and making introductions.

"Marc, I'd like you to meet Beth. And this is our Kyle. Emily should be here shortly. Since she had to travel in her crate, they'll be rolling her in with the luggage."

Marc grinned. "Hi, Beth. I've sure heard a lot about you."

Smiling, she reached out a hand. "It's nice to meet you too, Marc."

"Eh, we're going to be cousins soon," Marc said, tugging her hand and pulling her into his arms.

After seeing his mom being hugged, Kyle decided he should have one too, and Marc laughed when he wrapped his arms around Kyle, patting him on the back with obvious reassurance. "And I've sure heard a heck a lot about you too, Kyle, including the fact that if it hadn't been for you, my cousin probably wouldn't be engaged to your mom."

Zach was taken aback, because there was a strange clarity in Kyle's eyes when he began to laugh.

• • • •

STANDING NEAR THE FRONT door, Beth nudged Zach in the ribs after Marc had circled around the driveway to drop them off so they could unload their luggage.

"You never mentioned your family was this well off," she said. "You lived in a fricking mansion, Zach."

Grinning, Zach shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Not a bit," Beth murmured. "Although it might be a little overwhelming staying here."

After grabbing the last bag from the pickup bed, Marc opened the back door for Kyle, who looked around the property with obvious curiosity when he stepped outside hanging onto Emily's leash.

Barking a short "woof," Emily scrambled out from the truck with Marc's assistance.

Smiling widely, Marc murmured, "Let's take your stuff upstairs to the bedroom first, Kyle, and then I'll be happy to show you around."

Zach said, "I see you've had some landscaping done this year, Marc. The place is beginning to look a little like I remember it did as a kid."

Marc grinned. "I've actually been doing most of this myself. Since Denise and I split up and she moved away, I've taken up a few more hobbies. Mom was never into flowers, but I'm kind of enjoying learning about them myself."

As they walked inside the front door, the scent of fresh flowers filled the air. Zach glanced into the living room, where the furniture had been rearranged and some new pieces had been added.

"Looking good," Zach murmured, turning to Marc who was halfway up the staircase with some of their luggage.

Marc paused. "We've got both sets of parents visiting, so I finished remodeling the office and living room because there will be some hired help and caterers going in and out during the week. School starts soon and I'll be teaching a new class, so I'll be working from the library for a while since everyone will probably congregate in the kitchen."

"I didn't realize you and Denise called it quits," Zach said, picking up one of Beth's bags.

"It was mutual," Marc answered. "We still keep in touch, because we work better as friends."

Zach nodded his understanding. Marc just hadn't met the right person yet.

"You can go ahead and follow Marc, Kyle," Beth said, picking up Kyle's luggage. "I think you can let go of Emily's leash so she can look around?"

"Yep, that's fine Kyle," Zach murmured. "It will be hard for Em running up and down the stairs. Why don't we let her find the way into the kitchen since it's straight down the hallway, and we'll unpack her food as soon as we come back downstairs?"

"I already laid a bowl of water on the floor for her before I left," Marc said. "I'm sure she'll find it."

Marc had even considered Kyle, putting him in the room next to theirs. It was much smaller than theirs, since Marc had borrowed some space to create Zach's new bathroom, but since it had an attached bathroom and shower, it would work ideally for Kyle and Em.

"This is so cute," Beth murmured, walking into the room and laying down Kyle's bag on the full-size bed. "This room is still as big as his room at home, which is a pretty good size."

"This is great Marc." Zach punched Marc in the shoulder, noticing the dog bed in the corner. "Geez, you thought of everything. Look Kyle, there's even a place for Em to sleep."

Kyle came inside, laying down his basket of toys as his eyes went wide. There were shelves lining the walls on each side of the fireplace filled with kids' books and a small selection of toys. The décor was simple, with a couple of small recliners which had been placed on each side of the fireplace, and the curtain and comforter were patterned with navy blues and white stripes.

"Don't worry about the fireplace, the logs in there are electric, because I thought it would be nice to have a night light for Kyle since he's sleeping in a strange place."

Beth walked up to Marc, kissing him on the cheek. "Thank you so much."

Marc grinned. "I'm just trying to make it as easy as possible for you guys to get here more often and visit. Kyle, this room will always belong to you."

Zach laughed as Kyle began pacing the room with his hands in the air. After testing one of the chairs with obvious approval, he stood up, pacing the room once more.

As Marc walked back into the hallway, Beth murmured, "Kyle? Put your clothes in the drawers. Okay? Zach and I are going to go put our things in our room."

Kyle moved over to the bed, opening his bag and dumping his clothes on top.

Grinning as she followed Marc, Beth murmured, "He'll get there eventually."

AN HOUR LATER, THEY were all sitting downstairs in the kitchen eating a huge assortment of pizza, chicken wings and ribs which they'd had delivered from a local take out joint.

The rest of the family would be arriving the following day, and Marc's parents would fly into the airport from California an hour before Zach's, so they had already arranged their own transportation, an SUV rental they would use during the next two weeks.

It was after dinner when Marc, Zach and Beth sat drinking coffee that Marc's expression suddenly transformed as he frowned.

Resting his coffee on the table, Marc turned his palms up, looking at Zach. "Let me show you the restorations I've done in the library. Beth and Kyle? Why don't the two of you come along too?"

When Zach stood up, following Marc as he walked through the kitchen, Beth looked at Kyle, picking up her coffee from the kitchen table. "Come on, Kyle. Let's go see more of the house."

Grabbing the Lego mobile he'd been putting together and pulling apart, Kyle followed behind Beth with Emily shuffling closely behind.

Distracted by the beauty of the room lined with books and its massive fireplace, Beth was surprised when Marc's expression suddenly turned grim when he walked into the library.

After everyone was inside, Marc tugged the wide sliding doors closed, looking at Zach. "The cameras have been disconnected in here. That's why I decided to do the major renovations now rather than later, so that there would be a plausible reason as to why they were no longer working. I wanted us to have somewhere we could talk inside the house without being monitored. Plus, I hired an investigator to dig up some info about the devices themselves once they were disconnected. It seems they have serial numbers, and they might have been here for a while."

"Damn it, Marc. You didn't tell me about any of this," Zach muttered.

"I was so happy you were finally moving on with your life," Marc admitted, heaving a sigh. "But now things have changed. That's why Uncle Niall and Aunt Celine are on their way here. Your parents have some explaining to do."

"Why?" Zach growled. "What have you discovered?"

"A lot of nooks and crannies in this room for one. I'm sure I haven't even come across everything," Marc answered, moving toward the fireplace. "Once the first secret panel was discovered by the workmen, we pulled all the bookshelves away from the walls and made it look like we were doing demolition beforehand, and then I had Jeff disconnect the cameras after knocking down the one wall that did need replacing because of water damage."

Marc laid his hand on the top of the mantle, and Beth heard a click as one of the panels within the fireplace surround popped out, revealing a long narrow space stacked with paperwork and albums.

"Your dad had to have known this space was here," Marc murmured, pulling out an album from inside and handing it over to Zach. "Besides a lot of bookkeeping records for the house, these are clippings from the nineteen eighties, when you were about five or six years old."

Sitting down in a chair and opening the album, Zach began thumbing through the pages.

And then his eyes went wide, looking at Marc. "There were kids being kidnapped from New Orleans when I was young?"

"I did some research," Marc answered. "Apparently, there was a human trafficking ring going strong in the area."

Beth approached Zach, looking over his shoulder, and as Zach continued thumbing through the pages, Beth noticed the last few newspaper clippings were about a young boy, supposedly rescued after being taken. No names were mentioned, but the background of the featured picture looked

vaguely familiar. She and Zach had taken a walk to the edge of the property overlooking the Gulf before dinner had arrived earlier tonight.

“That’s our beach down below,” Zach growled.

Marc murmured, “I’m not one hundred percent sure, of course, without talking with your parents.”

“Oh, Zach. *That explains your confusion and nightmares.*” Beth said, before covering her mouth in shock.

“Yes. Everything’s beginning to make sense now,” Zach said grimly. “*I think I was kidnapped.*”



Zach felt surprisingly lighthearted during the remainder of the evening. It was like a dark cloud had drifted past and now he was finally seeing the light.

Marc had another surprise for Kyle. A keyboard had been set up in the living room, and while Kyle fiddled with making music, Zach and Marc had a few beers and Beth sipped on wine.

When they finally decided to make it an early night, Marc and Zach decided they would wait a day or two to confront Zach's parents. After all, they thought they were flying in specifically to meet Beth, their son's new fiancé, along with her son.

After telling her she was free to raid the guest rooms on the upper floors, Beth had already added some finishing touches to Zach's room, including a mirror, since all he had inside was the bed, one dresser and a single high back chair. After painting it a deep blue-green turquoise last year, which Beth said complimented the mahogany woodwork in the room perfectly, Zach had decided he would purchase new furnishings for the room once he returned.

"This is such a beautiful house, Zach. And so well kept for as old as it is," Beth murmured, once they were ready for sleep.

Kyle had been exhausted, and had gone willingly to bed with Em, who had laid in the dog bed for the time it took Kyle to brush his teeth and put on his pajamas. As soon as he'd laid on the bed, Em had hopped on top, burrowing into the covers beside him.

"Since I pulled out all my old furniture and painted, thankfully, I feel like I'm sleeping somewhere else," Zach admitted. "I used to have such terrible nightmares, and always thought I was hearing things in the wall. I even woke up a few times and thought someone was here in the room with me."

"I hate to say this," Beth murmured. "But maybe there was? Someone came inside and went through your boxes, after all."

Zach sprang up in the bed. "I hadn't even thought of that. I'm still trying to process what we learned about the kidnappings."

"I hate to say this, but there's another reason to be worried, Zach. Didn't it say in the paper that whoever had taken the boy had been shot by the person who rescued him?"

"Yes, it did. I poured over those clippings. That's probably why I keep having nightmares about someone being killed."

Beth sighed heavily. "If someone was here in your room last year? Maybe the kidnapper is still alive?"

Zach groaned. "That makes a lot of sense."

"And I know Marc said the kidnappings stopped, but maybe they just stopped around here. Maybe who was doing it simply moved their operation?"

"Geez, Beth. That's pretty darn analytical, and it makes perfect sense."

"I read a lot of mysteries," Beth murmured. "I have an idea."

"What's that?" Zach asked, feeling overwhelmed.

"Let's do something to get our minds off of this for a while? Especially since there's nothing we can do about it right now."

Turning to look at Beth, he grinned. "What have you got in mind?"

"You'll see," she muttered, sliding onto his lap.

Zach laughed, wrapping his arms around her.

*HE WAS BEING PULLED by his hand through a cave in a dark tunnel, when a woman appeared.*

*“Take him back,” she yelled. “I can’t believe what you’ve done. There’s just too much chance we’ll be found, and it’ll ruin the whole operation.”*

*Zach could hear voices behind him, and one of them sounded like his dad.*

*A shot rang out...*

*And the woman’s face was gone.*

Zach awoke suddenly, emitting a loud piercing scream.

“Zach,” Beth murmured. “Zach. It’s me, Beth. You’re shaking so badly. *Are you alright?*”

Zach dropped his face into his hands, hearing the words of his shrink. “*Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.*”

Inhaling one more deep breath, he pulled Beth into his arms.

“I’m fine,” he murmured. “I just remembered more than I ever have about the shooting. And for sure, I was kidnapped.”

“Did you remember enough to identify the kidnapper?”

“Not quite, but I know that the woman who was blamed for it was actually part of the operation, but she wasn’t working on her own.”

Beth continued to keep her arms wrapped around him, and it was the most comforting feeling in the world.

“I’m so glad I found you, Beth,” he murmured.

“The feeling is definitely mutual, Zach,” she whispered.





Zach's parents hadn't even made it into the door, when his mother turned to Beth, asking, "So, when are you two getting married?"

Zach blinked. "Geez, Mom. I only asked her to marry me a couple weeks ago."

But he was trying to get over the initial shock of his mother accepting Beth as quickly as she had. She must have really liked her, because she'd never been too keen about the girls he'd introduced her to in the past.

Of course, Zach had never proposed to anyone either.

Zach noticed Beth was looking dazed, but she was smiling widely.

"You and my mom would get along great, Mrs. Logan," Beth mumbled. "That's the first thing she asked when I told her Zach and I were engaged. *And she hasn't even met him yet.*"

Everyone laughed.

Zach looked at Beth. "You never told me about that, but we did talk a little with facetime on the computer, and I had a few words with your dad, too," Zach murmured, smiling. "For sure, you two would get along, Mom."

"That's good to hear," Zach's mom answered. "And please call me Celine, Beth."

Emily suddenly came scrambling through the hallway to acknowledge the newcomers, halting as Kyle approached from behind.

Emily cocked her head. "*Woof.*"

"Hi, Emily. Nice to meet you." Zach's dad came walking into the house with some luggage and smiled. "Beth? I go by Niall."

Beth smiled. "Alright, Niall."

Zach's mom turned to Kyle and smiled as he approached. "And you must be Kyle?"

Kyle walked up to Zach's mom, wrapping his arms around her loosely.

Zach noticed his mom had tears in her eyes when she said, "My, you're a handsome young man."

Kyle laughed as she patted him on the back.



THE CATERERS WERE CLOSE friends of Marc's who owned a restaurant in town, and even though everyone had been in and out of the kitchen most of the day, Melanie and Kevin didn't have a problem with it at all as they put together an assortment of snacks, appetizers and side dishes. Kyle sat at the island several times just watching them with fascination.

Everyone sat outside in the screened in porch during most of the afternoon, where they'd be grilling steaks later on that evening in the new outdoor kitchen Marc had decided to add at the end of last summer.

The pathway leading to the overlook was even lined with flowers now, and Marc had obviously hired someone to take care of the grounds regularly.

As Kyle raced around the yard, Emily ran after him, ears flying when she halted and howled after discovering his hiding place. Aunt Katie and Uncle Bill laughed especially hard at some of their antics.

They were all having such a great time, having a few drinks and sitting outside, enjoying the breeze coming in from across the Gulf. Zach would hate the confrontation he was going to be forced to have with his father.

But it could wait until tomorrow.

“I hope you two are planning on having more kids?” Zach’s mom asked Beth.

In the process of slugging down some beer, Zach suddenly spit it out, wiping his mouth with a napkin Marc had magically produced.

“You alright?” he asked softly, grinning. “You ought to see the look on your face.”

“The question is, is Beth alright?” Zach murmured.

Beth was definitely looking taken aback when she answered, “Well, I am a little bit older than Zach, you know.”

Zach smiled widely when his mother’s jaw dropped.

Finally, his mom spoke. “You sure don’t look it.”

“Thank you,” Beth answered.

His mom suddenly looked crestfallen. “Then you probably won’t have any?”

“*Mom,*” Zach growled.

Suddenly, Beth started laughing.

Hard.

Beth’s laugh was infectious, and everyone couldn’t help but join in. Even Kyle.

“Well, Zach and I haven’t even had a chance to discuss it,” Beth finally answered, looking at Zach. “But I’m willing to try if he is.”

His family fell in love with her at that moment, Zach could tell.

And if he wasn’t already head over heels in love with Beth yet, he sure would have been now.



Beth loved Zach's family. They were warm and caring without even an iota of snobbery involved, which she'd been concerned about after realizing how wealthy they were. Her first husband's parents had been just the opposite of Celine and Niall, and they'd ignored Kyle as if he didn't exist, blaming his issues with autism on *her* side of the family, as if his problems were totally dependent on genetics.

Zach had another nightmare, but it was basically the same as it had been the night before, and he hadn't recalled anything other than what he'd already remembered.

Except for Em, everyone was going out for lunch today and to take a short tour of town, which Beth was sure they were doing for her benefit since she'd never been here before. It was off season, so Beth, Celine and Aunt Kate did a little shopping while the men had a couple beers at one of the more colorful restaurants where they'd eaten lunch. There was entertainment, a small trio of jazz musicians had played and sung, and Kyle had sat watching in fascination. In fact, Beth couldn't believe how well he'd been behaving. But it might have had something to do with the fact that Kyle rarely got to do these things, and everything was new and exciting.

When they arrived home, everyone was a little sleepy, so they sat outside again on the porch for a while. Eventually, Zach's dad went off to make some calls for work while Zach's Uncle Bill went upstairs to their room to take a nap.

Celeste and Aunt Kate decided to check on the progress in the kitchen. Later on, they were apparently having guests for an open house dinner and the caterers were back today, finishing their preparations, and supervising the employees who would be here to serve the food and drinks tonight. Many of Marc's friends would be here along with some of the neighbors.

Beth was sitting alone in a rocking chair nearly dozing off, when she heard some unusual activity coming from Kyle's keyboard set up in the living room.

Standing and walking into the house, Beth murmured, "What the...?"

When she arrived in the living room, Zach was sitting beside Kyle watching as he skillfully combined notes to play one of the jazzy renditions they'd heard earlier today in the bar.

Both Aunt Kate and Celeste were standing nearby, open-mouthed.

Finally, Celeste murmured, "I've never in my life seen anything as amazing as that."

"I agree," Aunt Kate said, looking dazed.

Beth was speechless for a moment herself. This talent Kyle had seemed to be transforming into something wonderful. But how in the world could she channel something like that?

As Kyle continued to play, Celeste approached Beth. "Beth? How long as he been doing this?"

"Just since Christmas," Beth murmured.

Her eyes going wide, Celeste continued, "I used to be a music teacher, and I have never seen anyone with an ear like Kyle's. He's even getting the inflections right, as if he senses the emotions behind the music. I wonder if..."

"What...?" Beth asked.

"Let's just see what the future brings," Celeste answered. "I think he could benefit from specialized training. He obviously understands everything going on around him better than we think." Reaching out, she squeezed Beth's hand. "We'll talk about this more at the end of the week."

"Alright," Beth answered, catching Zach's eye.

He was looking muddled, just like she was.



UNTIL LIEUTENANT COLONEL Jackson walked inside through the front door, veering straight towards Zach and his dad, Zach had been enjoying himself immensely at the open house later that night. Noticing a slightly familiar younger man following Colonel Jackson inside, Zach frowned, puzzled. He was probably about Marc's age, but *where* had Zach seen the man before?

Zach turned back to his dad, who was greeting the Colonel.

"Ed," Dad said. "Good to see you again."

"Same here," the Colonel answered, noticeably disregarding a salute, along with not addressing him as sir.

Zach guessed it was something Dad had accepted years ago since they were friends.

Dad asked the Colonel, "Was the mission successful?"

"Eventually," he murmured. "Four months was too damn long."

"I'll say," Dad answered. "Help yourself to food and drinks. I hope we'll be seeing you during our stay?"

"I'm sure you will," Colonel Jackson murmured, sounding rather odd. "Nice spread. Guess I'll help myself to something to eat."

"Good," Dad answered. "Talk with you later."

The Colonel nodded, turning to Zach. "Zachary."

"Sir," Zach murmured, saluting.

Zach and his Dad watched as the Colonel walked away.

"Dad?" Zach said softly.

"Son?"

Zach heaved a sigh. "We need to talk. Tonight, after everyone's gone."

Strangely, his father looked resigned.

"Okay. Let's meet in the library," Dad said.

"I think that everyone, including Uncle Bill, Aunt Kate and Marc, should be there too."

"Alright, Zach," Dad murmured. "I'd better go mingle."



ZACH COULDN'T BELIEVE it, but Kyle was doing it again. Granted, not as well as he had with the keyboard, but this time Beth was sitting beside him at the grand piano playing a few notes along with Kyle.

"I didn't realize you played too," Zach murmured, sitting on the other side of Kyle.

Beth grinned. "You never asked."

"So, he's had experience on a piano?" Zach asked.

"I had an old out of tune one in our basement which I gave to a friend before we moved. Kyle used to mess with it, but not for very long," Beth admitted.

"Probably because it *was* out of tune," Zach said. "Maybe he couldn't match up the music with the chords, and it bothered him."

Beth grimaced, her eyes going wide. "You might be right."

Music was playing in the background tonight. Marc had set up a Bluetooth speaker and it was loaded with familiar songs. Kyle kept tinkling with the piano keys, until suddenly, he began playing one of the popular songs he must have heard coming from the Bluetooth.

"Alright," Marc murmured, now standing beside them. "This is really freaking me out. I feel like we're hosting a virtuoso, here. Everyone's gone quiet listening."

Beth's eyes met Zach's and they both began laughing.

• • • •

WHEN RYE CARLTON STOPPED by at the end of the evening, he'd mentioned to Marc that he had some important information to share with Zach about the kidnappings in the past. The word had spread in the family about the meeting in the library, so Marc had invited Rye to join them. After discussing a few things with Rye, Marc told Zach that he was sure the information was relevant to what was going on now.

Less than an hour later, Zach and Beth were tucking Kyle in under the covers after Beth had given him a quick bath. Zach had taken Emily outside and carried her upstairs to Kyle's room, laying the dog on the bed next to Kyle, who'd fallen immediately asleep.

The electric fire was burning bright and flickering in the fireplace, when Zach bent over, giving Kyle a quick kiss.

And then he turned to Beth. "Are you ready? I have a feeling Dad knows what we're going to be talking about."

"Hopefully, it will give you closure, Zach," Beth murmured.

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her quickly, and after wrapping his arm over her shoulders, they left Kyle sleeping in the bedroom, heading downstairs.



A few minutes later, the remainder of the guests had left, while the caterers and their team began the cleanup in the living room and kitchen.

“Okay, Zach. Why don’t you start?” Marc asked, after closing the sliding door to keep their conversation private.

Mom and Dad were sitting on one couch while Uncle Bill and Aunt Kate sat across from them on the other. Rye Carlton was situated a little further away on a club chair near the fireplace.

Beth was standing near Zach, who was leaning against the desk beside Marc.

Zach picked up the scrapbook, holding it up in his hand.

Mom gasped when she saw it. “*Zach? Where did you find that?*”

Zach answered, “Marc found it a few months ago Mom, behind a secret panel in the fireplace surround.”

Dad looked at Mom quizzically. “What is it Celine?”

Reaching for his hand, Mom looked into Dad’s eyes. “It’s a scrapbook I made. I needed closure after everything happened, Niall. My doctor suggested I put together a book with all the clippings I’d collected, and I didn’t have the heart to throw it away. I did so much busywork when you were on tour, and I started reading about the kidnappings, and before long, I was saving everything I read.”

Dad turned to Zach. “You’ve discovered what happened?”

Zach murmured, “Marc didn’t know for sure, but he guessed. It was me they were talking about in that last newspaper article in Mom’s scrapbook. I was kidnapped, wasn’t I?”

Dad heaved a sigh. “Yes.”

Zach rubbed a hand over his beard. “*Why didn’t you guys ever tell me about it?* I’ve been having flashbacks and nightmares since I’ve been a kid.”

“It was because of me, Zach,” Mom said, closing her eyes. “We’ve never told you because you almost had a little sister. When it happened, I was five months pregnant, and I lost the baby. Your father and I decided it was best to put it behind us because I couldn’t have any more kids. And we really wanted more. But that’s part of the reason why we moved away.”

Zach walked over to his mom and rubbed her shoulder reassuringly before Dad laid her head on his shoulder.

Rye Carlton cleared his throat. “Let me tell you a little more about what happened back then. If I’d have known you were the little boy who was kidnapped from this area, Zach, I would have told you more last year when you came to visit. I’d already been sent away to school, so I wasn’t living here at the time of your kidnapping.”

“Alright, Rye. Let me explain a few things to my parents first,” Zach murmured, helping Marc grab a couple chairs from the corner of the room and resting them near the fireplace so Beth could sit beside him. “Mom and Dad? Let me tell you what this is all about.”

Zach went on to explain what had happened the previous year, first with the discovery of the packed boxes upstairs in his closet which had been gone through, then about the cameras and surveillance, and next about the strange attempts he’d been sure had been made on his life.

“But, I don’t understand,” Uncle Bill murmured. “What’s it all about?”

“That’s the thing Uncle Bill,” Zach answered. “We just don’t have a clue why. But that’s why I left for Wisconsin last summer. Someone even had a tracking device attached to my new truck.”



Marc stood up. "I have some information to share with you too, Zach, but let's wait to hear what Rye has to say."

Rye looked grim. "Everything that I have to tell you happened after you and your parents moved away, Zach. First, regarding the Gerards? Vanessa Gerard was the girl I was seeing back then. None of you were living here when her father Peter was found murdered in the house next door to mine."

"You know, it's funny how I remember being shocked about the murder, but I never heard anything about who did it or why," Dad muttered. "I knew the Boviers fairly well. They were very sociable until Geneviève married Peter Gerard. And then her parents both died in an accident, which was too convenient to be coincidental. After that, Gen turned into a recluse."

"You're right, Colonel Logan. But this stays between us. Alright?" Rye said, glancing around the room. "There's still an active investigation going on, even though it's been years."

"Not a problem," Zach murmured, feeling puzzled.

"Peter Gerard was not only molesting his daughter, but he was part of a highly active human trafficking ring, that used to operate here in our neighborhood."

Everyone was suddenly looking at each other in stunned silence.

"There are too many details to explain, so I'll give you the short version." Rye heaved a sigh. "Vanessa was forced to marry Sam Danielson, and we finally discovered that Sam's mom had property in northern Michigan on Lake Superior, which was being used for transporting kidnapped trafficking victims. Anyway, Sam's a police chief in Wisconsin and eventually became a member of the special task force investigating this, and he's pretty sure that the trafficking was set up there after they had no choice but to lay low down here."

"But how could it still be operating?" Dad looked puzzled, scratching his head. "We killed the woman who kidnapped Zach."

"Dad? When you say we, *who* do you mean? I've been having this crazy dream about a woman who's pleading with a man to bring me back to my family, because it's just too risky to kidnap me." Zach cleared his throat, adding hoarsely, "And then right in front of me, the person who's holding my hand shoots a gun, and the woman's face is blasted away."

Dad looked horrified, staring at Zach.

"It couldn't be. The man's a hero," Dad finally whispered. "*He said he saved you...and I've been paying him back ever since.*"

"Who, Dad?" But Zach already knew.

"Ed," Dad whispered. "*Ed Jackson.*"



“I’ve always despised that man, Niall,” Celeste muttered. “I can’t believe we’ve been kissing up to him all these years when he’s the one who’s probably been responsible for this trafficking from the start.”

“He has to at least be a big part of it, Mrs. Logan,” Rye murmured. “Sam always suspected someone else living here in the neighborhood was part of the organization. There are underground tunnels and caves that have been hidden for years because of the early smuggling, and someone has to know this area pretty damn well to be able to hide all these victims.”

Colonel Logan let out a series of expletives before continuing, “I just remembered something strange. My father told me once that the Jackson family was related to Rene Breunard, and the family had been trying to purchase the Gerard home because it was originally theirs. Somehow, the family lost it during one of the wars. I can’t remember the details.”

“As far as the tracking devices and video surveillance? They’re supposedly military issued, according to my source,” Marc informed them. “But considering both Dad, Uncle Niall and Zach are Air Force, retired and active, I figured there have been a lot of friends in and out of the house. I think you’ve let a few people stay here when the house was vacant too?”

“Yes, you’re right Marc, we have,” Uncle Bill muttered.

“Jackson has always had access to anything he wants, with no accountability,” Niall growled. “He was in interrogation, so most of his missions have been top secret. I shudder to think about what he’s been getting away with during the years.”

“I think you should make a complete list of everything that’s happened during your life that might be suspect, Zach. Anything that might look like an accident, but you’ve never really been able to explain,” Beth said grimly. “It’s obvious, he’s worried about the fact that you might remember it was him who killed his female coconspirator that night. But there’s still something off about all of this, almost something fanatical, like there’s another motive for everything he’s been doing.”

Marc seemed to agree. “If he wants you dead, why not just shoot you?”

“He’s sure had plenty of opportunities,” Zach admitted.

Niall’s eyes went wide, staring at his son. “Zach?”

Zach blinked. “What is it Dad?”

“How much do you remember about your time in captivity, when all the members of your unit were tortured and killed except you?”

Zach swallowed. “God. You don’t think...?”

“You were drugged, but we could never identify what was used, and Jackson has access to everything, including something called scopolamine, which would explain your complete memory loss.”

Zach continued shaking his head, looking dazed. “But *why*, Dad?”

Rye asked, “Maybe jealousy?”

Dad nodded his head thoughtfully. “Maybe. But what was he trying to accomplish, if he’s responsible for having those men and women killed?”

Rye stood from his chair. “Tell you what? Maybe we should sleep on this for a night and get back together tomorrow and make a few decisions? And Zach? Do what Beth said to do and make a list.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Zach answered, heaving a sigh.

Everyone began standing as Rye slowly made his way into the hallway.

Suddenly, a long loud howl echoed through the air.

Zach's eyes met Beth's in horror.

*"Alex,"* they cried in unison, as Emily continued her long soulful howls.



Zach watched Beth run up the staircase as quickly as she could.

As Zach began to follow, he turned to Marc, who was poised to assist. “Don’t worry about me. Can you please go with Beth, Marc, in case someone is in there with Kyle?”

“*Damn, I wasn’t thinking.* Sure thing, Zach,” Marc answered, reaching the top of the staircase and running through the hallway and into Kyle’s room.

“Kyle? Kyle? *Where are you?*” Beth cried.

When Zach reached Kyle’s bedroom, the first thing he saw was Emily, acting strangely, barking at the fireplace.

And Kyle was definitely not asleep in his bed.

“*Where is he?*” Zach growled.

Zach couldn’t believe what was happening. Had someone actually snatched Kyle from right under their noses?

Beth flung herself into his arms. “*Oh, Zach. Why would someone take Kyle?*”

“I just can’t understand it,” Marc growled, checking inside the closet first and even under the bed. “Where is he? And like you said – *why?*”

Emily continued standing near the fireplace, howling now, with her nose up high in the air.

Before long, Mom, Uncle Bill, Aunt Kate and even Rye Carlton were searching the floor. Soon, they spread themselves out, continuing the search upstairs.

Zach was feeling overwhelmed when Dad walked into the room, whispering in his ear, “Son, we’ve received a ransom demand. You mentioned there were no cameras in the library? See if you can get your mother downstairs to meet with us there. Whoever it is, they’re requesting no one else be involved but you and I, but I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about when he’s requesting *the medallion* as his ransom. Maybe your mother knows, since she was the one comforting you after you were returned to us while I conferred with the police.”

Zach muttered, “Okay. So, say the two of us meet downstairs, and then everyone conveniently walks into the library like they’re looking for us?”

“That’ll work,” Dad answered, checking his watch. “But we need to hurry. We have less than an hour to figure out what this medallion is and meet someone down below who will take us to Kyle, where he’s hidden in one of the caves.”

“Alright, Dad,” Zach murmured, watching him leave the room.

“Mom,” Zach said, getting her attention. She had her arms wrapped around Beth, who had become surprisingly calm, while Marc continued studying the interior of the room.

Poor Emily still hadn’t quit howling.

“Zach?” Mom answered.

Zach showed his palms to Marc, who nodded his head imperceptibly as Zach held his Mom’s gaze.

“I need to go talk with Dad,” Zach announced. “Give me five minutes.”

Zach made his way downstairs, entering the library, where Dad was pacing the floor.

“He’s demanding only you and I deliver this medallion,” Dad growled. “But I can’t help thinking Zach, that he has something else in store for us, and I wonder if Kyle will be safe, even if we do figure out where this medallion is and hand it over.”

“I agree with you completely, Dad. But what else can we do?”

About five minutes later, Mom, Marc and Beth walked into the room.

Beth stood silent, definitely still in shock.

“What is it, Niall?” Mom asked.

Dad promptly handed over the note.

Mom shook her head decisively. “Hold on. I know where it is. Where is that album Marc?”

Marc rushed over to the fireplace, opening the secret compartment and then pulling the scrapbook out from inside.

After he handed it to Mom, she laid it on the desk, pulling a letter opener from inside the top drawer. Opening the album, she very carefully inserted the tip of the opener into the binding of the outer cover. After splitting it apart, she tipped the album and the coin fell onto the desk.

“I wasn’t sure what to do with the thing. Zach held onto it for over a week and then I finally got it away from him. At that time, I thought the case was solved and didn’t bother handing it over to the police, and I thought it would be too traumatic for Zach to hang onto it.”

Marc came over to inspect the medallion.

“*Holy crap,*” he murmured. “I do believe this is a rare Spanish doubloon which is worth thousands of dollars if not *more*. There’ve always been rumors about hidden treasure down in the caves because of the smuggling going on for so long.”

“It’s probably worth more if it’s important enough for him to demand it as ransom,” Zach growled. “I wonder if that was why all my belongings were rummaged through?”

Marc’s eyes went wide. “More than likely.”

Dad looked at his watch again. “We’d better get going, Zach.”

Suddenly, Beth seemed to snap out of her daze, and flung herself into his arms. “Oh, Zach. Please be careful.”

“We will. I swear I’ll get Kyle back, safe and sound,” he murmured, hugging her tightly and then meeting his father’s gaze. “Dad? Bring your Beretta.”

“I was planning on it, Son,” Dad answered grimly.





As they made their way down the trail along the face of the man-made cliffs, Zach realized he hadn't walked down here even once after he'd been kidnapped. He used to love the mystery of it all, imagining himself as a pirate sailing the seven seas.

Once he and Dad reached the narrow beach, a man moved out from the shadows.

"Come with me," he growled.

Stepping inside the cave, the man seemed to know where he was going, following at least six different turnoffs, and halting in the middle of a large open space.

"I'm puzzled. I never even knew this was here," Dad murmured. "And Bill and I did quite a bit of exploring as kids."

Moving further inside, Zach halted as the gravelly surface under his feet began to crumble and fall, causing an echo through the cavern. Zach realized there was a deep dark drop off where he heard water distantly thrashing against the rocks.

"Stop right there," Colonel Jackson murmured, aiming a pistol directly at Zach. "I want the two of you to back up – *now* – and stand against the wall."

They did as he said, and Zach asked, "Where's Kyle?"

Ignoring the question, the Colonel growled, "*Have you got it?*"

"It's in my pants pocket," Zach answered.

Reaching over and continuing to hold the pistol on Zach, the Colonel attached a shackle to Dad's arm.

Zach had failed to notice the hooks and chains attached to steel beams lining the walls. In fact, they lined the entire interior of the cavern. This must have been some kind of holding cell for slaves or maybe trafficking victims, come to think of it. The chains and shackles appeared to be relatively modern, so the original passageways must have been updated and restructured somehow since Dad had been young.

"Get it out," the Colonel snarled. "And do it slowly. Tyler's got a shotgun trained on the two of you, so don't get any ideas. Plus, you'll never see that kid again if you give me trouble."

Zach pulled the medallion out from his pocket, handing it over to the Colonel.

The Colonel sighed with obvious relief, muttering strangely, "I never thought I'd see you again, my lucky charm."

The Colonel's expression had become diabolical. "And now, what I've been waiting to do for years, after plotting my revenge. I've finally got the two of you where I want you."

Continuing to point the pistol at Zach, he motioned with his hand toward the deeper end of the cavern. "I want you there. *Move.*"

When Zach approached the deeper darkened interior of the cavern, his eyes went wide in shock. A huge flat stone was centered toward the end of the room and it was covered in pools of dried blood. Along a ledge rested hundreds of tools of assorted types and sizes Zach recognized as items used for torture, while several more devices hung on the wall.

The Colonel smiled slyly, staring at Zach. "Lay down."



AFTER DISMISSING THE caterers, Marc had taken Beth back upstairs to keep her distracted. Rye and Marc's mom and dad had retreated to the library with Celine and were anxiously awaiting word

of not only Kyle but of Zach and Niall. Marc had told them what was going on after the fact, and Uncle Bill had not been pleased to be left out.

Maybe they could figure out how Kyle had been abducted? Grabbing a bowl of water for Emily first, since she hadn't stopped barking and howling since Kyle had disappeared, they returned to Kyle's room to go through it again.

Let's look at this logically," Marc murmured. "There has to be a secret passageway, Beth. There's no other explanation."

"Emily keeps barking at the fireplace," Beth said.

"Okay. It's been closed up for years, so right there I'm thinking of a possibility." Marc looked down at the floor. "Let me get a flashlight. We keep a couple in the linen closet for emergencies."

Walking from the bedroom and returning a few minutes later, Marc laid on the floor with the flashlight. "It's recently been cleaned and polished. Let me see if there are any marks which could give me a clue."

"Alright," Beth answered, fingering the mantle like Marc had downstairs.

"I definitely see something here on the right," Marc observed.

And standing back up, he began studying the left side of the fireplace first, shining his flashlight where the brick met the wall.

His eyes went wide, glancing at Beth. "*I think I see hinges.*"

"Really?"

Moving over to the right, Marc started flashing the light along the edge of the fireplace.

"Here," he murmured, wedging his finger behind, and flipping down a switch. "I think it's on some kind of wheels."

And when the right side of the fireplace popped out about an inch, Marc opened it wide like a door.

After a sharp yip, Emily went running inside.

"*Emily. No,*" Beth cried.

"*Shoot, shoot, shoot,*" Marc growled, attempting to shine his flashlight into the dark space where Emily had disappeared. "I still hear her running."

Beth moaned, "*We have to go after her.*"

"I'll go," Marc growled.

Beth stomped her foot. "They're *my* family too. You're not going without me."

"Okay," Marc answered, rubbing a hand over his face. "Let's do this sensibly. Hurry up and change out of that dress you have on. I don't know what we'll find, so put on some jeans and a sweatshirt, and I'll do likewise. I'll get my weapon and a stronger lantern from my room upstairs. Alright?"

Pursing her lips, Beth nodded yes.

"*Hurry, Beth.*"

And she did.



Zach felt like he was ready to be sacrificed, laying down on the stone altar. But he knew that the Colonel had something far worse in mind since Zach had noticed the power cord hanging from above. The cavern was well lit where Dad was shackled, and Zach noticed several electric powered lights strung from the irregular stone ceiling.

There was really no chance of rescue, but why invite the inevitable, so Zach did something he did best under duress.

He talked.

Zach asked grimly, "It was a trap in Afghanistan? Wasn't it?"

Like Zach figured, Jackson was going to take the time to gloat.

"And it would have worked, if your dad hadn't called in reinforcements. I needed him to follow instructions and come *alone*."

Dad growled, "So you killed ten men and women, just for some screwed up idea for revenge? You let a band of terrorists take control of them. All except Zach, so you could use him to lure me there. What in the hell did I ever do to you, Ed?"

Zach could see the expression on Dad's face, and he realized that Dad had just remembered something important.

"You and your father are the reason *my* father is dead," Jackson screamed.

Dad answered, "He had to be turned in, Ed. He was molesting little boys. Hell, Ed...he tried to assault *me*. What was my Dad supposed to do – let it go? How did you even know about it?"

The Colonel stayed silent.

Zach answered, "Because your friend Ed was being molested by his own father, Dad. From what Rye Carlton mentioned, it was common practice in their organization to hand out their own children to their friends."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Jackson growled, moving back to his equipment.

Dad asked suddenly, "When did you have all these passageways added and reinforced? None of this was here when we were young."

"Back in the 1960's, Peter Gerard and I hired Robert Moses, who'd planned the overpass and underground highway system for New Orleans. I'd invested in the project, but the feds and idiots responsible for the historic preservation of New Orleans wouldn't let it be finished. I was impressed by the completed reinforced structure underground, which, by the way, is still there, although it's been altered and reinforced."

"What's the importance of the medallion?" Zach asked, not really expecting a reply.

"It's our family's legacy, since Rene Breunard, that we should always control this province," Jackson answered, sounding maniacal.

Turning his head from where he laid shackled on the stone altar, he studied Jackson's face.

*He was completely and irrevocably mad.*

When Jackson held up an electric iron, Zach knew he intended to start inflicting torture by brandishing it into his chest. Zach's capture in Afghanistan had revolved around imposing torture using many of the same techniques, except the burning had been exacted on his back and buttocks instead.

Suddenly, Zach heard a strange noise coming from one of the tunnels. It sounded like a wild animal was approaching, ready to strike.

A moment later, Zach was never as surprised as he was to see his basset hound Emily attacking Colonel Jackson, snarling.

Startled, Jackson dropped the iron, reaching for his pistol and getting off a shot.

Luckily, it missed Emily, but clearly understanding Colonel Jackson intended harm, she sunk her teeth through his pants.

Jackson let off a loud piercing scream as Emily kept going after him, obviously ripping into his skin.

Dad shouted, "*Ed watch out.*"

But Emily refused to quit, and suddenly Zach heard the earth beneath the Colonel crumbling, where he must have reached the edge of the shallow ravine which dropped into the manmade pit that Zach had nearly stepped into when they'd arrived.

The Colonel yelled, "*Stop, noooooooooo...*"

Still snarling, Emily stood watching as the Colonel went over the edge, screaming as he dropped out of sight.

Dad sighed loudly. "Holy crap, I can't believe any of this. There was no possible way to save him."

"Dad," Zach answered grimly. "He dug his own grave. We can't feel sorry about any of this. I wonder how many people he's been trafficking through the years?"

"God, Zach. I'm not sure how we're going to get out of this, but I'm so glad you're okay. You know this area used to be a haven for alligators? I wonder if that manmade pit Ed just fell into is related somehow? You don't suppose...? I know I haven't said it in a while, but I love you, Son."

Zach answered, "Same here, Dad."

"Well, what have we here?" The man who had led them into the cavern had returned.

*Damn it, Zach had forgotten all about him.*

Strangely, Emily had stopped barking, approaching the stranger timidly as the man glanced around, grimacing, obviously realizing what had happened to the Colonel.

Zach couldn't have been more surprised when he patted Emily on the head, murmuring, "Come on. Let's get everyone out of here, where they're safe."

The man unlocked the shackles from Zach first, and then moved over to Dad, doing the same.

"This didn't quite work out the way it was supposed to. I was just waiting for the right opportunity to draw him away from the two of you." The man heaved a sigh. "Hopefully, I haven't wasted years of moving up in the organization to try and get the goods on some of the main players."

Zach blinked, "You're a fed?"

"I am," he answered, holding out his hand. "Tyler Jackson, AFOSI."

After Zach shook Tyler's hand, Dad shook it too.

Tyler continued, "I think part of the reason he wanted that medallion back was for financial security. You wouldn't believe how much that coin is worth. I'm sure he suspected the feds were catching on. He was running low on funds, since the operation was forced to move north and west, into Texas."

Rubbing his wrist, Zach asked, "So, what will happen now?"

"I'll more than likely move up in the organization. This attack the Colonel made on you two was unauthorized."

"He was going mad, wasn't he?" Dad asked.

"Worse," Tyler answered. "He had no moral compass or compassion. He could be classified as a high functioning sociopath."

Just then, Emily began howling again.

Zach grimaced, asking, "How's Kyle?"

Motioning for them to follow, Tyler gave them a fleeting smile. "Good. I think he thinks it's all some big adventure."

As Dad followed with Zach, looking a little dazed, something suddenly occurred to Zach. "Did you say your name was Tyler *Jackson*?"

For a moment, Zach saw the vulnerability in Tyler's eyes before he turned away and kept walking. "Yes. The Colonel was my father."

Dad looked shocked. "He had kids?"

Tyler sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, more than one."

Emily suddenly emitted a quick woof, running to Kyle when he saw him sitting on a couch, listening to music from an iPod.

Jumping onto the couch, Emily licked Kyle's face until he started giggling.

Bending over him, Zach gave Kyle a kiss on the forehead. "Your mom is probably worried sick, not to mention your Grandma Celine, Uncle Marc, Uncle Bill and Aunt Kate. We'd better get moving Kyle, so they know you're safe."

Kyle stood up with the iPod.

Rubbing Kyle's shoulder, Tyler said quickly, "He can keep it."

"Thanks for taking good care of him," Dad murmured.

"I'd like to stop by tomorrow and tell you a few things to give everyone closure," Tyler said, leading them back toward the cavern. "Plus, it's important for me to keep my cover, because you might still be seeing me around. Maybe like three in the afternoon?"

"That'll work," Zach murmured, as they walked into the cavern.

Suddenly, Beth came running inside the cavern along with Marc.

"*Kyle*. Thank God, you're okay," Beth said, wrapping her arms around him.

Kyle giggled, shoving her away.

When Beth bent over to rub her affectionately, Emily started licking Beth on the face as Beth kissed her back on the nose. "Thank you, Emily, for watching over him for me."

Zach blinked. "Where did you two come from?"

Marc pointed behind him. "There's a secret passageway leading here from Kyle's room."

"Ah, hah," Dad murmured. "That must have been how they captured you when you were a kid too, Zach."

Beth stood up, rushing to Zach. "I can't tell you how happy I am to see that everyone's okay."

"We did have some trouble. But we'll talk about it tomorrow," Zach said. "Beth, Marc, meet Tyler, who helped us out."

Beth said, "Thank you, Tyler."

"Yes, thanks," Marc murmured. "Say, aren't you the Colonel's caretaker who was at the open house?"

"Yes. But my relationship with the Colonel is a long story. I'm going to be stopping by tomorrow," Tyler answered. "It's lighter on the beach, and it might be easier for all of you to walk Kyle back to the house that way." Tyler directed them toward another pathway. "He's scared as hell of the dark."

Marc looked confused. "Where's Jackson?"

"Dead, I'm sure," Zach answered.

“I’ll be checking on him now,” Tyler admitted. “It’s complicated, but there’s a way I can squeeze into the entrance where he would have fallen. There’s very little chance he would have survived though, since the basin is composed of rock.”

“Good luck with that,” Zach answered, grimacing. “We’ll see you tomorrow, or rather later today.”

“At three,” Tyler agreed, sighing heavily.

Zach motioned at his Dad, Beth and Marc. “Come on, everyone. It’s been a long night. Let’s try and get some rest.”

Marc still had his jaw dropped down in disbelief as they made their way from the cavern.

• • • •

“SO, LET ME GET THIS straight,” Zach murmured, later that day. “All the accidents I was having were non-accidents, and you staged them for the Colonel?”

Tyler nodded his agreement. “Why do you think I left you headroom when I pretended I was trying to run into you last year? I timed it, plus I added the water to your tank, so I knew you’d be coming over the bridge pretty slowly. I simply waited for the tracker to tell me when.”

“And you messed with the brakes of my other truck?”

“Not until it was in Jackson. I simply drained some of the fluid. They must have lied about it needing new brakes, by the way. I knew you’d be coming through the flatlands, and I thought you would be the one driving it.”

Zach scowled. “That was stupid of me to take their word. I didn’t even check under the hood.”

Marc laughed. “It’s not like you weren’t under a lot of stress, because of your injuries.”

“I was feeling sorry for myself,” Zach growled.

And everyone laughed, including Beth.

“The cameras?” Tyler looked at Zach’s dad, grimacing. “Some of them were already here, Colonel Logan, and Jackson simply took advantage of that. Plus, the Air Force had been looking into Jackson’s activities for years, and you were suspect because of your association.”

Niall frowned. “Thank God, I didn’t know that. I would have been chewing everyone’s head off if I’d ever had wind of it.”

Tyler continued, “I’m not sure what happened in Wisconsin? Obviously, you came through it alright. I didn’t know about that until after the fact. He discovered he was being transferred into an interrogation unit in Iraq, and he would be gone for months, so he went up to Wisconsin for about three weeks. I think it took him months to discover where you were, Zach. Whatever you did, it got you off his radar.”

Beth blinked, looking at Zach. “The tree?”

“The tree,” Zach murmured. “There were marks from a chainsaw on both the large pine that fell into the railing and the staircase leading down to the trail. You and Kyle just happened to be walking there when I usually did my workout and jogged along the path.”

“That’s why we were down there, hoping to run into you,” Beth growled. “I was tired of you avoiding me.”

“Well, you did run into me,” Zach answered, grinning. “Luckily, I was there to get you unstuck.”

Zach’s mom was laughing the hardest. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am that Zach found you and Kyle, Beth. I never thought he was going to get married.”

“Or possibly have kids,” Niall murmured, causing Zach to look at him in shock.

“Did you just tell a joke, Dad? You’re not running a temperature or something?”

Dad laughed. "I've always liked the idea of being a grandfather, but since I have Kyle now, I'll be happy with whatever the future brings."

Tyler stood up, wearing what was definitely a sad smile. Beth wondered about his past, and the courage it must have taken to stand against his father.

"There's one more thing I think you have the right to know about Zach, although it needs to stay secret. You can't speak about this to anyone, if I tell you. Alright?"

Zach's eyes met Beth's as they nodded their agreement.

"It's about the airbase in Iraq. The problem with all the occurrences overseas was that I wasn't privileged enough to be let in on his schemes. The insurgent attack which caused all your burns?" Tyler heaved a sigh. "I don't think it was a random event. I'm sure it was planned by my father."

Zach looked shocked.

"Thanks for telling us, Tyler," Niall answered, looking grim.

"I informed my superiors as well. I'm pretty sure he was involved in treasonous activities, and if that was the case, there could be similar setups against our troops that he planned in advance. If he had terrorists working for him, they would expect reciprocation, so there could be trouble if he set any plans in motion with some of the terrorist groups."

Standing, Zach and Beth both escorted Tyler to the back door.

Zach asked, "What's the word about your father being killed?"

"He's simply disappeared," Tyler answered. "I've taken care of the body. And I have the medallion. I guess I'll hang onto that for now and put it somewhere safe, since it wasn't stolen. Who knows what the future's going to bring?"

"You know where to find me if you need my help?"

"I do," Tyler answered, suddenly smiling. "Best of luck to you both."

He turned, following the path.

And then he was gone.





*Two weeks later.*

*Crystal Rock, Wisconsin.*

“I can’t believe your parents sent us a *baby grand piano* as a wedding present,” Beth murmured as she and Zach walked along the Dragonfly Pointe Beach.

Today Kyle had on his swimming trunks and was sitting in the water looking out across the lake, while Emily, who didn’t enjoy swimming, had her nose in the air and was howling at Kyle.

The beach was rather deserted today, since school had begun in the area for all the local kids. Kyle wouldn’t start until the following week, although his routine would remain much the same as it had during the summer, working at the lumberyard with Zach.

“I can’t believe we caved under pressure and picked a date for the wedding,” Zach muttered.

Beth rolled her eyes. “*You* picked the date for the wedding.”

Zach grinned. “Everyone can stay with us for Christmas.”

Beth laughed. “I’m glad most of the rooms are nearly finished. Now I just have to make sure we have enough furnishings for the bedrooms since all of them will probably need to be used.”

“We’ll still have the house next door, since it’s vacant,” Zach murmured.

“At least until after Christmas,” Beth said. “It’s a great idea that you had about eventually making the house available for some of the families of the wounded warrior patients receiving care at the clinic.”

Zach grinned. “*My idea?* Ah, Beth, you’re something else.”

He’d been talking about families of some of the future patients when they’d been eating dinner together one night, and Zach had been trying to figure how they would all be able to be included in the therapy sessions if they had long distances to travel, once the subject had come up at a meeting that day at work. A certain amount of privacy would be needed so that family members could focus on their loved one’s rehabilitation.

Zach grabbed Beth by the hand, and they continued strolling along the beach, keeping an eye on Kyle.

Beth suddenly became serious. “Do you think we have anything to worry about from the Jackson family, since Tyler said there were more kids? What if one of them is as fanatical as his father?”

“I’d like to think Tyler would keep everyone in line. It’s funny how he never told us how many kids there are,” Zach murmured.

“Yes, it is. Or who their mother is,” Beth added.

Zach sighed. “With the way Jackson operated, I’m willing to bet there was more than one, and none of them willing.”

His glance was seemingly thoughtful a few minutes later when he asked, “What about Kyle’s father?”

“How come he’s not in the picture?” She hesitated. “Well, we met in college. I married Greg before I really got to know him well. He passed away nearly ten years ago, by the way.” Beth gave Zach a wry smile. “Let’s just say that he wasn’t very accepting of Kyle and didn’t want to take on the responsibility, so he divorced me.”

Zach raised a brow.

“His family was equally unsupportive. After that, he didn’t think he needed to pay any child support.”

“What an ass.” Zach’s voice was vehement.

Beth shrugged. “You know, he drank too much, he partied too much, he went from job to job after he graduated college.” She rolled her eyes. “He was on his fourth wife when he died, at only thirty-six years old.”

Zach grimaced, looking down at her. “What a guy.”

“He was an overweight wreck when he passed away. It’s weird how sad I felt when I heard about his death from liver failure though.”

They halted, and Zach gazed into her eyes. “You still had a connection with him, Beth, since he was Kyle’s dad. You probably always tried to look for something good in the guy, because there’s so much good in Kyle.”

They both gazed at Kyle, and there were tears in Beth’s eyes when she turned back to look at Zach.

“I never thought it could be possible for me to love you any more than I already do,” she told Zach emotionally.

Kissing her gently and pulling her into his arms, Zach whispered into her ear, “You know, this place is notorious for bringing people together who *should* be together, according to Luke.”

“Dragonfly Pointe? You mean all the tales about everlasting love and new beginnings?” Beth grinned, leaning back in Zach’s arms and looking into his eyes. “I even heard about *those* stories while I was visiting here as a kid.” She hesitated. “I never would have thought back then, that it would take me over forty years to actually fall in love.”

Zach grimaced. “Until I met you Beth, those words had always remained unspoken by me.”

She nodded. “Even though I was *married*, that relationship was pretty much over before it began.” Beth became thoughtful. “Unspoken? Yes, that about sums it up for me, too.”

“I’ve got something for you,” Zach murmured, reaching into his pocket.

Beth’s eyes went wide when Zach opened the box. “*Oh, Zach. What a beautiful ring. Are those blue diamonds?*”

“They sure are. It belonged to my grandmother. My mother wears the one that belonged to my great grandmother,” he said, slipping the ring over Beth’s finger. “When mom handed it over to me when we were visiting New Orleans, I took it as a sign, seeing the dragonfly setting. When we returned here, I had it cleaned and sized for you.”

Beth held out her hand, admiring the ring and blue diamonds, its sterling silver setting shaped from two dragonflies.

Zach looked around at where they were standing on the beach, and grinned. “This spot looks awfully familiar.”

And before Zach could say another word, he was knocked down onto the sand by Kyle, who’d apparently come running along the beach because he’d decided to torpedo Zach again.

Beth covered her mouth in horror. “*Kyle!*”

Emily began to howl when Kyle started giggling.

But Zach just kept laughing harder and harder.

• • • •

**The End**

• • • •

Want to read more from The Wounder Warrior Series?

[Click Here To Get Two Hearts Surrendered](#)



DON'T MISS AN UPDATE from Tamara, Join Her Newsletter for information about new releases as well as free books and available promotional sign ups and giveaways.

[Sign Up Here!](#)



KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured



[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)



WRITING STEAMY YET sweet compassionate stories of fate that are wonderfully romantic, TAMARA FERGUSON is the multi-award winning, #1 international and USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR of the Tales of the Dragonfly Romance Suspense Series, the Kissed By Fate Series, the Two Hearts Wounded Warrior Romance Series, the Daydreams & Dragonflies Sweet Romance Series, and the Tales From Dragonfly Pointe Short Story Series.

Since 2015, she's earned more than 30 awards in the multiple genres of mystery, romantic suspense, short story fiction, novellas, women's fiction, new adult romance and military fiction for her series titles, including 2 Bronze, 2 Silver and Gold Medals, for a total of 8 from Readers' Favorite, and 12 awards from the Independent Authors' Network, including the 2019 OUTSTANDING FICTION NOVELLA WINNER For Two Hearts Under Fire.

A member of the RWA, the Authors' Billboard and the Independent Authors' Book Network, her stories have been included in several #1 bestselling anthologies.

Since she remains a full-time caregiver for an autistic son (along with a bunch of adopted pets!), you can usually find Tammy working at home, where she spends a lot of time not completing her numerous home improvement projects, because she's writing or helping author friends promote their books on twitter.



# CHRIS PATCHELL: IN THE DARK

---

IN THE DARK  
BY CHRIS PATCHELL

**Author's Rating:**



**Language:\*\*\* Sexuality:\*\* Violence:\*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Text Copyright © 2019 Chris Patchell. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior written permission of the author.

First published as an eBook by Chris Patchell on Kindle Press.





**M**arissa Rooney stands in her daughter's empty dorm room, a half-used vial of insulin clutched in her trembling hand. Brooke has been missing for days. Her roommate hasn't seen her since that night in the bar. And if Marissa has Brooke's insulin, it means that Brooke does not.

But Marissa isn't alone in her terror. A phantom from her past is lurking in the shadows, waiting in the night, and holding her family captive...in the dark.



# Prologue

---

The heavy gate groaned shut. After engaging the lock, he pulled the backpack out of his Jeep and slung it over his shoulder. It was a rare fall day in the Pacific Northwest, and he planned to take full advantage of the good weather.

He had work to do.

He walked a quarter of a mile along the fence line and stopped. Then he pulled a “No Trespassing” sign from the pack and propped it against the fence. With a few sure strokes of a hammer, he nailed it to the post. The dull blows echoed in the quiet woods.

Branches and fallen leaves popped and crackled beneath his feet as he worked his way methodically along the ridge, checking the barbed wire fence for gaps. The cinnamon smell of the turning leaves was a sure sign that hunting season would soon begin, and he couldn’t afford to have strangers stumbling onto his property.

He nailed the last sign to the post.

*There. That should keep the bastards out.*

He turned and started down the rugged trail carved into the steep hillside. A couple of hundred feet below, the valley floor glimmered like an emerald in the late-day sun. Three cabins stood in the clearing beside the Tolt River. A half dozen more were scattered along the upper ridge, overlooking Lake Langlois.

The place had been a youth camp once, before the drowning of a teenage girl had destroyed its reputation. Afterward the camp had closed and the cabins had fallen into disrepair.

It was a shame, really. He had fond memories of the place. While his father had spent the summer basking in an alcoholic haze, he’d spent it exploring the woods, far away from his father’s violent mood swings. By any measure it was a win-win.

Dappled sunlight shone through the thick canopy of branches overhead. He loved days like this. Alone in the woods, he felt at peace with the world.

A scream rent the air, shattering the stillness of the afternoon.

It was shrill. Human.

Crows fled the safety of the trees, a torrent of black wings flooding the blue sky. Heart racing, he started to run. The uneven ground slid beneath his boots. Branches slapped at his face, and he ran faster, driven on by her panicked cries.

The valley floor was muddy after the long weeks of rain. The spongy earth slowed his pace as he raced toward the river.

Another scream. Louder.

“Help me. Oh God. Please.”

It was coming from the cabin farthest from the water’s edge.

His boots pounded up the wooden steps. Hinges squawked in protest as he crashed through the door.

The stench hit him hard—stale sweat and human waste. His stomach churned.

At first he could see nothing, his eyes blinded in the dim light. Then her slender form materialized out of the darkness—a slip of a girl, barely more than a hundred pounds. She was standing near the center of the room, her hands bound behind her back. A soiled University of Washington T-shirt hanging from her skinny frame. Pink panties. And nothing else.

The relief on her face froze the instant she spotted him. A small sob escaped her lips. She stepped back, retreating into the shadows.

As if she could hide.

“Now, Kim,” he said. “What was the rule?”

Her jaw worked, but no sound emerged. She took another pitiful step back, her wide eyes brimming with fear.

“What was the rule?”

His voice boomed in the small cabin. She flinched like a beaten dog.

“No calling out,” she mumbled.

“I can’t hear you. What’s the rule?”

“No calling out.”

“No calling out,” he repeated, smiling thinly. “That’s right. You leave me no choice.”

“Please,” she said, voice trembling, tears leaking from her eyes. “I’ll do better, I promise. I promise . . .”

He stepped toward her, his tread echoing on the bare plank floor. She shrank back, trembling, and stumbled over the bucket. Without her hands to stop her, she crashed to the floor.

He stopped. His six-foot frame loomed above her. She averted her gaze, looking anywhere but at him.

*This will not do.*

He hunkered down and gripped her narrow chin, forcing her gaze to meet his.

“Please,” she whispered.

Her mouth trembled.

“Aw, princess,” he said, running his thumb slowly across her swollen bottom lip. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

He reached down and unbuckled his belt.



There was something seriously fucked up about turning a mortuary into a bar, Drew Matthews thought as he walked through the heavy oak doors of the Chapel. While much of the original architecture of the 1920s building remained intact, the interior displayed the tumors of decades of evolving taste. There were a few recent growths, like the U-shaped bar in the center of the former embalming room. Lit up like a runway at Sea-Tac International Airport, it guided him in.

The drink menu read like the King James Bible, with parables about sins and martinis. Arm propped against the bar, he ordered the Bruce Lee, a fast, tawny drink that howled like a banshee with fists of fury. It was named after the famous Seattle martial artist whose embalming had reportedly taken place in this very bar.

But there was nothing dead about the place now. Swarming schools of urban hipsters out for their Saturday-night fix swelled like dividing cells. So many desperate souls crowding the bar, looking for that elusive thing missing from their lives. Attention. Sex. Connection. Drew felt the pulsing need, so palpable he could almost taste it.

Tension rippled across his shoulders, into the base of his brain. If ever there was a night he'd felt like getting good and truly shitfaced, this was it. He knew he couldn't give in to the impulse though. Meeting the friends was a rite of passage he must endure for his relationship with Alicia Wright to progress. And he had every intention of taking their relationship to the next level.

He'd already picked out a sparkly new ring.

A hand ran up his back and he turned. Alicia had dressed well for her starring role. A fitted white blouse hugged her athletic curves, the plunging neckline low enough to reveal a delectable view of her cleavage. A tight black miniskirt rode up her well-toned thighs. In high-heeled boots, she was almost at eye level with Drew. He found the accumulated effect arousing.

Alicia leaned in close. He caught a whiff of her perfume. Dark. Floral. Orchids. Her ruby lips brushed his ear, sending sparks jangling along his taut nerve endings.

"Hey, look who finally decided to show up," she said in a sexy, throaty murmur.

"Sorry, I had to work a little late. Came straight here."

"Well, grab your drink and let's go. Gretchen's waiting."

Drew raised a finger and drained his glass in a long swallow. Alicia raised her eyebrows.

"You okay?"

"I've got some catching up to do."

So what if he was a little nervous? Who wouldn't be? Alicia and her pack of prep-school friends had grown up in a different world. While their nannies had dropped them off at private schools and playdates, he'd watched cancer devour his mother and his father fall to pieces. What could they possibly know about being hungry enough to steal food, or hiding in the woods all night, afraid to come home because your father was a mean drunk? Or being left behind, abandoned by your evil stepmother?

Alicia grasped his hand and tugged him away from the bar. Drew followed her up a narrow staircase to a wide balcony overlooking the main floor. The speakers blared and the upper deck swarmed with life.

He definitely needed another drink.

Alicia threaded her way to the front of the platform, where she stopped. Her back to the railing, she looped an arm around the shoulders of a chubby girl.

“Drew, this is Gretchen Lange. We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“What she means to say is that we’ve been BFFs since third grade,” Gretchen tittered.

Bright-blue eyes sparkled in her doughy white face. A ridiculous mass of strawberry-blond curls bounced and jiggled when she laughed.

Drew stretched out his hand.

“Gretchen, at last. Alicia’s told me so much about you.”

“Not too much, I hope.”

“She didn’t tell me you were so lovely,” he said.

She wasn’t really. Clad in a skintight floral dress, she looked like a gaudy pink hibiscus. Smelled like one too. Up close, her perfume made his eyes water. But he knew the comment would score points with both women, so he said it anyway.

“Shame on you, Alicia, for keeping this one all to yourself.”

“She was afraid I’d embarrass her,” Drew said.

“You? Looking all James Bond? Not likely.”

“James Bond?” Drew asked, his lips stretching into a grin.

“Careful, Gretchen,” Alicia said. “You’ll only feed his ego, which is enormous, by the way.”

Drew’s mouth dropped open in mock incredulity.

“Don’t you believe a word of it,” he said, splaying a hand across his chest. “I’m the very embodiment of modesty.”

“Oh, I can see that,” Gretchen cried. “Modest and charming. A killer combination.”

Gretchen wasn’t very bright, but watching her was fun—in a train-wreck kind of way.

Alicia shook back the dark curtain of her glossy hair and leaned into him. The warm press of her body had him thinking more about the after-party than the festivities at hand, and he wished he could push the fast-forward button on the evening. Get to the part where she was his alone.

Glancing around, he spied the waitress on the other side of the platform. Raising his hand, he caught her eye. She hustled over and he ordered another drink—a nod to the serial killer Ted Bundy this time.

Moments later more of Alicia’s friends arrived. Amid a flurry of hugs and kisses, Alicia made the introductions.

“Tracy, Madison, and Liam,” she said, her bright eyes glittering.

The anorexic spandex twins could have passed for sisters with their long blonde hair and skintight dresses. The guy was tall, with a swimmer’s build and a bored, pouty look that said exactly what he thought: they were all beneath him. Ice-blue eyes stared at Drew through a fringe of wispy blond bangs in a messy, chin-length cut that could easily have cost a couple of hundred bucks.

Liam’s hand wedged into the small of Alicia’s back, his little finger inches above the curve of her ass. Eyeing Drew with the clinical stare of a scientist assessing his subject, Liam smiled. The bastard was baiting him. Wondering just how far he could push before Drew lost his shit.

He wanted to plow the prick in the face. Instead he grasped his ring and twisted it around his finger. The bloodstone ring glimmered red in the light. He remembered his father’s fist lashing out, how the ring had gashed his cheek. But he was no longer that boy. Now he knew there was more than one way to win a fight.

Drew tore his gaze away from Liam and scanned the upper deck.

*Where the fuck is the waitress?*

Apparently the universe heard him because just then the beer wench appeared, hefting a tray of jewel-colored cocktails. Like a frat boy at a freshman party, Drew inhaled half of his in a single



swallow. Vodka burned a fiery path down his throat, and he realized with regret that he should have ordered a double.

“Drew, is it? Tell us how you met Alicia,” Liam shouted over the throbbing house music.

“We met at the investment firm where she works. I was meeting with my financial advisor when she walked in. She took pity on me when I asked for her number.”

Alicia smiled. “Pity had nothing to do with it. He asked me out for dinner, and the rest is history.”

“Investments, eh? Tell me about your portfolio,” Liam said, swirling an electric-blue drink around in his glass with his free hand.

“Why? Do you have some wisdom to share?” Alicia asked.

“Not likely,” Gretchen scoffed. “You see, Drew, Liam here is Seattle royalty. His father founded one of the first successful dot-coms and sold before the bubble burst. Unlike the rest of us working stiffs, he doesn’t worry about petty things like money.”

“I like to dabble in stocks,” Liam shrugged, sipping his drink.

“That’s sweet,” Gretchen quipped with a small, sour look that made Drew smile.

“Don’t you have people to do that for you?” Drew asked.

“Sure, but everyone needs a hobby.”

“A hobby? Now that’s funny,” Gretchen snorted, sloshing her drink onto her dress.

Cheeks flushing red, she glanced around for a napkin. Drew handed his over. Dabbing at her dress, Gretchen scowled at Liam.

“See what you made me do?”

“Not me, Gretch. You always were a sloppy drunk.”

“Liam!” Alicia said.

“It’s true. Don’t you remember the time we all went to dinner at that place?” Liam said, snapping his fingers like he was trying to recall. “You remember, Alicia, the posh little place in Madison Park.”

“Crush?”

“Yeah, that’s it, Crush. Gretchen got so wasted, the maître d’ hauled her out of there . . .”

“Escorted her, you mean,” Alicia said.

Liam waved a hand. “Whatever. The whole way out of the restaurant, she’s yelling at him, calling him names . . .”

“Until she threw up on his shoes,” Alicia blurted, before slapping her hand across her mouth like she’d just spilled a secret.

“Sweetheart,” Liam said. He paused and turned his affectionate gaze on Alicia. “You stripped down to your panties and danced in the fountain.”

“That’s right,” Gretchen said, her flaming-red face breaking into a smile.

“It was epic,” Liam roared, and the whole group erupted in laughter.

They spent the next half hour reliving highlights from their glory days—like the time Liam and Alicia took his father’s private jet to Paris for the weekend—while Drew stood at the edge of the group and looked on. An outsider. He laughed at the right moments. Feigned interest. Checked his watch. The minutes crawled by.

By eleven thirty the party was in full swing, but he was done. Alicia turned to him, as if suddenly recalling his presence.

“Get me another drink?”

It came out sounding more like a command than a request, and Drew bristled. Liam shot him a condescending smile and smoothed his hand over Alicia’s ass.

A hot burst of anger surged through Drew.

“Sure,” he said.

He grabbed Alicia by the hand and tugged her toward him. His eyes boring deep into hers, he leaned down and kissed her hard. Through the thin fabric of her shirt, he felt her stiffen, resist. So he deepened the kiss. His tongue probed the depths of her mouth.

All conversation stopped. The throbbing beat of the house music pulsed, and Alicia’s face glowed bright red as she pulled away.

Drew released her and winked at Liam on his way by. Last call. He had to get out of here before he did something stupid. But first he needed another drink.

And then what?

Then he’d do the smart thing. He’d go home and cool off. He’d deal with Alicia later.

After all, she wouldn’t have any trouble finding a ride home.



“Give me that,” Brooke Parker said, trying to snatch her ID card out of Tess Turner’s hands. But her roommate was too quick. With an impish grin, she held it beyond Brooke’s grasp and squinted at the photo.

“Seriously, this is the worst fake ID I’ve ever seen. Were you drunk?”

“Very funny. Like yours is any better.”

She grabbed Tess’s arm and managed to wrestle the card from her grip. Tess laughed.

“At least mine looks like me.”

“And you’re passing yourself off as twenty-three?” Brooke said, tucking her ID card back in her wallet.

“Hey, it was good enough to get us in here,” Tess said, sipping her drink. “This was your idea.”

They were both nineteen. Underage. And while Tess had wanted to go to an on-campus party, Brooke had convinced her to sneak into the Chapel instead.

“Your boyfriend was right. The guy at the door wasn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the shed.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Brooke said, looking up in time to catch a glimpse of Jesse Morgan holding court. Halfway down the bar, he handed an older woman her drink. There was nothing subtle about the hungry look on the woman’s leathery face as she eyed him, and Brooke frowned.

Assessing the situation in a flash, Tess leaned into her and shouted, “Careful, girls, tanning kills.”

Brooke laughed. She drained the few remaining drops of alcohol from her glass and winced. At least Jesse wasn’t skimping on the vodka. Three drinks in and already she felt as if she were floating on a soft cloud rather than sitting on a hard barstool.

“Not your boyfriend, eh?” Tess said. “Why not? He’s cute.”

Brooke shrugged. “We’ve got a history. We sort of dated in high school.”

“What do you mean, *sort of* dated?” An eyebrow arched in Tess’s pixie face. As always, she wanted to hear all the juicy details, but Brooke dropped her gaze to the empty glass and shook her head.

“My mom didn’t like him. Said he was too old for me. After graduation he moved away and I hadn’t heard a word from him until a few days ago.”

“Okay, so Prince Charming shows up looking this good, and you’re telling me you’re just friends?” Tess flashed a wicked grin. “I suppose that’s why you’re dressed like that. Because you’re *just friends*.”

Brooke glanced down at her sequined tank top, matchstick jeans, and high heels. “What, this old thing?” she said, and both girls laughed.

Brooke watched Jesse shake up the next cocktail and pour it into a chilled martini glass, this time for a curvy brunette. The girl said something and Jesse smiled. Brooke remembered that smile—the dimples carved into his cheeks. And how his eyes, as blue as a tropical sea, could make you feel like you were the only girl on earth. She missed that. She missed him.

Tess propped her chin on her palm, nudging Brooke with her shoulder.

“Earth to Brooke. Maybe you need to give him a reason to notice you.”

“Meaning?”

“Look around. The place is packed with gorgeous guys. Find one to flirt with.”

Tess had a point. There was no shortage of hot guys crowding the bar.

“Most are here with their Barbie-doll girlfriends,” she said.

“Don’t let that stop you. You look hot, girl. You shouldn’t waste it. So if Prince Charming is too busy to notice, find someone else. I’m even willing to play Cupid.”

“Wait, you’re going to pick out a guy for me?” Brooke asked, wishing she had a full drink in front of her. “No offense, Tess, but . . .”

“But what?”

Brooke grinned. “It may surprise you to know that we don’t exactly have the same taste in men.”

“Or women.”

A wicked glint twinkled in her roommate’s eyes, and Brooke shook her head.

“You’re so bad. Okay. You remember the last guy you hooked me up with?”

*God. What a disaster that was.*

“Yeah, he had that thing about picking his nose,” Tess said.

“I could have dealt with the nose thing, but when the police crashed our date to arrest him on an open bench warrant . . .”

“Come on, he wasn’t that bad.”

“Tess, he was a felon.”

A sheepish smile spread across her friend’s face. “Okay, you got me there, but everyone’s allowed an off day.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“The next one’s a can’t-miss, right?”

Brooke laughed and shook her long blonde curls over her shoulders. Tess laughed too. It was getting late, and Brooke swung her gaze back toward Jesse, wishing that just once he would glance her way. He didn’t though. He was too busy fist-bumping some guy when she heard a man’s voice close beside her.

“Hey, beautiful, buy you a drink?”

Brooke glanced around. A brawny guy leaned against the bar, staring straight at her. He had a boxer’s face with a crooked nose, like the kind that had been broken more than once. She shied away from the cloud of beer breath wafting her way.

“No thanks. I’m good,” she said, turning back toward Tess.

“Anything you want. Sky’s the limit. The name’s Sully. Charles Sully.”

Brooke groaned. Really? Could this night get any worse? She pulled out her phone, pretending to read a text message.

“No thanks,” she said again, sounding distracted.

She hoped the dismissal would send the guy packing, but she could still feel him standing beside her.

“You’re not one of those stuck-up girls who thinks she’s too good to talk to a nice guy like me, are you?”

She wasn’t trying to be a bitch, but he wasn’t her type, and there was something about the look in his eyes she didn’t like. Brooke searched for something to say, some kind of polite brush-off that wouldn’t upset him.

Her roommate saved her the trouble.

Tess smacked her hand solidly on top of Brooke’s. Quick as lightning, she snatched Brooke’s phone off the bar and stuck it directly in Sully’s face. The flash flared, and the phone’s camera clicked, recording his ruddy image. Light glinted off the stud in Tess’s eyebrow.

Easing forward, Tess eyed Sully with a hard look.

“Back off, shit-for-brains, she’s with me.”

Sully's thick lips parted in a predatory grin. Brooke caught a glimpse of sharp incisors. She inched closer to Tess.

"That's okay, bitch. I'm man enough for both of you."

"I doubt that," Tess said.

"Sorry I'm late," a voice, deep and male, said behind them.

Brooke spun, looking up into his face. Her stomach lurched. Talk about Prince Charming. He was gorgeous. Six feet tall, he had a lean, muscular build. Straight nose. Angular cheekbones. There was something oddly familiar about him, like maybe she had seen him on campus.

His chocolate-brown eyes locked on hers. She searched for something to say, but her mind went blank. As usual, Tess didn't miss a beat.

"It's about time you got here," she said, sounding annoyed.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Is everything okay?"

He turned his steady gaze on Charles Sully's broad face. Sully stared back. Brooke's stomach tightened another notch as the two men eyed each other like a pair of pit bulls facing off.

"Have we got a problem here?" the newcomer asked.

Jaw clenched, Sully looked away. He pushed off of the bar and dissolved into the crowd.

Brooke's heart still pounded. She was glad Sully was gone. He might not have scared Tess, but there was something about him that had set her nerves on edge.

"Thanks," Brooke breathed.

"Looked like you could use a hand."

"You can say that again. That fuck-wad wouldn't take no for an answer." Tess rolled her eyes.

"I was kind of hoping he'd make a thing of it."

"I'm Tess, by the way, and this is Brooke."

Brooke smiled.

"So, ladies, who do I have to screw to get a drink around here?" he asked, shifting his gaze away from Brooke to the bar.

"Unfortunately, that guy."

Brooke hooked a thumb toward Jesse, stationed at the far end of the bar. The handsome stranger grinned and raised his hand to flag down the nearest bartender. She caught a flash of gold and red, and her gaze lingered on his ring. It was old. Unusual. Like a class ring, with a dark-red stone embedded in a thick gold band.

A strong sense of déjà vu tickled the back of Brooke's brain. She knew him from somewhere. She tried to think, but her brain was still foggy from the last cosmo she'd inhaled. The memory refused to click into place—maddeningly aloof, like a word poised on the tip of her tongue. She shook her head.

Tess hopped off of her barstool.

"Where are you going?" Brooke hissed, grabbing her arm.

"To the ladies' room. Why? Do you want to watch?"

Brooke released her grip and Tess winked. Gone in a flash, she was swallowed up by the crowd. The guy shouted his drink order to a skinny bartender with a neck tattoo and a scruffy hipster beard.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"A cosmo."

Before he'd shown up, she'd been thinking it was time to go. Now Brooke didn't see the harm in staying for one more drink.

Her phone buzzed on the bar. She picked it up and read the new text.

*Go for it. If you don't, I will.*

Tess.

She glanced around, looking for her partner in crime, but the press of bodies made it impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. Brooke tucked the phone back in her pocket, hoping he hadn't seen the text.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Brooke Parker."

She held out her hand. His grip was warm and strong. A shiver of electricity passed through her at his touch. A memory clicked into place, and just like that, she had it. She remembered who he was.

"You're Andy. I knew I recognized you."

"What's that?" he asked, craning his head back toward her.

"Andy, right?"

All at once his expression changed. His eyes narrowed and she was caught by the intensity of his stare. Brooke blushed. The fact that she embarrassed so easily was infuriating, but she couldn't look away either. Her gaze focused on the taut line of his mouth. He glanced at the balcony. Then he smiled.

"Brooke Parker. It's been a long time. Look at you. All grown up."

His eyes roved over her slowly, appreciatively, triggering another infuriating blush.

"You don't look so bad yourself, Andy."

He tipped his head close and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "I go by Drew now."

His warm breath tickled her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

"Are you here with your girlfriend?" she asked, half dreading the answer.

"Are you?" he asked, looking amused.

"Tess is my roommate. It looks like she's abandoned me though."

"Your stalker hasn't." He glanced across the bar.

Sully's acid glare was fixed on the two of them. Goosebumps prickled Brooke's arms. Andy—or was it Drew?—placed his hand on her back. The warmth of his touch burned through her thin tank top, and for a moment she forgot all about her stalker and Jesse. Brooke inched closer to him.

"Mom will be so surprised when I tell her I saw you. Kelly has a music recital tomorrow afternoon. Why don't you come with me? I mean, if you're not doing anything. I know Mom would love to see you."

"Let's play it by ear," he said, squeezing her shoulder.

She pulled out her phone, aimed it at him. He raised a hand in front of his face.

"What are you doing?"

Playfully she batted it away and snapped a photo. It wasn't the best picture. The low light made it a little blurry, but it didn't matter. She could tweak it later.

"Well, if you're not going to come to the recital, I need evidence that you actually do exist."

He stared down into her upturned face and smiled. His warm fingers brushed her skin, unleashing a torrent of butterflies in the pit of her stomach as he drew the MedicAlert dog tags from beneath the neckline of her tank top.

Running his thumb overtop of the caduceus medical symbol etched into the front face, he frowned. "What's this?"

Her cheeks burned. She hated this—admitting she had a condition. Waiting for the inevitable look of shock on someone else's face. Or worse, their pity.

"I'm diabetic."

She'd expected a look from him that said she was broken, but his expression didn't change. Letting go of the dog tags, he let them fall against her chest.

"Well, I don't know about you, Brooke Parker, but I've had enough of this place for one night. Where's your little friend?"

Brooke shrugged. Tess was doing a good job of making herself scarce.

"I hate to sound all big brother on you," he said, "but you really shouldn't stay here alone, not with your stalker lurking close by."

"Big brother. That's funny."

He grinned and cast his gaze across the crowded bar. Brooke didn't have to follow the trajectory of his stare to know whom he was talking about.

"You can't leave. You just ordered drinks," she said.

"And they're not going to get here anytime this century. I'm out of here."

"Okay." The tightness in her muscles was a subtle warning that her blood sugars were on the rise. She could use a shot of insulin. "You're probably right. It's time to go. Do me a favor and walk me outside?"

"Sure."

The crowd parted around Andy as he made for the exit. After grabbing her coat and purse from a hook underneath the bar, Brooke followed in his wake. He glanced up toward the balcony. Brooke looked up too, but no one seemed to be looking their way.

They stepped outside into the brisk night. Brooke shivered. The denim jacket that had looked so perfect in her dorm room did little to ward off the chilly night air. She pulled the phone from her pocket and launched an app to summon a ride back to campus.

"Shit," Drew said, stopping dead in his tracks. "I left something at the bar. You'll be all right?"

She smiled. "Of course."

He turned and jogged back inside, leaving her alone on the stairs. Brooke tucked the phone back into her pocket. It was darker out here than she'd expected. The sparse line of streetlights did little to penetrate the inky blackness around her. The one closest to the parking lot was out. Broken glass littered the pavement below. A cold wind ruffled her hair, and she folded her arms across her midriff.

The door opened. There was a burst of laughter and clicking high heels, then nothing but the gentle buzz of cars zipping by. Brooke glanced behind her and took a couple more steps away from the stairs.

It was creepy out here in the dark.

Brooke glanced at her phone, checking the time, wishing her ride would hurry up. It was cold, and she didn't like being out here alone. She glanced back toward the doors, knowing she'd feel a whole lot safer with Drew by her side.

The deep growl of a car engine roared close behind her. Startled, Brooke stepped back. A car squealed out of the parking lot in a flash of green and black. Tires squawked to a halt. Red taillights flared. Her pulse raced.

The car backed up. The window lowered. She recognized his crooked nose.





The high, airy sound of the flute faded, consumed by the deeper, earthy strains of the cello. The final notes settled in the darkened auditorium, and Marissa Rooney pressed a button on her cell phone. The digital display sprang to life. The woman beside her glowered, but Marissa ignored her. No new messages. Sighing, she flipped the phone facedown in her lap and brushed a hand over the empty seat beside her, the one she had saved for her daughter, Brooke.

The house lights rose and the crowd erupted into thunderous applause. Proud parents sprang to their feet. The conductor and the members of the Renton High School Orchestra bowed in unison, accomplishment and pride shining in their faces.

Marissa felt exposed in the bright glare from the overhead lights. She watched the couple in front of her. His fingers stroked the woman's hair, golden brown tinged with gray. She nestled close to him, her shoulder brushing his chest. They turned and looked at each other. And such a look. Pure devotion. The woman smiled and Marissa averted her gaze.

No one had ever looked at her that way. She had been married three times, and never once had any of her lovers gazed at her with such naked adoration. Perhaps it was the kind of look you earned only after years of enduring life's triumphs and trials together, or maybe the woman was just plain lucky, having met the right man at the right time. Whatever it was, Marissa was sure she would never know that kind of love.

She turned away from the stage and searched the back rows to see if Brooke had slipped in at the start of the performance. Just yesterday they'd exchanged texts confirming the time and place, so it wasn't like Brooke could have forgotten.

Why wouldn't she at least send a text? Irritated, Marissa slid the phone into a front pocket of her jeans.

All around her, families congratulated students on their performances. Colorful bouquets of fresh flowers were given and received. Marissa frowned. She should have brought Kelly flowers. She was never any good with that stuff, and maybe it was just as well; flowers were a luxury she couldn't afford on their tight budget.

Marissa stood amid the crowd, solitary and empty-handed. Surely she wasn't the only one who'd come alone? But everywhere she looked she saw families—mothers with their daughters, fathers with their sons, grandparents and siblings.

All she had were her two girls, and with Brooke starting college and Kelly giving her the cold shoulder, she'd never felt more alone.

An older woman with kind eyes in the row behind her smiled and leaned toward her. "Is your sister in the band?" she asked.

"My daughter," Marissa said.

"Oh."

The woman's eyes widened in surprise, and Marissa knew what came next. A swift mental calculation followed by a judgmental look. Ironically, the same people who treated her like she was a lower life-form for getting pregnant with Brooke at sixteen were often the first to picket an abortion clinic.

Marissa curved away.

Finally she spied Kelly striding toward her. Her long, smooth gait cut through the crowd, quickly closing the distance between them. Kelly had shot up over the past year. She now stood a good two

inches taller than Marissa, and while she wasn't conventionally pretty, she was striking. She had her father's strong nose, jutting cheekbones, and flinty green eyes.

Marissa draped an arm around her daughter's back, drawing her close for a hug. Kelly's shoulders remained rigid. She tolerated the awkward embrace for the required two to three seconds before pulling away. Marissa bent to retrieve her coat and masked the painful twinge she felt in the pit of her stomach at the cool reception.

There had been a time when Kelly would rush into Marissa's arms at the end of the day, her small face beaming as if there was no person in the world she would rather see. But that had been a decade ago. Three failed marriages and half a dozen jobs later, she didn't know how to win back Kelly's trust.

"Where's Brooke?" Kelly asked, casting her gaze beyond Marissa toward the back of the auditorium.

"She didn't make it."

"Figures."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Brooke's pretty into herself these days."

"She said she wanted to be here."

"But she's not, is she?"

Marissa sighed. Truthfully, she couldn't blame Kelly for being disappointed. She was disappointed too. Brooke was usually so responsible. It wasn't like her to blow them off, not without a word. Whatever her own misgivings, though, Marissa brushed them aside, reluctant to criticize Brooke in front of Kelly.

"Something must have come up."

"Why do you always defend her?"

A familiar scowl darkened Kelly's expression, and Marissa let it go. The last thing she wanted was a fight. Not today. Not after Kelly's first performance at her new school. Sidestepping the question, she changed the subject.

"You played very well. I've heard you practice the piece before, but hearing it with the orchestra really brings it to life. How did it feel to be up on stage?"

"Okay, I guess."

Kelly avoided her mother's gaze and strode down the aisle. Marissa hurried to catch up. They had almost reached the back when she caught sight of a familiar face. The bottom dropped out of her stomach at the sight of him.

Logan.

Kelly must have seen him too, because she picked up the pace, threading her way through the crowd on a course that led directly to him. His bright-blue eyes crinkled at the corners, and he opened his arms wide. Kelly stepped willingly into his hug.

Logan glanced over the top of Kelly's blonde head. As he caught sight of Marissa, his smile faded.

Just looking at him hurt, like an empty ache inside her heart. She hadn't laid eyes on him in six months, not since she'd moved out of his house. Although he wanted to remain part of the girls' lives, she'd resisted the idea. Claimed they needed time to gel as a family. It was a poor excuse. In truth, she needed time to lick her wounds.

Anger, hurt, and betrayal rushed to the surface like the blood surging into her cheeks. Logan's expression remained neutral, as if seeing her again didn't make him feel anything at all. *Lucky him.*

Then again, he was a master at hiding his feelings, while hers had a maddening tendency to bubble over.

“I hope you don’t mind I came,” he said.

What could she say? He was already here. Vowing not to pick an argument, Marissa shrugged.

“It’s Kelly’s day. She’s free to invite whomever she pleases.”

Skepticism clouded Logan’s blue eyes and he looked away. For a moment Marissa studied his perfect profile. She’d been blinded by his sophistication, his beauty—doomed to see what she wanted to see instead of what was actually there.

“You were great, Kel,” he said.

Logan reached down and plucked a bouquet of flowers from the empty seat beside him. Marissa’s lips twisted into a pained smile. White daisies, yellow roses, and purple delphinium—all of Kelly’s favorites were tied together with an airy silver bow.

“Thank you. They’re beautiful.” Kelly sank her nose into the flower petals and sniffed.

“You deserve them.”

His eyes met Marissa’s again.

“I won’t keep you. I’m on my way to the airport.”

“You’re flying out?”

Marissa cringed at the disappointment she heard in Kelly’s voice. As a pilot for Alaska Airlines, Logan spent two weeks of each month traveling. She’d realized too late that the long absences from home allowed him to keep the two parts of his life separate.

Kelly blamed Marissa for the breakup. And why not? Logan had been her third husband, and she’d struck out again. That she was shielding Kelly from the ugly truth behind the split provided little solace. She supposed her daughter’s anger was the price she paid for her silence.

“I enjoyed seeing you play. You’re very talented, Kelly. Keep it up.”

Kelly clutched the flowers close to her chest, her cheeks glowing from his praise.

“I’m glad you came.”

Marissa felt a stab of guilt as she watched the pair hug one last time. There was nothing stiff or awkward about their embrace, and she wondered what good she was doing by keeping them apart. Whom was she protecting, anyway—Kelly or herself?

Logan grabbed his coat and followed the crowd toward the exit. Pausing with his hand on the door, he glanced back at Marissa. A blast of cold, damp wind blew into the auditorium, and Marissa shuddered.

“Where’s Brooke?” Logan asked.

Marissa frowned and glanced behind her. That seemed to be the million-dollar question.



Dull light filtered through the dirty windows of the commuter train. Marissa pressed her fingers against her ears, blunting the noise around her. Beyond the window the Seattle skyline emerged like a ghost ship from the pale mist as Brooke's recorded voice blasted cheerfully through the cell phone's speaker. Marissa's heart sank as she listened to the message for the twentieth time.

The beep sounded, and Marissa matched Brooke's upbeat tone.

"Hi, honey, it's Mom again. I know I must sound like a crazy helicopter parent, but I missed you at Kelly's recital. Give me a call back just to let me know everything's okay. Thanks."

The train jerked to a halt, and Marissa stowed the phone back in her purse. She followed the throng of Monday morning commuter zombies up the two flights of concrete stairs into the cold morning drizzle. Trudging down Second Avenue, Marissa looked up. The peaked pyramid of the Smith Tower had disappeared, swallowed by a thick layer of low-hanging clouds.

Marissa had always loved this building. It had history. Character. Built by New York tycoon L. C. Smith, the Smith Tower was the first skyscraper to grace the Seattle skyline, and for many years had been the tallest building in North America west of the Mississippi.

A century later the white, neoclassic building stood out against the other hulking monoliths like a white rose in a garden filled with dandelions. On a typical morning, walking into the marble-and-bronze lobby made her feel special, like someone who had done something with her life.

But this morning nothing was typical.

Worry buzzed like a swarm of bees inside her head. She strode through the lobby, ignoring everyone and everything around her. Stepping off the elevator onto the sixth floor, she found the law offices of Holt, Regis, and Grant deserted.

Marissa settled into her chair behind the reception desk and placed her cell phone beside her keyboard, willing it to ring.

Oblivious to her need, it remained stubbornly silent. She snatched it up and thumbed the small silver button to power up the display. No voice mails. No texts. No messages of any kind since the last time she'd checked. Twenty minutes ago.

*Damned phone.*

She rubbed her temples.

Why wasn't Brooke pinging back? There were at least a half dozen reasonable excuses for not responding, she knew. Right now, though, short on sleep, she couldn't think of many.

Would she be this worried if Brooke weren't diabetic? Certainly she didn't hover over Kelly in the same way. But it wasn't a fair comparison.

When Brooke had been diagnosed with diabetes at age thirteen, Marissa remembered how overwhelmed she'd felt by the complexity of managing her condition—learning how diet, exercise, and insulin all worked together to strike the complex balance necessary to keep Brooke healthy, while trying to forget the nightmare of things that could happen if her sugars went off the rails.

So she hovered. What parent wouldn't? Brooke hadn't seemed to mind. Until now. Did her daughter's silence signal a change in attitude? Was it time for her to back off and let Brooke live her life?

Maybe.

But Marissa couldn't let go. Not yet. Not until she knew Brooke was all right.

Her eyes burned with fatigue as she glanced past the flat-screen monitor toward the frosted-glass doors. Surfing the web was against company policy, she knew, but this early, who would notice? She'd be quick—on and off before any clients entered the lobby. No one would be the wiser.

So she launched a web browser and logged into Facebook. A few clicks later, she reached Brooke's wall. The cover photo was a pretty picture of Brooke hugging the huge purple W outside the gates of the University of Washington. Like most girls her age, Brooke posted frequent updates to her Facebook site for her four-hundred-plus friends to see.

*Struck out in search of adventure. Need to get out of the rain for a while. Peace, Brooke.*

Marissa read the post twice. Her gut twisted like a rusty turbine in the wind, and she knew something wasn't right. Brooke studied her ass off, earning grades that had assured her a place at UW. She wouldn't just take off. She wouldn't jeopardize everything she'd worked so hard for. It didn't make sense.

Hoping to find out more, Marissa clicked on the recently uploaded photos. There was one posted from inside Brooke's dorm room on Saturday night. Brooke and Tess stood with their cheeks pressed together, smiling wide for the camera.

There was another photo, uploaded last night. The young man in the picture was not smiling. Beneath an unruly forelock of wavy hair, he looked angry.

The hair stood up on Marissa's arms. Anxiety cranked another notch tighter in her gut.

Who was he and why had Brooke posted his picture? Was she trying to send a message? Was he the reason she wasn't calling back?

Desperate for answers, she clicked on Tess's profile. If the girls had gone out together, maybe Tess had posted something more, but Sunday morning's status update was all about Tess's epic hangover.

Friends had offered a litany of hangover remedies ranging from the ridiculous to the downright disgusting. Hair of the dog. Canned fish. Pickles. Sex.

*Sex? What ever happened to Gatorade, vitamin C, and a catnap?*

The heavy glass doors swung open, and with a quick click of her mouse button, Marissa minimized the Facebook window. Just in time too. A slim, well-dressed woman in her late thirties entered.

Paige Benoit was Marissa's direct supervisor. With a sharp face and an even sharper tongue, she squawked orders with a drill sergeant's charm. If she caught Marissa online, there would be hell to pay.

Instinctively Marissa straightened in her chair as Benoit neared the desk. She glanced back at the monitor, ensuring Facebook was minimized and her calendar was showing.

"Marissa, Elizabeth Holt will be arriving at ten sharp for a meeting with Regis," Benoit said, all business.

"Yes, ma'am. It's on my calendar."

Benoit's nod was curt. Her sleek dark hair brushed the collar of her starched white shirt. Arced lines bracketed her thin lips, giving her a sour look.

"She'll want tea sent in. Earl Grey with milk, not cream. Don't forget."

*What kind of idiot would put cream in tea?* Based on her boss's dragon breath and coffee-stained teeth, she figured Benoit might not appreciate the difference.

"I'll have it ready," Marissa said.

Benoit's lips stretched into a chilly smile. Marissa made a note about the ten o'clock tea, knowing full well Benoit would shit a chicken if she forgot.

Elizabeth Holt was a founding member of the law firm and, by all accounts, a formidable woman. In the year Marissa had worked here, she had seen Holt only a handful of times. Rumor had it the old woman was sick, so whatever the ten o'clock meeting was about, it was important enough to warrant a rare visit.

As soon as Benoit closed her office door, Marissa maximized her browser window. She skimmed Tess's wall to see if she could figure out where the girls might have gone on Saturday night. Nothing. One by one she clicked through the candid snapshots of Tess's fresh-faced college friends, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man posted on Brooke's page. No luck.

Marissa's fingers stalled as a black-and-white image filled the screen. Tess stood half-naked; her tiny hands barely covered her small breasts.

"Oh, Tess," Marissa groaned under her breath.

No doubt Tess considered the picture artistic, but Marissa thought about all the people who would see this image. From personal experience, she knew Tess would find no shortage of men ready to objectify her. She didn't need to help them along.

Staring intently at the screen, Marissa didn't hear John Ervine approach. He was a short, round man with glasses and a waxy smile. The way he looked at her gave her the willies. This morning was no exception. His small black eyes shifted from the monitor to her face.

Caught red-handed, Marissa clicked the red X, and the browser window closed.

"Good morning, Marissa," he said in a high, nasal voice. "Was that your daughter?"

Marissa's cheeks reddened.

"Sorry, Mr. Ervine. I shouldn't have been looking at a personal site during business hours."

"She's pretty, like her mother."

His smile made her skin crawl, and his gaze dropped from her face to the opening of her shirt. Her outfit wasn't revealing. A crisp white blouse, a straight black skirt, and business-sensible pumps—there was nothing provocative about her attire. But the way he looked at her still made her feel like a bimbo.

Marissa angled her chair away to block his view down her blouse. She forced a civil smile and handed him his mail.

"I don't typically look at my daughter's Facebook site at work, but . . ."

Ervine waved a dismissive hand, his grin widening. "I get it. You want to keep an eye on what your kid posts. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul what I saw. It'll be our secret."

He winked at her and slithered down the hallway. Marissa cringed.

Great. She'd been caught violating company policy. Benoit didn't like her and would seize any opportunity to get rid of her. And now Ervine thought she owed him a favor. She could only imagine the types of payback he had in mind—maybe a lap dance in his office or a quickie in the copier room. She was no intern, though. One wrong move from Ervine and she'd go straight to Mr. Regis. He wouldn't want the firm's reputation sullied by a sexual harassment suit.

It was still early, before eight o'clock, but most of the attorneys were in the office. Clients would arrive soon. Marissa scratched the patch on her left arm and glared at the silent cell phone on her desk.

The nicotine patch was supposed to curb her craving for cigarettes. Maybe if she ripped the damned thing off and smoked it, she'd feel better. Of course, that could get her into trouble too. She'd picked a hell of a time to give up her best vice. Her oldest friend, she amended.

*Ring, damn it. Ring. Please. Please, Brooke, just call.*



But if there was a God up there in the sky, he wasn't listening to her, and Marissa relaunched Facebook. She didn't want to be caught online again, but she didn't know how else to get a message to Tess. Hoping for good news, she started to type.

The door opened and a stately gray-haired man in a long black coat entered. Marissa's fingers froze. She forced a smile and clicked on her calendar to hide the Facebook window.

"Good morning, Marissa. How are you?"

Mr. Regis was looking at her eyes and not at her chest. It was a refreshing change, and she handed him a short stack of mail.

"Fine, Mr. Regis. You have a few messages this morning."

"Thank you."

With a kind smile, he turned down the hall toward his spacious corner office. Marissa dismissed her calendar and finished the message.

*Tess, I'm looking for Brooke. Have you seen her?*

The glass doors swung open again. Marissa pressed send and closed the browser window, hoping Tess would respond soon.



Perched precariously on the tips of her toes, Marissa wrenched the teapot down from the cupboard's top shelf. She lifted the top off and peered inside. It looked clean enough, but just in case, she rinsed the pot with warm water. God help her if Ms. Holt tasted dust in her tea.

She'd freed the first Earl Grey tea bag from the plastic wrapping when her cell phone rang. The tea bag slipped from Marissa's grasp as she lunged for the phone. Her stomach sank. It wasn't Brooke. She didn't recognize the number. Bending to pick the tea bag up off the floor, she answered the call.

"Ms. Rooney?"

The voice sounded young. Nervous. Familiar. Marissa's heart took off at a gallop.

"Tess?"

"I saw your message on Facebook, and well, here's the thing. Brooke wasn't in class this morning."

"What do you mean?"

The teakettle whistled, steam gushing from its spout. Marissa stepped away from the counter and angled her head to the side so she could hear what Tess was saying.

"Well, I actually haven't seen Brooke since Saturday night."

Marissa's knees turned to water. A nauseating wave of heat washed over her, and she slumped against the wall, grateful for its strength.

Behind her the kettle wailed, but she couldn't hear it over the pounding pulse in her ears.

"Saturday night? Are you sure?"

*Two days? That can't be right. How could two days go by without word, without a call? Where the hell is Brooke?*

"Marissa," she heard a voice snap behind her, and she swung on her heels.

Paige Benoit filled the doorway. Her red lips peeled back from her teeth in a snarl. With a clawed hand, she reached out and plucked the kettle's plug from the wall. The shriek of the whistle dipped into a low, plaintive cry before falling silent.

Marissa swallowed the knot of fear in her throat.

"Tess, can I call you back?"

She dropped the phone from her ear and straightened away from the wall. Angry red splotches stained Benoit's gaunt cheeks.

"Marissa, the kettle. Didn't you hear it?"

She shook her head slowly, barely understanding the words coming out of Benoit's mouth. Benoit snapped her fingers.

"Tea. Now. Elizabeth Holt will be here any minute."

Marissa's lips parted, but it took a full two seconds to find her voice.

"I can't."

And suddenly she didn't give two shits about what Benoit wanted or the upcoming meeting, and she cared least of all about Ms. Holt's tea. She had to get out of here.

Marissa brushed past Benoit and raced down the long hallway toward reception as fast as her heels allowed.

She arrived in the lobby in time to catch Elizabeth Holt's grand entrance. She swept into the lobby along with her large entourage. Mr. Regis smiled. He gripped both of Holt's hands in his own and

planted a kiss on the old woman's cheek.

Benoit's heels clicked close behind.

"What do you mean, you can't?"

As Benoit grasped Marissa's elbow, her long nails dug into the soft flesh of Marissa's arm. She spun Marissa around until they stood face-to-face. Inches away, Marissa could smell the rank stench of coffee on Benoit's breath. A fierce bolt of anger flashed through her, and she wrenched her arm free of the other woman's grip.

"Look, I don't have time to explain. I have to go."

Hunkering down, Marissa grabbed her purse and jacket from beneath the desk.

"Go? Now?"

Benoit reached for Marissa's arm again, but this time Marissa was faster. She whirled away, her hair whipping around her cheeks. She fixed her hot stare on Benoit's pinched face.

"Don't you ever touch me again. Do you understand?"

Benoit's dark eyebrows scrunched so close together on her forehead they almost touched.

"You listen to me, Ms. Rooney. If you walk out of this office, don't bother coming back," Benoit said, her shrill voice carrying through the lobby.

The lobby fell silent. Suddenly all eyes were on Marissa. She looked up in time to catch Elizabeth Holt's curious gaze. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she glared at Paige Benoit.

"Do what you will. I have to find my daughter." She turned toward Mr. Regis. Shock and concern were reflected in his lined face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Regis, the conference room should be ready for your meeting. Ms. Holt, the kettle is boiled. Perhaps Ms. Benoit can make your tea."

Without another word, she marched out the door.

• • • •

RAIN DRIZZLED DOWN in a fine gray mist from the sky. A murder of crows flapped overhead, their black wings smudged against the low ceiling of clouds, like pooled mascara beneath a woman's eye. Marissa plowed through the heavy doors to the student union, looking everywhere for Tess. This close to lunchtime, torrents of students flooded the hall, all talking, yelling, and laughing. The sound of their eager young voices echoed off the high ceilings.

Tess was nowhere to be found. Marissa paced the perimeter of the hall, trying to make sense of this crazy situation. There had to be some explanation. Maybe Tess knew more than she was saying. Someone had to. Brooke hadn't just vanished.

Pacing the student union wasn't calming her frayed nerves. With each step frenzied thoughts filled her head, choking out all rational thought. Despite her throbbing feet, she couldn't stop. Anxiety thrashed inside her like a trapped bird, barely contained, desperate to get out.

Her gaze passed over the message boards, looking but not really seeing. Colorful flyers pinned to the surface announced study groups, yoga classes, meet-ups, and a multitude of other on-campus events. Her eyes skimmed across the flyers, her thoughts filled with Brooke, until her eyes locked onto the face of a young woman staring out from a missing-person poster.

She stopped. Kim Covey had disappeared from a party four weeks ago, and suddenly Marissa recalled the local news stories about the missing girl. She'd thought about the girl and hoped she was safe. She'd thought about the family and the hell they must be going through.

But she really hadn't understood anything about the girl's disappearance until now.

Heart pounding, she stared into the girl's photocopied eyes. The realization struck her with crippling force. This girl looked like her daughter. Same blonde hair and blue eyes. Same slender

build. Kim Covey was two years older than Brooke, but the two girls could have passed for sisters.

Marissa's pulse throbbed at the base of her throat.

Without thinking, she stretched out her trembling fingers and ripped the missing-person flyer off the message board. She stared at it horror-stricken, no longer seeing a stranger's face, but seeing her own daughter staring back at her.

She spun on rubbery legs and swung toward the entrance, stuffing the flyer into her pocket just as Tess Turner burst into the hall at a run.



Tess led the way across campus, from the student union toward the dorms. Despite her diminutive size, she set a blistering pace, and Marissa struggled to keep up. The cold drizzle chilled her to the bone. She couldn't look at the faces of the other students they passed. They were safe. Their parents knew where they were. She kept her head down, shoulders hunched against the rain. All she could think about was her burgeoning fear.

"I figured Brooke spent the night at your place and I'd see her in class this morning. When I saw your message, I knew I had to call."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

Tess unlocked the door to their room. "Saturday night at the Chapel."

Two days ago, and not a word? How could that be? Frustration and fear welled up inside Marissa. She shook her head, overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation. If she let herself get carried away by the spiraling trail of what-ifs crowding her brain right now, she'd be lost. Instead Marissa focused on Tess, desperate to learn something that might help clear up this mess.

"You went to a bar?" Marissa asked, her frantic gaze bouncing around the room.

Dirty clothes trailed across Tess's half of the room while Brooke's was as neat as a pin. Nothing looked missing. Nothing looked out of place.

"That's right. Brooke wanted to go," Tess said, sliding a balled-up pair of leggings across the imaginary boundary from Brooke's side of the room to her own.

"It was Brooke's idea?"

She could hardly believe it. Brooke wasn't the type of girl to break the rules. Tess, on the other hand . . .

"She went there to see her ex."

"Who?"

"Some dude named Jesse."

*Jesse Morgan*. She remembered him, all right. Brooke's case of puppy love had bordered on obsession. While Marissa had been relieved when Jesse moved away, Brooke had gone through a grieving period that made Bella from the *Twilight* books look fickle. She'd spent weeks moping in her room, playing depressing music on her iPod and shunning calls from her friends. When Brooke had finally snapped out of it and started dating someone else, Marissa had been relieved.

It seemed more than mere coincidence that Jesse's reappearance coincided with Brooke's disappearing act. If there was one person Brooke might take off with, it was him.

"Did she leave with Jesse?"

"I don't know. I went to the bathroom, and she was gone."

"She didn't tell you she was leaving? Not a text? Didn't you think that was weird?"

"Not really," Tess said. "She doesn't always share her plans."

Tess averted her worried gaze, picking away at the frayed strings hanging from the knee of her ripped jeans.

Marissa brushed her hand along the straight line of clothes hanging in the closet. Sweaters and tank tops, jeans and sweat shirts slid against her open palm, and she caught the scent of Brooke's perfume. Sweet. Vanilla. Like she was standing beside Marissa instead of God knew where.

Marissa pulled the hem of a dress aside and saw Brooke's gym bag on the floor. Something wasn't right. She could feel it.

“She would have taken something with her.”

“What?” Tess asked, hovering close by.

“If Brooke was leaving, even overnight, she would have taken something with her,” Marissa repeated, whirling toward the bed. “A sweat shirt. A jacket. Something.”

The lavender quilt looked crisp and untouched. Even Brooke’s UW nightshirt was folded beneath her pillow. It was like at any minute her daughter would come bursting into the room.

Marissa sank onto the bed, her hand drifting across the soft pillowcase, the silence of the room surrounding her. Tess fidgeted by the window, arms folded, a worried look on her face.

“Where does Brooke keep her insulin?”

No sooner had she said it than she spied the dorm-size refrigerator tucked underneath the desk. She hunkered down and opened the door.

She saw the open box of insulin pens and counted them. Each box held a dozen. There were five left. She grabbed the vial of insulin off the top shelf.

Brooke needed daily shots from the vial to keep her blood sugars steady overnight. As she stared at the vial in her hand, another thought struck her. Marissa wrenched open the nightstand drawer and there it was.

She saw Brooke’s insulin travel kit stowed neatly in the corner beside her glucometer, small and insulated, about the size of a pencil case. Marissa picked it up in her hands, and she knew.

She knew there was no way Brooke would leave without taking this with her.





“You say she went to the bar with her roommate,” Officer Reardon said in a monotone, like he’d heard this story a hundred times before.

Perched on a hard chair in the middle of the bustling squad room, her back ramrod-straight, Marissa nodded.

“That’s right. The Chapel on Capitol Hill.”

The keyboard clacked as Officer Reardon recorded her answers. Marissa fidgeted with the leather strap of her purse. The squad room stank like sweat and bitter coffee. She breathed in the stale air. Unbidden images surfaced in her mind, and she remembered the last time she’d been in a squad room. Instinctively her tongue probed the top row of smooth, even teeth, searching for jagged edges and gaps. She kept her gaze focused tight on the officer, pushing the memories back. Not wanting to remember.

“And the roommate says she was there to meet her ex-boyfriend?”

“Well, yes. He tends bar there.”

“And what makes you think she’s gone missing?”

Marissa squirmed in her chair. She knew she sounded like an overprotective mother reporting her kid late for curfew, but that wasn’t it. Her every instinct was telling her that something was very wrong. What kind of mother would she be if she didn’t do what she thought was right?

She drew in a deep breath and released it slowly before answering.

“Brooke’s not answering her cell phone. She’s missing classes. Her medication travel kit is still in her dorm room.”

Reardon cocked his head. His sharp brown eyes met Marissa’s. “Hold it. But didn’t you say she had her medication with her?” He scanned the computer screen, checking the report.

She’d already said this. Wasn’t he listening?

Marissa pushed back the waves of frustration crashing over her and explained it to him. Again.

“She probably does have an insulin pen with her, but she would pack her vial of insulin and a syringe in the kit so it wouldn’t get damaged.”

“But she could still carry that stuff with her, right? The kit just makes it more convenient. So you don’t know for sure she doesn’t have her insulin.”

“It’s possible, yes, but . . .”

Marissa’s words trailed off when Reardon’s gaze stayed focused on the screen. By the look on his face, she could tell he didn’t buy her story.

“Any other reason to think something has happened to . . .” He paused to check the screen. “Brooke?”

*He doesn’t even remember her name.*

It was too much. Her jaw clenched and she glared at him with burning eyes.

“You mean other than jeopardizing her life by not taking her medication as prescribed? Look, I know my daughter. She wouldn’t just disappear.”

A condescending smile appeared under Reardon’s bushy moustache, and Marissa sprang from her seat. She couldn’t waste another minute of her time waiting for him to take her seriously. Slung her purse over her shoulder, she spun away from the desk. His voice stopped her.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Rooney. I don’t mean to make light of the situation. I know you’re very worried, what parent wouldn’t be?” He leaned forward, his elbows propped on the desk. “But looking at the

situation with objective eyes, you shouldn't jump to conclusions. Maybe she reconciled with her ex and they decided to spend a few days together. I know it's hard to accept, but college girls aren't high school girls. They don't have curfews, and they don't always check in with their parents. They're free to make their own decisions."

"Why would she leave without taking her clothes or her medication?"

"Do you know for a fact there is nothing missing from her room?"

It had sure looked like there was nothing missing from Brooke's dorm room, but could she swear to it? No. She didn't know how many vials of insulin Brooke usually kept on hand. She didn't know if Brooke had makeup and clothes stashed in an overnight bag.

But her gut was screaming at her that something was wrong. After two days without insulin, her daughter could be dead by now. She couldn't ignore her intuition. She had to act. Two days was an eternity.

Reardon continued, more gently now.

"Look, Ms. Rooney, there's a good chance she'll show up tonight or tomorrow on her own. We get twenty thousand missing-persons reports every year. Most of these people show up all on their own with no intervention. When you were a kid, didn't you do anything crazy and impulsive?"

She knew firsthand that rash decisions made in the heat of the moment could change your life. Brooke was living proof of her first crazy, impulsive act, going to bed with the first guy who paid attention to her.

"Can't you just check her cell phone to find out where she is?"

"Your daughter is an adult. She has a right to privacy. We would need a warrant to check her cell phone records, and for that, we need some sort of evidence indicating foul play. It will take time."

"We don't have time," she said. Marissa could feel eyes boring into her, but she didn't care. Let them look. "This isn't a normal case. This is a kid with a very serious medical condition. We at least have to find out if she's okay."

"Here's what I think we should do," Reardon said. "I'm going to file the missing-persons report. It will get assigned to a detective who will conduct a preliminary investigation. He can check in with the ex-boyfriend. From there we'll decide how to proceed."

"And how long does that take?"

"I can't give you a specific time frame. You're going to need to trust us."

Trust? How could she trust him when he clearly wasn't taking her seriously? But what choice did she have? Bone-tired and emotionally drained, Marissa stood. Without another word she marched out of the police station and back out into a gray blanket of rain.

• • • •

TRAFFIC BLED OUT OF the downtown core in a sluggish trickle of flashing red taillights. Cars slithered in an unbroken line heading south, like a monstrous snake all the way down Interstate 5. Marissa gripped her steering wheel tight. The slick roads made for slow going, and a drive that should have taken no more than forty-five minutes took a grinding hour and a half in the rain.

It was well past dark when Marissa turned onto her street. It wasn't the best neighborhood. In the yellow glow of the streetlamps, the small houses crowding the sidewalks looked grim and dirty. A far cry from Logan's hilltop home in Redmond, it was all she could afford within commuting distance of the city.

The house lights were on and Kelly was home. Raucous music blared from the speakers in the living room. Back in her day, they would have called it punk, or maybe grunge, but Kelly called it

something else. Alternative. Kelly's new favorite band, G-String Jesus, grated like an electric shock on Marissa's frayed nerves.

Marissa found her fifteen-year-old daughter hunched over the kitchen table, ignoring the stack of books strewn around her, texting on her phone. Marissa marched into the living room and turned the music off. Kelly looked up, shooting her mother an indignant glare before turning back to her phone.

"Any word from Brooke?" Marissa asked.

Kelly shook her head, still typing into the damned phone.

Feeling a thousand years old, Marissa dropped into the chair opposite Kelly. She stared at the dark rings of eyeliner that circled Kelly's eyes. Kelly's high school friends probably thought dark makeup made their eyes pop, but Marissa thought it made Kelly look cheap. It was a phase. She would grow out of it. Somehow the knowledge didn't make it easier to bear.

The chasm between them filled her with sadness.

*What happened to my sweet girl?*

"What?" Kelly asked, feeling her mother's stare.

"I filed a missing-persons report today."

"You what?"

Kelly dropped the phone into her lap and gaped at Marissa like she'd just dropped an f-bomb.

"Brooke missed class today. She wasn't at her dorm room."

Kelly rolled her eyes in an oh-my-God 360 that set Marissa's blood boiling.

"Mom, you saw the message she put on Facebook. She probably just met some guy and took off. And you've got the police hunting her down like she's some kind of criminal."

"Brooke wouldn't leave without telling me. Aren't you the least bit worried about your sister?"

Kelly shook her head and eyed Marissa with a scathing look. "Your perfect little Brooke may not be as perfect as you think."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kelly shrugged, gathering her books. "Just because she's not answering you doesn't mean that something's wrong. She doesn't tell you everything."

Marissa's head reeled with the implications of what Kelly meant. What was Brooke hiding from her? A boyfriend? Something more?

"Have you heard from her? An e-mail? A text? Anything?"

Kelly slammed her cell phone on the tall stack of books and huffed out an exasperated breath. "No, but I'm not bugging her either. Maybe she's sick of you controlling her every move."

Marissa's head snapped back; she was stung by the accusation in Kelly's voice.

"You think I'm controlling?"

A short bark of laughter escaped Kelly's lips.

"You think you're not?"

"Brooke's roommate hasn't seen or heard from her in two days. Of course I'm worried. If you were missing, wouldn't you want me to do everything I could to ensure you were all right?"

"Me? I'd hope you wouldn't come looking for me. I'd hope you'd leave me alone to live my own life, instead of dragging me through another shitty relationship, another shitty divorce, only to move me back to another shitty rat-hole like this one."

"That's not fair, Kelly. Sometimes families have to make hard decisions, but we stick together."

"Family," Kelly scoffed. "You don't know the first thing about family. You've destroyed any family we've ever had. I've never met my father or my grandparents or cousins. You stayed with that

asshole Rick long after you figured out what a lunatic he was. God, I remember all of the drinking, the fighting. It wasn't until Rick knocked out your teeth that you came to your senses and left the bastard.”

“Kelly . . .”

“What about Logan? What did he ever do to you? He was the only one who gave two shits about me, and you left him. Why? Because he didn't worship the ground you walked on? Because for once I was happy and you couldn't stand it?”

Marissa sat in stunned silence as Kelly snatched her stack of books off the table and ran to her room. The kitchen walls shuddered with the force of the slamming bedroom door.

Tears welled in Marissa's eyes. She pressed her palms against her closed eyelids. Her whole world was collapsing around her and she didn't know what to do. Brooke was gone. Missing. And she had no idea how to find her.

Kelly hated her. The acid pouring from Kelly's lips had gone leagues beyond teenage angst. God, she couldn't do anything right, and there was no one she could talk to, no one who cared. Kelly was right about that much. She was alone. She had driven everyone away.

She raised her head and raked her fingernails across the nicotine patch on her arm.

*God, what I wouldn't give for a cigarette right now.*

Marissa crossed the room and turned on the teakettle. A cup of herbal tea was a damned poor substitute for a cigarette. A shot of whiskey might be better, but she never drank the hard stuff. Her ex-husband's drunken rages had turned her off anything stronger than a glass of wine.

*Rick. What a disaster.*

Rick had been the assistant manager at the grocery store where she'd worked. He was a single parent too, so he never gave her a hard time about missing work because the kids were sick or having to leave early to pick them up from day care. All she'd wanted was a real family for the girls.

He'd seemed so normal. Stable. And he was—for a while, anyway.

On his meds, Rick was a nice guy, and without his support, there was no telling where Marissa and the girls would have ended up—on welfare, or worse. So they moved in together quickly and married shortly after that. A few months into their marriage, Rick stopped taking his medication, and everything went off the rails.

No amount of pleading could get him back on his meds. Soon his drinking binges intensified. The first time he hit Marissa, he cried, and she forgave him. Six months later, though, she realized the situation was hopeless.

Marissa ran the tip of her tongue across her gums, feeling the scars, and this time she couldn't hold back the memories. They flooded her mind with vivid, chilling detail.

Fourth of July, and Rick had been drinking all day. Marissa was clearing the dinner dishes from the table. The Dixie Chicks were playing on the kitchen radio and the girls were in high spirits. Soon they'd be going to the lake to watch the fireworks—they were all talking and laughing. Marissa asked Rick if he was coming.

The first hit took them all by surprise. The kitchen light flashed off Rick's bloodstone ring, catching Marissa squarely in the mouth. White-hot pain burst through her and she fell back on the floor, lips splitting and blood pouring out of her mouth.

Nine-year-old Kelly screamed for him to stop, but he didn't. Desperate, afraid Rick would turn on her next, Marissa shouted at Kelly to go to her room. Kelly didn't move. Her red, tearstained face full of fury, she screamed at Rick to stop. He cocked back a meaty fist and Marissa dropped her head to her knees, bracing herself for another blow.

But it didn't come. Rick's son jumped in front of her.

Seventeen-year-old Andy was as tall as his father now and done with Rick's shit. He raised his arm, deflecting his father's blow. The bottle of Jack Daniel's exploded against the edge of the countertop in a starburst of glass shards. Glass and liquor rained over Marissa's crouched body. Silver light flashed along the jagged neck of the bottle as Rick swung it wide in a wild, desperate arc. Glass sliced through Andy's hand, spraying red blood across the white linoleum floor.

Andy roared. He lunged, and Rick went down with a thunderous crash.

Brooke raced into the kitchen and slipped on the slick combination of whiskey and blood. She came down on her knee, screaming. Chunky shards of glass embedded themselves in her tender skin. She still had a patch of bumpy scars just under her kneecap where doctors had pulled the glass out.

To this day Marissa didn't know who had called the cops. Probably the neighbors. The wail of the police sirens drowned out Kelly's shrieks. Rick left the house in handcuffs, stuffed into the back of a squad car. Marissa tucked Brooke under one arm and Kelly under the other as she marched through the back door.

After filing a domestic violence report and a protection order, she never went back. They abandoned their belongings, not wanting to see Rick or that house ever again. That was six years ago.

Exhausted, Marissa propped her hands against the countertop and stared out the window. Rain streaked down the glass like a river of tears.

Kelly's bitter words still cut deep, and as much as it hurt to admit, there had been truth in what Kelly said. Her string of failed relationships spoke for itself, and as a result of her poor choices, she'd dragged her daughters through hell.

Maybe Kelly was right about Brooke too. Maybe Brooke was sick of her interference. Maybe she'd met some guy at school and fallen head over heels for him. Maybe Marissa needed to back off and do the impossible . . . wait.

Marissa picked at the edge of the nicotine patch, then ripped it off her arm. The adhesive clung stubbornly to her skin, peeling a few strips off with it. Her breath hissed through her clenched teeth. The newly exposed skin was red, irritated, and painful as hell. She rubbed the spot with the palm of her hand and went rifling through the drawers in search of a cigarette.



The line moved at a glacial pace. Drew shifted his weight from one foot to the other and pulled out his phone. He had time to kill while the morons in front of him hemmed and hawed their way through the decision-making process. How hard was it to order a fucking coffee?

They should have two lines—one for regulars, one for the galactically stupid.

Drew pulled out his phone and clicked on his Facebook app. A smiling photo of pretty Brooke Parker filled his screen. He saw the photo of that asshole Charles Sully from the bar and some others posted by Tess.

Running into Brooke had been a shock. She was part of the past he'd buried years ago. And with his father safely tucked away in the loony bin, he'd severed all ties with who he used to be. There was no way he was going back. He had no intention of sharing that part of his life with anyone—not his new set of friends, not his coworkers, and especially not his girlfriend. Alicia wouldn't understand.

The line shifted, and Drew looked up. His favorite barista was working. She was big and black and beautiful, with a quick wit and even quicker smile.

“Tall dark Americano, with an extra shot,” she said.

“You know how I like it, baby.”

“Oh yes,” she said with a flirty grin. “Mama always knows.”

Drew handed her a five-dollar bill.

This was his favorite neighborhood coffee shop. Though it was predominantly a geek hangout, he came here for the great coffee and free Wi-Fi. The location was perfect, a short jog from his condo and close enough to Alicia's office. She'd sometimes join him for an afternoon mocha Frappuccino.

Speaking of Alicia, she'd sent him a text this morning. He'd ignored this one too. After all, she'd ruined their evening out by inviting Sir Liam Douchebag to the party. So instead of bonding with Alicia's inner circle, he'd been shoved to the sidelines and treated like an outsider.

Judging by the number of messages and phone calls, Alicia didn't like being ignored. That was fine. She could spend the time alone mulling over her own shitty decisions.

Not too long though. He didn't want to lose her. In many ways she was the best thing to have happened to him. She was exactly the type of girl he'd always wanted. Beautiful. Fun. Wealthy. She would complete his transformation from a boy raised in a poor train wreck of a family to the successful man he wanted to be.

“Tall handsome Americano,” the barista called, batting her eyes. The line jostled.

Drew elbowed his way through the throng of waiting sheep and scooped up his drink. He might have walked out of the shop without looking around if he hadn't heard the snort.

Gretchen sat hunched over a table near the window. Her unruly mass of red hair tumbled around her hunched shoulders. She shifted in her chair, and he caught sight of Alicia. She gazed out the window with a sober look on her pale face.

A public confrontation wasn't at all what he had in mind, and he knew he should turn around and leave the coffee shop before she spotted him. He wanted Alicia in the right place, in the right frame of mind, so he could control the outcome of their discussion. The last thing he needed was Alicia's fat little friend lobbing more fuel on the fire.

Drew's curiosity got the better of him though, and he edged his way toward the table, drawing as little attention to himself as possible. He settled in a nearby chair with his back to Gretchen, staring



down at his phone while he listened.

Eavesdropping wasn't hard. Gretchen's obnoxious voice carried.

"Liam said he saw Drew chatting up some blonde at the bar. You really haven't heard from him since Saturday night?"

"Not a word."

"You've texted him?"

"Of course I've texted him. I've left messages. He's ignoring me. He's . . ."

Alicia's voice caught, and she stopped. Gretchen sighed.

"Look, Alicia, I didn't want to say this, but I'm your friend and I don't want to lie to you. Something about Drew gives me the willies. I mean, he's cute and all, but how much do you really know about him? You guys are awfully serious for the short time you've been together. Maybe you should take a break. Maybe . . ."

"Enough," Alicia snapped.

Behind his coffee cup, Drew smiled, but Gretchen pressed on.

"Hey, I'm not the only one who thinks so. Liam said he was worried about you. Being with Drew, I mean."

"Worried. What do you mean?"

"You know, that Drew might be the jealous type. Like he might do something crazy."

"Crazy? Really? And what puts Liam in any position to judge?"

"Are you forgetting about the girl at the bar? What if Liam's right and Drew really did leave with her? What if he's been playing you all along? You know how shallow guys can be."

Drew's hand clenched around the cup. Hot, bitter steam rose from the lid. He should have followed Liam home from the bar and taught the prick a lesson. Instead he'd waited, and Liam had joined forces with Gretchen the Witless in hopes of undermining his relationship with Alicia.

"Drew wouldn't just leave with some girl," Alicia said, but the tone of her voice lacked conviction.

Gretchen heaved another dramatic sigh.

"He's gone dark, Alicia. Do you know where he is and what he's doing? Look, I'm not trying to cause trouble or anything, I'm just saying that if it were me . . ."

Drew couldn't sit and listen to this crap another second more. Gretchen's blather encroached on dangerous territory. He spun in his seat and glared directly at her.

"If it were you, what, Gretchen?"

Gretchen looked like a guppy with her mouth dropped open wide. She looked so ridiculous he would laugh if he weren't so fucking furious. Alicia was shocked to see him too, but she recovered more quickly, composing her face into a stony mask of indifference.

"Oh, Drew, I didn't see you there."

Drew cocked an eyebrow. "Mind if I join you?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He scraped his chair across the tile floor and sat down at their table. Avoiding eye contact, Alicia angled her gaze out the huge glass window and watched the traffic pass by. Drew's knee grazed Gretchen's and she flinched away, as if stung by the sudden, unexpected contact. Anger bubbled in Drew's gut.

Gretchen tugged on a fat red curl and glanced across the table at Alicia, who was still staring out the window. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and cleared her throat.

"Alicia and I were just talking about Saturday night," Gretchen said.

"I gathered. So Liam has been spreading rumors about me and some blonde?"

Bull's-eye. Gretchen's cheeks flushed a deep, unflattering shade of red. She looked mortified, like she'd rather be anywhere else right about now. She'd much rather whisper her poisonous lies into Alicia's willing ears.

"Well, Liam said he saw you talking to some girl at the bar."

"Did he now?" Drew took a sip of his Americano, letting the awkward silence stretch out. He wanted Gretchen uncomfortable. He wanted her to regret opening her mouth. "I'm surprised he noticed. He seemed to be pretty intent on impressing Alicia."

"Liam and I are just friends," Alicia said.

"Really? Because he's the only friend whose hand was on your ass. Or didn't you notice?"

Gretchen sputtered coffee across the table. Covering her mouth, she coughed.

"That go down the wrong way, Gretchen?" Drew thumped her on the back.

"I'm fine," she croaked.

Holding up a hand, Gretchen swabbed her face with a wad of paper napkins.

Alicia looked directly at him. "Let's leave Gretchen out of this, Drew. This is something we should discuss alone."

"Why? It seems like Gretchen is anxious to tell you all about what happened after I left the group on Saturday night. Maybe we should listen."

Gretchen cleared her throat and held up a hand, palm out. "Not me. I didn't see anything."

"Well, it just so happens I was talking to a blonde at the bar. Some creep was hitting on her, so I interrupted. I wanted to make sure she was all right."

Drew waited. The secret to telling a good lie was seeding it with enough truth to make it ring true. This one was sure to shut Gretchen's big fat trap.

"Who was she?"

"Just a girl. I don't remember her name, but it certainly wasn't anything you should be concerned about."

Gretchen's phone beeped. She checked the display.

"Excuse me," she said, looking relieved. "I have to go. I'll call you later, Alicia."

Drew's eyes met Alicia's, and he wondered if she would flee too, but she didn't. She stayed put.

"Where did you go Saturday night?"

"Home, Alicia. What about you?"

She pursed her lips and eyed him warily. "Why haven't you been answering my calls?"

"Because I'm pissed."

"Clearly."

"Anybody in my shoes would be."

"What do you mean?"

"Your ex-boyfriend comes to the party, plants his hands all over you, and you expect me not to react?"

"His hands weren't all over me."

Drew arched his eyebrows, and Alicia dropped her gaze. Her cheeks flushed red, and he sipped his coffee, letting the silence stretch out like an elastic band ready to snap.

"Are you sure about that? You two seemed quite cozy."

"Honestly, Drew, I didn't know he was coming. Gretchen invited him."

"How convenient."

Alicia frowned.

Was Liam using Gretchen to stir up trouble, or had she come to Alicia all on her own? Either way, they were a problem. He might be able to get Gretchen on his side. Liam was a bigger problem.

“Look, Alicia, I’m not going to compete for your attention. If you want Liam, just say the word and . . .”

Drew met Alicia’s gaze. This time she didn’t look away.

“I don’t,” she said, looking worried.

“Okay. You may consider him a friend, but are you sure that’s all he wants from you?”

Alicia looked troubled. Her dark eyebrows pulled together over her blue eyes.

“What he wants is irrelevant,” she said at last. “I’m with you. That is, if you still want to be.”

Drew set his coffee cup on the table and offered his hand. After a second’s hesitation, Alicia took it, and Drew smiled.

“Of course I want to be with you,” he said. “You already know that. You also know I’m not the jealous type. But I want you to think hard about something.”

“What?”

“Think about Liam and his motivations. Is it possible he still has feelings for you?” Drew shrugged. “Look, I can’t blame the guy. I’m crazy about you too, and if I lost you, I would do everything I could to get you back, including telling lies about him.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” she said.

She covered his hand with hers, and Drew knew that he’d won. Leaning across the narrow table, Drew kissed her. The press of her lips tasted sweet, like victory.



Rain drizzled down in a fine mist and mingled with the sweat on Charles Sully's face. He'd already worked out, and the ache of swollen muscles in his chest and arms was a pleasant reminder of what Lara would call his "penance." Penance. That was a fucking joke. Other than his grandfather's funeral, he'd never been to church in his life.

He'd been thirteen then, and his mother had dressed him in a borrowed suit, some ugly gray piece of shit. She didn't care it was too small. She wanted him to look decent. But he hadn't looked decent. He'd looked like a fat, pizza-faced kid with the jacket buttons straining around his gut and the cuffs of the pants riding up on his ankles. The suit pinched. It was itchy and he couldn't wait to take the fucking thing off. That was the last time he'd been goaded into wearing a suit. It was also the last time his mother had forced him to do anything against his will.

The constant thrum of cars speeding past on nearby Aurora Avenue was barely muted by the sparse greenbelt bordering the parking lot outside his condo. Hunkered down over the trunk of a bright-green Dodge Super Bee, he examined the coarse fabric of the lining with a flashlight. Small bits of debris—leaves, twigs, torn fabric—he deposited in a white Safeway bag. The earthy smell brought him back to the forest.

As a kid, when things got bad at home, Sully escaped into the trees. Deep in the woods, he couldn't hear his mother nagging or his father yelling. Alone he would slide into the trees and become invisible. Even now the forest offered the isolation and escape he needed.

He slowly swiveled the light back and forth, and a glimmer of metal caught his eye.

A gold hoop earring had woven its way into the fabric. Carefully he wiggled the thin metal with his thick fingers, freeing it from the bottom of the car's trunk without tearing any of the fibers loose. He held it up for a brief examination. If he'd overlooked this, what else had he missed?

Beads of sweat raced down the back of his neck, and Sully scratched them away, casting a quick glance over his shoulder. He was alone. Casually he strolled across the parking lot and dropped the gold hoop through the broad slats of the storm drain. If there had been two earrings, he might have been able to pass them off as a gift, but one did him no good at all. If Lara had found the earring, she would have had lots of questions about where it came from and who it belonged to and on and on.

He didn't need that shit.

Sully returned to the car and resumed his examination of the trunk—more slowly this time, determined not to miss a single thing. He froze. Captured in the yellow beam of light was a red speck on the charcoal-gray fabric near the opening for the spare tire.

"Fuck," he growled.

Reaching down, he smudged the speck with his finger. It caked off under his nail like dried mud, but he knew it wasn't mud. He would need to do a more thorough cleaning soon.

The whine of the handheld vacuum cleaner masked the sound of her footsteps. She was directly behind him when he finally heard her high-pitched voice.

"Carlos, aren't you going to drive me to my mother's?"

The shrill tone of her voice was every bit as annoying as the slow screech of fingernails scraping down a chalkboard, and he cringed. He wanted to ignore her, but he knew Lara wouldn't shut up until she got her way. He used to like that about her, back when what she wanted was him. Now he wanted to drill his fist into her fat mouth to stop her from saying another goddamned thing. He stared down into the trunk, flexing his twitchy fingers.

“Carlos, turn that damned thing off.”

He hated when she called him Carlos. Like he was a spic.

Sully’s jaw clenched. Who the fuck did she think she was? His own mother didn’t speak to him that way. You’d have thought she’d have learned her lesson by now. Maybe she was just plain dumb.

He thumbed the switch, and the vacuum cleaner ground to a halt. With all the control he could muster, he turned to face her.

Lara was a good half a foot shorter than he was. Her black hair was scraped back into a ponytail, and her fisted hands were propped on her ever-broadening hips. How many times did he have to tell her he wanted her hair loose and flowing down her back? The stupid bitch didn’t listen. Maybe she needed another lesson in respect. Maybe then she’d remember. Maybe a black eye would provoke her into wearing some makeup.

Didn’t she care about looking decent?

“Carlos, do you hear me?” she squawked again, her dark eyes boring into his.

“Of course I hear you. I’m not fucking deaf.”

“Then answer me. Are you going to drive me to my mother’s?”

“For lunch? You don’t look like you need to eat to me.”

Lara’s face went slack. Hurt flashed in her eyes, and he knew he’d struck a nerve. Before she’d gotten fat, Lara had had an insane body. Normally Sully favored blondes, but Lara in a tank top and skinny jeans had caught his eye. Ever since she got knocked up, though, she’d let herself go.

“What are you doing out here anyway?”

“Cleaning my car. What does it look like?”

Lara crossed her arms. Her dark eyebrows thickened as she frowned up at him. Goosebumps pimpled her caramel-colored skin. He could see her nipples hardening through the light cotton top she wore. At least he still liked her tits. If there was one upside to the pregnancy, it was her bulging bra. At least that could still get him going.

“You spend more time with that damned car than you do with me.”

The top of the Safeway bag fluttered in the wind, and he lowered the trunk lid, blocking her view. He couldn’t argue the point. A classic car like this cost a lot of money. It was an investment. His father had owned one just like it when Sully was a kid. Of course, it was a beater. His old man never took care of anything, while Sully prided himself on keeping the Dodge in pristine condition. What was the point in owning something if you didn’t take care of it?

“Forget it, Carlos. If it’s too much bother, I’ll ask my mother to come get me.”

His fingers curled into fists and he looked past Lara to where the neighbors shuffled by. Great. Now they had a fucking audience.

The nosy couple who lived across the hall sauntered across the parking lot. They were staring. Sully nodded his greeting. The woman screwed up her pinched face and ducked into the car, but the guy offered a weak smile.

Sully deliberately lowered his voice.

“I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

“The car is spotless. I don’t know why you need to . . .”

He shot her a look that stopped her midsentence. Her head dipped, and she cringed away from him like a beaten dog.

“I’ll wait inside,” she said.

He waited until she’d waddled around the corner, her round hips swaying under the weight of the growing baby; then he turned the vacuum cleaner back on.

Once he dropped Lara off at her mother's, he'd look for a dumpster to stash the Safeway bag in. He didn't want it anywhere near his home. Just in case.





The howling wind snaked around the edges of the small cabin, clawing at the tin roof. It clanged and clattered, sounding like it might actually tear free of the trusses and launch itself up into the sky. Shivering, Brooke pulled the thin edges of the blanket around her. The ratty, stinking thing barely took the edge off the damp chill that drilled deep into her bones, but it was better than freezing to death.

She stared at the plastic bucket wedged into the corner, hating it, hating every single thing about being trapped down here. Chained up. Scared. Alone.

She crossed her legs and tried to hold it, but with her blood sugars soaring sky-high, there was no way around it. She had to pee. Her stomach churned. She hated the indignity of squatting over the bucket and smelling her own foul waste, but what choice did she have?

Teeth clenched, she marched over to the corner. She pulled down her panties and squatted over the bucket. Her thighs screamed like she'd just run a half marathon. Urine trickled out like water leaking from a hose, and Brooke grimaced.

Business done, she trudged back to the bed. The chain hissed along the floor behind her, the links digging into the thin flesh around her bony ankle, and she slumped down onto the mattress. She peeled back the corner and pulled out the insulin pen. Six inches long, it was the same length as a writing pen and four times the size around.

The plastic housing encased a small vial of short-acting insulin. She pulled off the cap, revealing a short, slim needle.

Brooke studied the pen in the waning light, her stomach tied up in knots. Under normal circumstances a pen would have lasted her a week. But that was when she was supplementing her shots with long-acting insulin. Trapped here, she had nothing but this. Without refrigeration, the medication lost some of its potency. This small device, with the one hundred units of insulin it contained, was the only thing keeping her alive.

And while she knew she had to use it, she also knew she had to use as little as possible. She had to let her sugars run as high as she could stand, because once the insulin ran out, she was as good as dead.

Brooke grabbed the dial at the end of the pen and twisted it slowly, carefully measuring out a dose. Twelve units? No. She cranked the dial back to eight. It wasn't enough. It wouldn't quench her cottonmouth, ease her aching muscles, or stop her skin from crawling like an army of ants marching up and down her body, but it was enough. It would keep her alive.

A violent gust of wind sent branches battering the tin roof. Brooke's eyes cut up toward the bare cedar beams, like at any minute the big bad wolf would huff and puff and blow her house down. The walls shuddered but stood firm, and Brooke looked down at the insulin pen in her hand.

She stabbed the short needle into her thigh. The dial clicked as the insulin pen dispensed, and she replaced the cap, still holding it tight in her fist . . . reluctant to let it go. Knowing it was the only thing that kept her going. And if she lost it, she would slip quietly into a coma and never wake up.

Brooke sank onto the mattress, her knees pulled in close to her chest, still gripping the pen. Fear and despair wrapped tight around her like the moldy woolen blanket over her shoulders. Tears threatened to fall, but she willed them back. Tears would do her no good. She had to stay strong; she had to survive.

The wind howled like a wolf through the woods. The lonely sound filled the empty cabin, and Brooke closed her eyes, letting it fill her too. Her breathing evened out, and she felt herself drifting toward the edge of sleep.

Then she heard it. A crack. Her heart jolted and Brooke bolted upright on the bed. She heard a hiss and another crack. The cabin rocked and Brooke tumbled off the bed. Bright sparks of pain exploded behind her eyes as her head hit the floor.

A rumble. Up above. Brooke rolled underneath the bed frame for shelter as something hard and heavy crashed through the roof. Chunks of beam and branches rained down around her. The floor shook. Her head throbbed. She pressed her palm tight against the wound at her temple. Warm trails of blood slid down her forehead onto her cheeks.

Violent gusts of wind shuddered overhead. The smell of wet pine filled the air. Hard, slashing rain blew through the gaping hole in the roof.

She waited for more—for what was left of the cabin's roof to cave in, for the massive trunk of the tree to pin her to the floor, for the bed frame to collapse on top of her. But that didn't happen. She was alive. It was enough.



The wind kicked up. Branches from the laurel hedge outside the window scratched against the windowpane. Unable to sleep, Marissa drifted down the darkened hall to Brooke's room. She crept into the deep shadows, bumping into the boxes and stacks of books piled on the floor. So many of Brooke's things hadn't made the college cut, a treasure trove of personal belongings too dear to donate, but not vital enough to cram into her small college dorm room.

*How can a place so full feel so empty?* Here among Brooke's things, fear flashed bright in her mind. She could have handled anything if she'd known Brooke was going to be okay.

More nights than she could count, Marissa had peered through cracked bedroom doors, checking on the girls while they slept. Kelly stretched out like a starfish on her back, a tangled mess of sheets wound around her torso and her arms and legs flung wide. And Brooke, curled up on her side, neatly tucked under the covers, her face serene in sleep.

In the weeks since Brooke moved out, she'd found herself worrying about all the little things that could go wrong. Was Brooke eating right? Taking her insulin? Making smart choices? Marissa wasn't stupid. College was a time when most kids experimented. Brooke wasn't like most kids though. Her diabetes set her apart, so some of the normal things kids did—partying, binge drinking, and drugs—were more risky for Brooke.

Marissa sank down onto the bed and clutched Brooke's pillow tight in her arms. She breathed in her daughter's scent still clinging to the pillowcase.

Alone in the dark, she let the tears come. For once she didn't hold back. She let it all out—the fear ratcheted tight in her chest, the frustration of not being able to do a damned thing to help find her daughter, and, most of all, the agony of not knowing. Smothered sobs racked her body until exhaustion finally overtook her and she slept.

Marissa awoke with the full light of morning shining in her face.

What time was it? Marissa craned her neck around and stared at the clock. The digital display blinked, and she realized the storm must have knocked the power out overnight. By the time she bolted out of Brooke's room, Kelly had already left for school.

Gritting her teeth, she endured a three-minute spritzing underneath the shower's bracing spray, then grabbed the first clean outfit from her closet before bolting out the door. After the scene she'd caused in the lobby yesterday morning, Paige Benoit might just make good on her threat to fire her, but Marissa needed her job.

She had the whole train ride into the city to regret her hasty wardrobe choice. The low-cut blouse defied the firm's conservative dress code. And although Marissa's legs would have been the envy of a Las Vegas show girl, she tugged self-consciously at the hem of her skirt as it rode up above her knees.

Clearly Ervine liked the view. His beady eyes never made it past chest level as he leered.

"Finally decided to show up for work today, Marissa?"

The look of contempt on her face was lost on him, since he was too busy staring at her cleavage to notice. She rose from her chair and handed him a stack of mail, forcing him to look up.

"If you have any concerns about my performance, feel free to discuss them with Ms. Benoit."

Ervine's round face flushed, and he sneered.

"No need. I hear she's already on the warpath. I'd start updating my résumé if I were you."

Marissa's stomach tightened another notch and she sank back into her chair. She wasn't surprised Benoit was out for blood. She was not known for her empathy. Still, Marissa needed this job. Maybe if she apologized and explained the situation, Benoit might understand.

The first chance she got, Marissa pulled her phone out of her purse and glanced at the display. No messages. She'd talked on the phone with Detective Crawford about Brooke's case last night. Since then, she'd heard nothing, and she was going nuts. The lobby was empty as she dialed Crawford's number. Before she could finish, someone called her name.

"Ms. Rooney."

Startled, Marissa looked up. Evan Holt stood by the desk. He was tall and thin with dark hair and deep almond-shaped eyes. His wide mouth wasn't smiling, which was a shame, really. He might actually be handsome if he didn't look so damned uptight.

Although Evan Holt was a lawyer, he was not a member of the firm. He worked closely alongside his Aunt, managing her personal matters. Marissa quickly scanned her calendar—Tuesday morning and she found nothing to explain his sudden appearance. At a loss, she forced a smile.

"Mr. Holt, what can I do for you?"

"Ms. Rooney, could you come with me, please?"

His tone was curt, his words more an order than a request, and Marissa's stomach sank in a sickening spiral of dread. She stood on rubbery legs, staring dumbly at him.

"Bring your things."

This was it. They were going to fire her for violating company policy and there wasn't a damned thing she could do to stop them. They didn't want to hear excuses. They didn't care what was going on in her personal life or why she'd left the office in a panic. The only thing she couldn't figure out was why they'd sent Evan Holt to deal with her. Surely Benoit wanted the honors.

Perplexed, Marissa collected her coat and purse and followed Holt toward the elevators. Paige Benoit's chilly voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Just where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"Ms. Rooney is coming with me," Holt said.

Benoit folded her arms, glaring at Marissa. "I wasn't notified of this."

"Then perhaps you should take that up with Mr. Regis." Holt's lips stretched into a condescending smile.

Leaving Benoit openmouthed and ready to spit fire, they exited the lobby and marched down the hall. Marissa supposed he was trying to be discreet, taking her away from prying ears to fire her. After yesterday's fiasco in the reception area, the last thing anyone wanted was to cause another scene.

Marissa and Holt stood on opposite sides of the brass-and-copper-caged car without speaking. The elevator operator pressed the button for the thirty-seventh floor. They were going up instead of down. Confused, Marissa frowned and glanced over at Holt. He cocked an eyebrow and eyed her from head to toe, not undressing her with his eyes like Ervine had, seeming more like a scientist assessing a test subject.

Marissa shifted uncomfortably in her heels, well aware that today she did not fit the conservative profile of the firm. Today Holt's mute assessment made her feel like a low-class bimbo.

"Nice shoes," Holt said, breaking the silence at last.

"They're Jimmy Choo knock-offs."

"I know."

He smiled. Confused, Marissa stood ramrod-straight, staring straight ahead as the floors slid smoothly by. Despite the brave front she presented, her apprehension grew as the elevator continued its steady climb.

If they fired her, she was screwed. Her savings account would evaporate in a matter of weeks. With Brooke in college, she was barely scraping by. Not only would she lose her family's sole source of income, she would lose her medical benefits too. There was no way she could afford private medical insurance, and Brooke needed insulin. Without insulin . . .

She clutched her coat against her chest, and the knot in her stomach tightened. Finally they arrived at the thirty-seventh floor. The elevator doors opened, and Marissa stepped out into a sumptuous suite. The floors were dark hardwood, polished to a lustrous glow. Flawless white walls stretched up to high, arched ceilings. Huge banks of windows showed a bird's-eye view of the city skyline to the north and the football and baseball stadiums to the south. To the west Marissa glimpsed the turbulent waters of Elliott Bay.

She had always loved this view. On her lunch break, she would often ride the elevator to the observation deck overlooking the city. Not only did it get her away from the lunchroom gossip, seeing the city from this angle made her feel larger than life, like a god staring down from atop Mount Olympus.

Marissa followed Holt down a long hallway to a conference room. He closed the door behind her. A bitter taste filled Marissa's mouth.

Yes. This would be a closed-door conversation.

Holt stood tall at the head of the table, his narrow face solemn as a clergyman's. Marissa settled into a chair at the other end, staring past him out the huge bank of windows, where a thick layer of dark clouds hung low over Elliott Bay.

Slowly he opened a fat manila folder at the end of the table. *A severance package?* She could hope.

"So, Ms. Rooney, it looks like you've been with the firm just over a year."

"That's right. I got hired after finishing my legal secretary certification."

"At North Seattle Community College," he finished. "Night school."

The arrogance in his tone piqued her, and Marissa raised her chin.

"We don't all go to Ivy League schools," she said.

Holt's expression remained flat, and Marissa wondered if there was a heart beating beneath his marble skin.

"Before that you worked for the Boeing Company."

"It's a good local company."

"I've heard of it," he said with a dry smile. "Why did you leave?"

Holt cocked his head, and Marissa wondered what was written in that magic file of his. Why she'd resigned was none of Holt's business. In truth, her old boss made Ervine look like an altar boy, but she'd never complained and the terms of her resignation had been generous. The money she got had kept the family afloat while she went back to school.

"I decided to upgrade my skills," Marissa said.

"Your attendance record has been good. I see no complaints in your file, and yet Ms. Benoit claims you walked out of the office yesterday without giving notice. Why?"

She saw nothing, no compassion, no curiosity, nothing in Holt's expression to compel her to confide in him. But if she wanted to save her job, she had to tell the truth.

"I had a family emergency."

“What type of emergency?”

Marissa pressed a hand against her flat belly. She wanted to tell Holt to shove his job up his uptight ass. Instead she forced the words from her lips.

“My daughter is missing.”

Saying the words out loud made the situation painfully real. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away. She wouldn't cry in front of Evan Holt.

Surprise registered on Holt's face, and something else. Sympathy? Acid churned at the pit of her stomach. She didn't want his pity. She needed her goddamned job. He glanced back at the file.

“Which one?”

“Brooke. She's a freshman at UW.”

“You've been married three times . . .”

“And divorced,” Marissa cut in, her patience at an end. “What's your point?”

His pawing through her private life, though amusing to be sure, was a waste of time, and Marissa was about done with the games.

“Just collecting background information.”

“Do you care to tell me how my marital history relates to my employment status? My kid is out there somewhere, and you want to know how many times I've been married? You're kidding, right?”

Holt ignored the question.

“How long has she been missing?”

“Four days.”

“And you've filed a missing-persons report?”

“Yes, of course. I'm not an idiot.”

“How much of this did you tell Ms. Benoit before you left the office yesterday?”

Marissa glared at him, her eyes boring holes in his Burberry suit. She didn't want to answer any more of his questions. Fuck the job. Fuck him.

*Count to ten*, she told herself, pulling in a deep breath. But she only made it to five.

“Do you have children, Mr. Holt?”

“No.”

Marissa's chin jerked up and down in a rigid nod. She doubted Holt had ever cared about another human being more than himself in his whole self-centered, trust-fund-brat, entitled life.

“If you did, you'd know their safety is more important to you than anything else in this world. If the firm can't see fit to grant me some leniency based on my excellent work record and the extreme circumstances of—”

Holt held up a dismissive hand, stopping her in midsentence.

“I get it, Ms. Rooney.”

Marissa's anger sizzled white-hot. The arrogant bastard didn't even have the decency to let her finish. Her hands clenched into fists as she fought to suppress the string of epithets she wanted to hurl in his face. Oblivious to her rage, Holt closed the folder.

“Would you mind waiting here?”

“What for?”

“I won't be long.”

Left alone, Marissa scratched at the nicotine patch she'd applied before leaving for the office. If she'd had cigarettes in her purse, she'd have lit one up right now. Damn the rules. Damn the consequences. Damn him.

Marissa raked her hands through her hair. What the hell was she going to do? Best-case scenario, they'd pay her severance. That would help, but it wouldn't be enough. She closed her eyes, knowing full well there was only one option. As much as she hated the idea, she was going to have to ask Logan for money. She had no other choice. She needed health insurance for Brooke, and she needed to keep a roof over Kelly's head.

She opened her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She thumbed through her contacts and was about to hit the dial button when she saw Kelly's name on the screen. A flicker of hope flared in her chest, and she answered.

"Did you hear from Brooke?"

Kelly hesitated. Tension crackled on the line before she finally spoke.

"No."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'm calling about something else. Do you remember my friend Ashley?"

Marissa closed her eyes and kneaded her forehead.

"From Redmond. Sure."

"Well, her parents are heading to Napa Valley for Thanksgiving weekend. Apparently they've got this amazing place. Anyway, Ashley has invited me to go with them. What do you think?"

The words tumbled out of Kelly's mouth so fast, it took Marissa a second or two to catch up.

"About?"

"Can I go with them to Napa Valley for Thanksgiving?"

The question caught Marissa off guard. She opened her eyes and stared out the bank of windows. Outside, a green-and-white ferry bobbed across the white-capped waters, struggling to hold its course against strong winds buffeting Puget Sound.

"It wouldn't be expensive, Mom. I've already checked flights online. If I book now, it will cost less than three hundred dollars. What do you say?"

Kelly sounded so excited it hurt Marissa's heart to say no. But what choice did she have? She dropped her gaze to the empty conference room table, gripping the phone tight in her hand.

"Look, Kelly, things aren't good at work. We can't afford—"

"But, Mom, all I'd have to pay for is my flight. They'd take care of everything else. I could get a part-time job and pay you back. It's not like it's a lot of money, only a couple hundred dollars. Please?"

"It's money I don't have to spend. Besides, with your sister missing, how can you even ask?"

Silence greeted her, and she could picture Kelly's expression all too well. Hurt. Angry.

"I could ask Logan. He'd—"

"Kelly, I said no."

"Since Logan works for the airline, maybe he can get me a free seat."

"No."

"You're such a bitch. No wonder Logan doesn't want you anymore."

Marissa's mouth dropped open, but before she could utter another word, Kelly hung up. Tears filled Marissa's eyes. She blinked them back, knowing any minute now Holt would march by, passing judgment, and there was no way she was going to cry in front of him.





What the hell was taking Holt so long?

Unable to sit still another second, Marissa stood and paced the length of the conference room. How long would he keep her waiting? And for what? He was just going to fire her anyway. He could damn well mail her the paper work.

She snatched her purse off a chair, slung it over her shoulder, and stalked toward the door. Her hand was stretched out toward the door when it opened. Marissa jumped. Holt stood in the doorway, his face revealing nothing.

“Ms. Rooney,” he said, “please come with me.”

Holt led the way to a pair of mahogany French doors. He stopped and knocked once. Marissa scowled. Visions of a firing squad flashed through her brain, and for one brief moment she thought she could smell the seductive scent of cigarette smoke. Holt threw open the door.

“Lizzie,” Evan Holt said in a disapproving tone of voice.

Elizabeth Holt sat behind a huge, ornately carved desk. Her yellowed skin was the same color as parchment paper. Pale, lined, and thin, it covered her sagging cheeks and drooping chin. Evan glared at the cigarette pinched firmly between Ms. Holt’s fingers like it was a stick of dynamite. Marissa watched the silvery ring of smoke swirl up into the air above Ms. Holt, curving around her head like a halo. A pang of longing shot through her. The smell filled her lungs and she could almost taste the warm buttered-toast flavor of a cigarette.

Ms. Holt looked unconcerned by Evan’s censure. Her lips curled up at the edges in an impish smile. Defiance twinkled in the old woman’s eyes.

“That’s Ms. Holt to you, or Aunt Elizabeth, if you must.”

Her voice was like coarse sandpaper, hard and grainy. Evan frowned. His upright stance stiffened and he glared across the desk at his aunt.

“You know what the doctor says.”

“He is not here. Besides, at this point, what difference would it make?”

“Well, if you don’t care about your doctor’s advice, then perhaps you could consider my welfare. I work here too and have no wish to inhale your secondhand smoke.”

Ms. Holt stared at him for a long moment, her sagging chin angled up. She placed the lipstick-stained butt between her lips and took another long drag, as if goading him to say something more. Evan’s mouth opened, but no words escaped as she reached over and flicked on the purifying air filter. The hum of the fan interrupted the silence, and smoke was sucked down into the blunted end of the device.

While Evan evidently found the aroma of cigarette smoke revolting, Marissa drew in a deep, longing breath and held it. Her fingers scratched absently at the patch on her arm.

“Ms. Rooney,” Ms. Holt said, turning her attention to Marissa. “Thank you for coming to see me. If you would be so kind as to take a seat, we can get started.”

*Started? Start what?* Ms. Holt wasn’t the type of woman you argued with, so Marissa stepped forward and perched on the edge of a high-backed leather chair. Her short skirt inched up her thighs, and she tugged it back into place again, grimacing, regretting her hasty wardrobe choice again.

Holt swished her hand through the air.

“Evan, you may go.”

Dismissed like a lapdog, Evan exited the room. The door clicked shut behind him, and Marissa's apprehension grew.

"Would you like a cigarette, Ms. Rooney?"

Marissa touched the patch on her arm. Would she? Absolutely, but there was no way she was going to sit here and smoke with Elizabeth Holt. Instead she shook her head.

"I'm trying to quit."

"A noble effort. I, myself, have never been the quitting type."

A thin smile stretched Holt's lips, and she took a final drag on the cigarette. The smoke was released from her lungs in a luxurious, silvery stream. Marissa watched it fade from the air like mist on a sunny morning. Holt crushed the glowing end of the cigarette in the heavy ashtray. Long, bony fingers plucked a file folder off the desk, and Holt opened it without glancing up. Her sharp eyes scanned the first page quickly.

Holt looked draped in wealth. The long, flowing cobalt jacket matched her eyes. The matching dress fell from her slim shoulders in a flattering neckline appropriate for a woman her age, low enough to show the glimmer of the gold necklace around her throat, but not too low. Her steel-gray hair brushed her shoulders in a sleek bob, and huge diamond earrings completed the look.

Holt's laser stare met hers over the top of the manila folder. Next to Holt's elegance, she looked like a ladder-climbing bimbo in her ill-fitting outfit. Marissa tugged at the neckline of her blouse and smoothed the hair away from her face.

"In the lobby yesterday, you said you were leaving to find your daughter."

Marissa's frustration bubbled over. "Aren't people in the firm allowed to have family emergencies?"

She regretted her defensive tone as soon as the words escaped her lips, but Elizabeth Holt didn't look offended. She looked curious. Her lips angled up in a ponderous smile. The smug expression irked Marissa.

"Of course, Ms. Rooney."

"I know Ms. Benoit was upset when I left yesterday, but when I realized my daughter's roommate hadn't seen her since Saturday, I had to leave. Quite honestly, Ms. Holt, I would do the same thing tomorrow."

Holt dipped her sagging chin in a slow nod. "Given the circumstances, it is entirely understandable."

Marissa's eyebrows wrinkled. Understandable? Bullshit. Why had Evan Holt grilled her? Why was she sitting here, if not to plead her case? Marissa had no idea what game Holt was playing, but she no longer cared. She was done with their games.

"So what do you want? Are you hoping I'll quit?"

"I want to know more about your daughter's disappearance. What have the police said?"

The abrupt change in topic took her by surprise, and Marissa clasped her hands in her lap.

"Not much. I spoke to Detective Crawford at the SPD. He asked a bunch of questions, and I haven't heard from him since. I left him a voice mail this morning and am waiting to hear back."

"You must be frantic with worry."

Was Holt screwing with her? Of course she was frantic with worry. Anyone in her shoes would be. She shouldn't be sitting here; she should be out looking for her daughter. She was wasting precious time.

Marissa stood up, looking down at Elizabeth Holt.

"Let's stop playing games."

Holt's eyebrows arched. She probably wasn't used to people giving her the straight goods, but Marissa was out of patience.

"Just what game do you think we're playing, Ms. Rooney?" Holt tented her fingers beneath her chin, waiting for Marissa to respond.

Marissa flipped her hands, palms up, returning Holt's stare. "Come on. It's obvious, isn't it? If you're going to fire me, I'd prefer you just get on with it."

Holt's lips thinned, and she regarded Marissa with a curious look.

"Very well then, Ms. Rooney," she said, and swished a hand through the air like a magician waving a magic wand. "You're fired."



The words didn't come as a shock. Marissa had already been braced for the blow. Expelling a breath from between pursed lips, she snatched her purse off the floor.

"Send the paper work to my home address," she called over her shoulder as she strode to the door.

She could probably sue for wrongful dismissal. God knew she needed the money, but right now it was the least of her worries. All she could think about was finding Brooke.

"Just a moment, Ms. Rooney, if you please."

*What now?* Marissa turned and glared down into Holt's lined face. Holt raised a gnarled finger.

"I do have another job opening . . ."

"Another job?"

"Yes. One for which I believe you're uniquely qualified. Please sit."

Marissa gripped the purse strap tight, torn. Was Holt screwing with her? Part of her wanted to march out of the office and never look back. Part of her knew she had to listen. Reluctantly she resumed her seat across from Holt. The old woman smiled.

"You see, I'm starting a new foundation. That's why I was visiting the office yesterday morning. I've asked Regis to draw up the papers for me."

"What kind of foundation?"

"Its purpose is to help victims of violent crimes and their families."

Marissa's head swam. She tried to grasp what Holt was saying. Hugging her purse to her chest, she shook her head.

"I don't understand. How do your plans for the foundation involve me?"

"My dear Ms. Rooney, I would think it would be quite obvious. Your daughter is missing, and I want to help. I'm going to need an executive assistant to help me launch the foundation, and you happen to be out of a job."

Marissa stared at Holt, dumbfounded. She was a receptionist, not an executive assistant. Why would Holt want her? Before she could utter a word, Holt continued.

"I propose we make the search for your daughter the foundation's first case."

Was she hearing this right? Was she dreaming?

"You want to help me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Holt eased back in her chair, a flicker of emotion crossing the old woman's lined face. Her flinty blue eyes were softer now, and Marissa waited. Holt reached beneath the collar of her shirt and pulled out a golden amulet at the end of a fine chain. From this angle, it looked like some kind of religious symbol, like a saint or an angel. Elizabeth Holt rolled it thoughtfully between her finger and thumb. At last she spoke.

"I've spent half my career, and a good chunk of my fortune, looking for ways to help families in crisis, Ms. Rooney. You see, when I was a young college student, much like your daughter, I was attacked in my dorm room. The terror of that day is something I will never forget. In the years that followed, I looked for ways to deal with my own trauma and heal my own wounds. I became a lawyer to fight for justice—not just for me, for all victims."

Holt released the amulet, and it disappeared in the folds of her blouse. She straightened.

“Eventually I realized justice wasn’t enough. There will always be more predators than there will be jail cells to house them, and predators are very difficult to catch. I want to do more while I still have time—to create a foundation that will provide resources to the people who need them most, to help victims and their families get on with their lives.”

Marissa was stunned by Holt’s revelation. Elizabeth Holt, wealthy, powerful, successful beyond measure, a victim? She couldn’t imagine it.

“I’m very sorry to hear about your daughter’s disappearance. I want to help.”

“How?”

“By giving you access to resources to help find her. By providing support for the search that you otherwise would not have.”

“And what would I have to do?”

Holt tented her fingers underneath her chin and smiled.

“Mainly, you would focus on the search for your daughter. But along the way, I will ask you to do a number of things to help make my dream of the foundation a reality.”

“It sounds too easy, too good to be true.”

“Easy?” Holt raised her eyebrows. “Oh no. Quite the contrary, Ms. Rooney, there will be nothing easy about it. You have faced many challenges in your life so far, but you have not given up. You have worked hard to better yourself, to build a life for your daughters. You are strong, and by the way you stood up to Ms. Benoit yesterday, I could see that you have got a lot of fight in you. That is good. You are going to need it. You are going to need every bit of strength you possess if you are going to survive this ordeal.”

Holt’s words chilled Marissa. Crossing her arms, she settled back into her chair.

“First, you are going to need to trust me. Can you do that?”

Marissa squirmed under Holt’s appraising eye. Trust? Everyone she trusted had betrayed her. Her mother. The men in her life. How could she learn to trust a woman she didn’t even know?

“You want to find your daughter?”

“Of course.”

“Then join my foundation. Let me help you find Brooke. I am warning you, though, as a prosecutor I have seen a number of these types of cases. They are often hard and ugly. Happy endings are a fantasy reserved for the movies. This ordeal will change you. It will change your daughter in ways you cannot begin to imagine. Let me ask you, Ms. Rooney, are you ready to face the road ahead, no matter how painful it might be?”

“I have no choice.”

Holt leaned back in her chair, eyebrows raised. “Indeed you do not.”

Marissa swallowed, her mouth as dry as sandpaper. “So, where do we start?”

Holt inclined her head, a slight smile on her lips.

“First we go to the police. We find out what on earth they are doing to find your girl. Second, you write a press release.”

“A press release?”

How the hell was she going to do that? No doubt Holt could whip one off in her sleep, but Marissa didn’t know where to begin.

“We need to engage the media in the search for Brooke. A press release is the first step.” Holt paused, her cobalt eyes never leaving Marissa’s face. “Shall we get started?”

“Yes,” Marissa said.





Elizabeth Holt stepped out of the limousine. The wet wind whipped off Puget Sound. Holt's black coat billowed around her narrow frame like a cape. She swept up the staircase, entering police headquarters like she owned the place. Marissa followed close behind. They crossed the lobby, heading for the front desk, where a young, clean-cut officer sat. He looked up as they approached, recognition registering on his narrow face.

"I'm here to see the chief," Holt said before he opened his mouth.

He glanced at a flat-screen monitor in front of him.

"Do you have an appointment, Ms. Holt?"

"I do not."

Still staring at the computer screen, the young officer angled his head to the right.

"I'm afraid his schedule is booked."

Holt cast a withering smile in his direction and pulled her phone out of her purse. She dialed a phone number and waited. With each passing second, the apprehension on the young man's face grew.

"Elizabeth Holt here. I need to speak to Marty. No, he most certainly cannot call me back. I need to speak with him now."

Marissa's eyes widened. Marty? She couldn't even get the police to call her back, and here Holt was calling the mayor. What must it be like to have such powerful connections?

"Interrupt him. This will only take a few minutes," she said in a hard voice, the thin veneer of civility stripped away.

Holt waited. Marissa stole a sidelong glance at the officer manning the desk. He was pretending to ignore Holt, but she could tell he was hanging on every word.

"Marty, I have a situation. I need to see Chief Abrams. Now. It's about a missing-persons case."

Holt bent her head, her sour mouth pursed, looking displeased as she listened to the mayor's response. Marissa's hopes plummeted. They weren't just going to waltz in there to see the chief. Even the great Elizabeth Holt's influence had limits.

"No, Marty, I am afraid that is not good enough. Did you hear the news? I've made *Fortune* magazine's list of most powerful women." She paused. "Thank you. I'm planning to talk to Lesley Stahl from *60 Minutes* about the nomination tomorrow, but now . . . well, turns out the publicity might aid my cause, though I was hoping to discuss the matter with the chief first. Of course, if he's too busy . . ."

Marissa gaped at Holt's brazen play. She wasn't just cutting through the bureaucratic red tape—she was shredding it.

"That would be fine. The girl's name is Brooke Parker. She's a nineteen-year-old college student from UW. I also want to meet the detective assigned to the case." Holt's chin jerked in a tight nod. "Excellent. Thanks for your help, Marty."

Elizabeth Holt dropped her cell phone in her purse. Two beats of silence passed before the telephone at the front desk rang. The officer stared at it as if it were a ticking bomb. His eyes flicked to Holt's face. She raised her eyebrows in expectation, and Marissa waited, hope coiled like a spring in her chest. He answered.

"Yes, sir," he said, and hung up the phone. "Ms. Holt, the chief will meet you upstairs in twenty minutes. I'll have you escorted up immediately."

They entered a large conference room and Elizabeth seated herself at the head of the long cherrywood table. Too keyed up to sit, Marissa paced the length of the room. Holt hadn't been exaggerating her influence. She was astonishingly well connected. After her phone call with Detective Crawford, Marissa hadn't heard a peep; now here she was, waiting for an audience with the chief of police. And all it had taken was a short, contentious phone call to the mayor.

The chief of police, John Abrams, marched crisply into the room, a phalanx of uniformed officers in tow. Abrams was a trim man in his midfifties with salt-and-pepper hair and piercing brown eyes. He had an erect military bearing and moved with a quick, efficient stride. After taking up a position at the foot of the table, Abrams introduced the two other police officers.

"This is Captain Moses Lindquist from the West Precinct and Lieutenant Brad Alvarez."

Each man reached across the table to shake their hands—Holt first, Marissa second—before everyone settled around the table. Tension showed in the men's tight, polite smiles. They didn't want to be here, but they had no choice.

"Ms. Holt, it's a pleasure to see you," Abrams said. "How can I be of service?"

"Good of you to see me, Chief Abrams. Who has been assigned to the case?"

"Detective Crawford."

"And where might this Detective Crawford be?"

"He's out in the field, ma'am. We don't need to wait for him. I'm sure we can handle this," Lindquist said.

Abrams had a good poker face. He looked pleasant, as if he were meeting with a colleague for coffee, with no trace of resentment on his face. She shouldn't be surprised. Political savvy was a must for anyone in his position.

"As I'm sure the mayor informed you, I am here because Ms. Rooney's daughter has gone missing. I was hoping you could get us up to speed on the investigation."

Holt's stern gaze swept the room, from Marissa to Chief Abrams, and settled on the police officers, who were seated to his right.

Captain Lindquist spoke first. He was a middle-aged man with a powerful build, thick through the shoulders and chest. He swung his bright-blue eyes toward Holt.

"So far we have found no evidence indicating that Brooke Parker was abducted."

Lindquist's matter-of-fact tone rattled Marissa. All illusions she'd had of the police snapping to evaporated.

Holt jumped in.

"Evidence? You mean an eyewitness swearing that some monster swept Ms. Parker off the steps of the Chapel and shoved her into a van? Is that the type of evidence you are looking for, Captain?"

Lindquist's eyes narrowed.

"Of course not. We've talked to people who saw Ms. Parker at the club that night. No one saw or heard anything that leads us to believe Ms. Parker left against her will. Additionally, she posted a message on her Facebook page saying she was heading out of town . . ."

"And I suppose no one has ever hacked a Facebook site?" Holt asked with mock naïveté.

A grim smile stretched across Holt's lips, and Marissa realized the old woman loved this; she loved going to war.

"It's presumptuous to think someone would go to such lengths to—"

"Cover up a crime?" Holt interrupted, eyebrows cocked. "Surely you don't believe that, Captain Lindquist." She flattened a bony hand against her sagging chest and said, "If I was brazen enough to snatch a girl up from a local bar, is it that much of a stretch to think I might cover my tracks?"

“And can you hack Facebook?”

“Me?” She touched her fingers to her chest and grinned at Captain Lindquist. “Hardly. I am barely capable of using my cell phone. I would be willing to wager that in less than twenty minutes, I could find someone who can.”

Lindquist’s lips compressed into a thin, angry line.

“So tell me, just how will the department look if it fails to investigate the disappearance of a teenaged girl?”

“Hold on, now. Let’s back up,” Chief Abrams said, raising a hand. “No one is saying we’re not investigating the case. However, at this point, we have no reason to suspect foul play. So, Ms. Rooney, help us understand what you think happened to your daughter.”

Marissa fidgeted in her chair and her mind went suddenly blank. She had been foolish to think Holt would handle everything for her. Her mouth bone-dry, she struggled to compose her response as all eyes turned toward her. Marissa fixed her gaze on Lindquist. There was nothing friendly about his answering look.

“Captain,” she began in a shaky voice, “I haven’t seen or heard from Brooke in three days. I believe something has happened to her.”

He grinned. She hated that grin. It made her feel small and stupid.

“No disrespect intended, Ms. Rooney, but your daughter is not a kid anymore. She doesn’t have to tell you where she’s going or ask your permission.”

Marissa glanced over at Holt, hoping she would jump in and crush all remaining doubts that Brooke was a runaway, but Holt was staring back at her. They all were.

“Brooke’s a diabetic. She needs her medication to stay alive.”

“Yes,” Lindquist said. “A condition your daughter has managed for years. There is no reason to think that she can’t manage it now, right?”

“Not necessarily. If she was taken, she might not have medication with her.”

“Any way to know that for certain?”

“No,” Marissa said, rattled but still determined to plow ahead. “She missed her sister’s recital. Brooke is not the kind of girl who would fail to show up, not to something she knows is important to her sister. I haven’t heard a single word from her. Normally she sends me a text or calls almost every day. It’s unusual for her to go dark, especially for this long.”

“Ms. Rooney . . .,” Lindquist said. He was going to dismiss her again. She could tell.

A slow flush of anger warmed Marissa’s cheeks. She couldn’t let him shut her down. Not now. She had to fight for Brooke. She couldn’t let them intimidate her into silence. The police said they were investigating the case, but she knew time was their enemy. She knew in her gut something was very wrong and stalling could cost Brooke her life.

Marissa’s gaze hardened and she leaned forward in her chair.

“Do you have teenagers, Captain Lindquist?”

“Yes,” he admitted, angling back.

“Is your teenager surgically attached to her cell phone? I know my daughter is.”

Lindquist reluctantly dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Have you checked Brooke’s phone records?”

Lindquist’s gaze dropped to the table and Marissa knew what that meant—she’d scored a point. Her confidence grew.

“In the eyes of the law, Ms. Rooney, your daughter is an adult with a right to privacy. We need to compel her service provider to release her cell phone records, and in order to do that, we’d need a

warrant.”

“Then get a warrant,” Marissa said. She pushed out of her chair and eyed each of the police officers in turn. “Even her roommate hasn’t heard from her since Saturday night. Brooke is missing classes, and that’s not at all like her. She’s coming up on exams. She wouldn’t just leave town without a word to anyone. I don’t care what her Facebook page says; there is something wrong. I know it. I need you to find out what it is.”

Lindquist cast a glance over at Chief Abrams. The chief nodded. But before he could speak, Lieutenant Alvarez jumped in.

“We’re working on it, but I have to tell you, Ms. Rooney, I get calls like this all of the time. Just last month there was a girl reported missing. Everyone agreed she was a responsible kid that would never just leave without letting her parents know. She met a boy at a party and took off for a weekend without telling her parents or her *boyfriend* where she was going. If we spent our time running down every single one of these cases . . .”

“Tell me, gentlemen, is Brooke Parker the only girl missing?” Holt interrupted, staring at Lindquist like she already knew the answer.

In the burgeoning silence, Holt beckoned toward Marissa. Hands shaking, Marissa pulled the missing-person flyer from her purse and slapped it on the table.

“What about Kim Covey?” Marissa asked. “Have you found her yet?”

Marissa slid the flyer into the center of the table. All the cops in the room glanced at it, then quickly looked away. Marissa caught Holt’s approving nod.

Alvarez looked like he was about to explode.

“We know how to do our jobs, Ms. Rooney. At this point there is no reason to think your daughter knew Kim Covey. They moved in different circles.”

Marissa slammed her palm hard on top of the flyer. The sound echoed in the room.

“Have you found her yet?”

She stared directly into the lieutenant’s eyes. Alvarez looked away first.

“No, but the last thing we need is for the public to panic about some psychopath out there abducting college girls.”

“Then you had better find my daughter soon, because I think it’s time the press heard about Brooke and what you’re doing, or, more importantly, not doing to find her. I’m sure they will be interested in a potential connection between Kim Covey’s disappearance and Brooke’s—two girls who went out with their friends and never made it back to the university campus. Take a look at this picture,” Marissa said, shoving the paper across the table toward Alvarez. He recoiled like she’d just flung a snake at him. “Look at her. Kim Covey looks so much like Brooke they could be sisters. Tell me you don’t see it.”

Marissa stared across the table at the police officers. All traces of apathy had vanished from their faces. Only Elizabeth Holt looked pleased.

Chief Abrams’s brow furrowed and he turned to Lindquist with a look as hard as stone.

“Call Crawford.”

“He’s on his way.”

“Call him,” Abrams commanded.

Lindquist’s lips pursed and he gave a brief nod. After rolling his chair away from the table, he stood and marched from the room. Moments later he returned and placed his cell facedown on the table.

“Rest assured, Ms. Rooney, we will continue to look into your daughter’s case.”

“And do what?” Marissa demanded.

They were pissed. That was good. So was she.

“We’ve got procedures,” Alvarez said.

“Procedures?” Marissa shook her head. “Brooke is an insulin-dependent diabetic, and yet it doesn’t look like she’s taken enough insulin with her to be away for days at a time. I found a full vial of insulin in her dorm room. Do you know what that means, Lieutenant? If she doesn’t have enough insulin, she will die. My daughter is out there somewhere without the medication she needs to stay alive. So while I’m busy waiting for you to follow your procedures, she may already be dying.”

A heavy silence answered Marissa. She met Alvarez’s hostile stare without flinching.

“How long will she survive without her medication?”

Marissa whirled toward the doorway. Her eyes collided with the newcomer’s. Shock jolted through her.

Thick, ropy scars disfigured the right side of his face. The puckered red skin arced beneath his eye, swept taut across his cheekbone, and ended at his jawline.

Marissa didn’t want to stare, but somehow she couldn’t tear her gaze away from his wreck of a face. He didn’t seem to notice. He met her eyes with a level gaze.

“You’re late, Crawford,” Alvarez said.

“Yes, sir. Traffic’s a bitch.”

Alvarez looked irritated by Crawford’s response, while Chief Abrams masked a grin behind his square hand. The detective was still looking at her, awaiting her response.

“With an insulin pen, a week, maybe two if she cuts back on her medication, but without the insulin in the vial, she’s going to run her sugars high.”

“What does that mean?” Crawford asked, sounding like he wanted to understand.

“It means she’ll be in constant pain as the muscles in her body feed on themselves to consume enough sugar to stay alive.”

Captain Lindquist grimaced. Marissa wondered if he was thinking about his own children now and how he’d feel if they were suffering. The other faces around the table looked equally sober.

“I looked at Brooke’s phone records and bank statements,” Crawford said. “There’s been no activity since eleven o’clock on Saturday night. It’s a definite break in her regular pattern. I was on my way over to the university to talk to her roommate when I was redirected here.”

Crawford wasn’t here to cover his ass, Marissa realized. He was actually doing his job. He was looking for her daughter.

“We will find out what happened to Brooke.”

*Brooke.* He remembered her name. For the first time in days, Marissa felt like she could breathe again. She forced herself to look past the hideous scars on Crawford’s face and into his steady gray eyes.

“That’s all I’m asking, Detective Crawford.”

“Does that meet your expectations, Ms. Holt?” Chief Abrams asked.

“Indeed it does. I do, however, request daily progress updates.”

Lieutenant Alvarez’s face turned a deeper shade of red. “In all appreciation for your interest in the case, Ms. Holt, Detective Crawford is carrying a full caseload. I will not ask him to provide you with daily updates.”

“I’ll do it,” Crawford said. He wasn’t looking at Elizabeth Holt. His gaze met Marissa’s squarely.



Alvarez stormed out of the conference room, a man on fire. On the drive back to the West Precinct, Alvarez barely said a word. Seth didn't mind the silence. It gave him time to consider Marissa Rooney and what she had said about her daughter's medical condition. Insulin affected the timeline in a big way. Without it Brooke would survive hours, maybe a day, until it was too late. They had already wasted too much time.

Alvarez paused in the break room and poured himself a cup of coffee. He turned toward Seth.

"So, Crawford, how did you like getting your balls busted by the great Elizabeth Holt?"

"I don't know what your problem is, Lieutenant, I love politics," Seth quipped.

"Yeah, you're known far and wide for your astute political savvy." Alvarez flashed a fierce grin. He gestured with the coffee carafe and Seth shook his head, declining the offer. Alvarez set the pot down. "You couldn't pay me enough to do the chief's job. The way I heard it, Holt was hell on wheels back in the day. She knows the system inside and out. Lucky us. We'll get to smile as she shoves this case down our throats."

Seth couldn't blame him for being pissed. No one liked being called into the chief's office. It wasn't like they were sitting around on their collective asses. But instead of getting bent out of shape about it, he did what his shrink advised him—he ignored the stuff he couldn't control and focused on the missing girl.

"So what's your plan with the Parker case?" Alvarez asked.

"I'll bump it to the top of my list for the next day or two. With any luck she'll pop back up at the dorm with a story about how she went out partying. No harm, no foul."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Alvarez said, his expression grim. "If not, we'll have the chief and the dragon lady breathing fire down our necks. At least the mother's not hard on the eyes."

Alvarez cut a sidelong glance his way. Seth shrugged.

"If you say so."

"Like you didn't notice."

Of course he'd noticed. What guy wouldn't? But it wasn't her pretty face that lingered in his mind. He couldn't quite shake the look of panic in Marissa Rooney's eyes.

"Keep me posted on your progress."

"Yes, sir." Seth snapped a flippant salute and strode across the busy squad room toward his desk.

Seth's fifteen years on the force had left him short on optimism. Experience had taught him to treat every missing-persons case like a homicide. Politics aside, this case was no different. One missing college student was bad news. With two on the books, the sooner he could uncover or rule out a connection between the cases, the better.

Brooke's Facebook page was a treasure trove of information. While the techies were busy scouring her circle of friends to uncover any potential overlaps with Kim Covey, Saturday night's post told him that she and her roommate, Tess Turner, had spent the evening at the Chapel. One of Brooke's Facebook friends, Jesse Morgan, tended bar there. A quick phone call later, he learned that Jesse's shift was just beginning.

Seth opened his desk drawer to retrieve his car keys.

The photograph stuffed in his drawer stopped him cold. A stab of pain sliced through his heart. Golden-brown eyes stared up at him, bright and brimming with life. Holly. Two years had passed, and still not a day went by that the memories of her didn't burn through his soul like acid.

His shrink said he should get rid of the pictures—pack them away in a box where he didn't have to see them. But what good would that do? The memories stayed with him. So he kept the picture locked away in his drawer, a private pain only he could see. Some days he looked right past her face, barely flinching. Days like today, though, with a missing girl and a scared mother on his mind, the hole in his heart gaped like an open wound.

Reaching over the photo, he grabbed his car keys and slammed the drawer shut.

• • • •

MIDAFTERNOON PATRONS perched like vultures around the Chapel's U-shaped bar. Large arched windows reflected the gray afternoon sky. House music blared, and Seth was surprised he recognized the artist. Madonna. Though he admired her ability to keep up with the trends, he had little use for the song, electronic and hollow. He found himself missing the days when bands played real instruments. He knew his fondness for wailing guitars dated him, but what the hell.

The bartender was busy slicing up enough fruit to garnish a sea of jewel-colored cocktails. He glanced up as Seth approached. Catching sight of Seth's face, the kid did a double take before quickly looking away. He recognized Jesse Morgan from his DMV photo.

Jesse was a good-looking kid. Medium build. Sandy, shoulder-length hair. Blue eyes. A colorful sleeve of tattoos wound its way up his arm from wrist to shoulder.

A slight young woman perched across from him. With spiky black hair, pale skin, and bright-green eyes, she looked like a wood sprite. Seth didn't have to hear what she was saying to see she was pissing Jesse off. It was obvious—Body Language 101. There was no mistaking the clenched jaw and the way he glared at her, eyes as hard as metal.

Seth stepped close enough to hear her voice over the pounding music.

“Why invite us in the first place if all you were going to do was ignore us?”

Jesse glowered at her. He tossed a lime into a container and shook his head.

“So you're not going to answer,” she said, folding her arms like an angry wife.

“You saw how busy it was. What did you expect me to do? I was working.”

“Working? That's what you call it?”

“Look, I don't give a fuck what you think.”

Seth recognized the girl from Brooke Parker's Facebook page. Tess Turner. She was supposed to be in class; instead here she was, harassing Jesse.

Jesse looked up and caught Seth's gaze.

“What can I get you?”

Seth flashed his badge and Jesse rolled his eyes.

“Drinking on duty, Officer?”

“Just here for a friendly talk, but I see Ms. Turner beat me to it.”

Looking directly at him, Tess grinned. “You're the cop I talked to on the phone.”

“One and the same.”

Seth wasn't a big man, but in his grasp, her hand felt as small as a child's.

“Can you make her leave before I throw her out?” Jesse asked, pointing the business end of the paring knife in Tess's direction.

Tess scowled. “Throw me out? For what?”

Jesse pointed toward the glass on the bar and Tess raised her palms.

“It's soda water, Einstein. You weren't so self-righteous on Saturday night.”

“If I'd known what a huge pain in the ass you were going to be, I'd have . . .”



Jesse stopped midsentence. His face flushed red, and Tess leaned across the bar, planting her bony elbows wide.

“You’d have what, tough guy? Come on. Out with it. They say confession is good for the soul.”

Jesse shot Tess another murderous glare. She returned his look with a grin.

Seth sighed. “That’s enough, Ms. Turner.”

“You heard the police officer.” Jesse sliced the tip of the paring knife through the air, pointing toward the doors. The sharp metal edge glinted silver in the light. “Go home, little girl.”

Tess opened her mouth, ready to argue, but Seth stifled her response with his upraised palm.

“Ms. Turner, if you would be so kind as to wait over there”—Seth gestured to a booth in the corner—“I’ll speak with you after I finish with Mr. Morgan.”

Tess flashed a haughty show of teeth. With a light thump, her boots hit the floor, and she padded over to the booth with quick, graceful strides. The two women at the end of the bar held up their shot glasses, and Jesse gave a curt nod. The dark-haired woman smiled. The dimple in her cheek, so like Holly’s, sliced through Seth’s heart, and he turned away.

“You’re here about Brooke,” Jesse said.

He grabbed two shot glasses and slammed them onto the bar in front of the women. A splash of Galliano in each, a sugar-coated lemon on each rim. Then he poured a shot of sambuca into a brandy snifter and set it on fire. Blue flames filled the bowl. Slowly spinning the snifter, Jesse warmed the alcohol.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the flames, Seth watched, his fingers stroking his scarred cheek. Jesse poured the flaming sambuca over the two shot glasses. Fire rolled over the rims and pooled on the bar. Blue flames flickered. The women laughed, looking delighted.

Seth missed drinking—how the sweet oblivion of alcohol made everything fade from his mind until there was nothing. His shrink called drinking a crutch. His sponsor called it a problem. He called it a solution, but they couldn’t all be right.

“When was the last time you saw Brooke?” he asked.

“Saturday night.”

“Where?”

Jesse’s hands splayed wide. “What do you mean, where? Here, obviously.”

“You were working?”

“Right. They were sitting at the end of the bar.”

“Did you leave the bar with her?”

He shook his head, long bangs obscuring his eyes. “Around midnight, I looked up and she was gone.”

“Did you see her leave?”

“The place was a zoo.”

“What about Ms. Turner? When did she leave?”

“I couldn’t tell you. There must have been a hundred people hanging around the bar. It’s tough to see any one person. We’re hustling all night.”

“Poor baby,” Tess called from the table. “How many phone numbers did you get?”

Jesse’s brows furrowed and he fixed his angry gaze on Tess. “Contrary to popular belief, I’m not a man-whore.”

Tess looked skeptical, but let it drop.

“What time did you say you left?” Seth asked.

Jesse grabbed a bar cloth and ran it under the tap.

“After we closed, around two thirty.”

“Anyone see you?”

“Sure, there were a few of us who hung around for a drink before we went home.”

“Did you leave with anyone?”

“Look, I moved back to town a week ago. I’m still looking for a place. For now I’m crashing out on my buddy’s couch. He can vouch for me. I went back to his place after my shift. Alone.” Jesse wrung the cloth dry and wiped some smudges from the bar. His expression sober, he shot a quick glance at Tess and lowered his voice. “You don’t really think something bad happened to Brooke, do you?”

“She’s missing, you moron. What do you think?”

Jesse’s hands clenched into fists. Seth sighed and cast his stare over at Tess. She shifted in her seat and looked away.

“Ms. Turner, must I ask you to wait for me outside?”

She scowled and shook her head. Jesse propped his hands on the bar.

“How well did you know Brooke?”

“We were friends in high school. Well, more than friends, actually, but after graduation I moved away and we didn’t stay in touch.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Five years. So when I moved back, I looked her up.”

“And what made you want to get back in touch with her?”

Jesse cocked his head. “You saw her, right?”

Seth nodded. Brooke Parker was a pretty girl. She looked like her mother. Jesse dropped his gaze and continued.

“We were close once.”

“That’s all?”

“Maybe I was interested in seeing if there was something still there. You know, the road not taken.”

“And was there?”

He shrugged with his palms up. “We barely had time to talk. Like I said, it was crazy in here.”

Seth paused. The easy answer was no, so either the kid was a skilled liar or he was telling the truth. Seth was inclined to believe him. Still, he pressed on.

“Can you think of anything else that might help locate Brooke?”

Jesse’s expression was grim.

“I wish I could. I tried texting her on Sunday, but heard nothing back. I thought maybe she was pissed.”

“Why would she be pissed?”

“Because I didn’t spend any time with her. You know how touchy women can be.”

Seth waited for more, but Jesse fell silent. Dropping his gaze, he pushed back onto his heels. His lips tightened into a grimace. “Christ, I hope nothing bad happened to her. I feel responsible, you know, like if I hadn’t invited her here on Saturday night, none of this would have happened.”

He sounded sincere, and checking his story out would be easy. There were plenty of people Seth worked with who could tell him what kind of kid Jesse was.

Seth placed his business card on the bar. Jesse stared at it for a moment before stowing it in his pocket.

“If you see or hear something that might help, call me.”

“I’ll talk to the regulars. Maybe they saw something.”

“Thanks.”

Seth pivoted away from the bar and crossed the room to join Tess at the corner booth. She wasn’t looking at him though. Her gaze was locked on Jesse Morgan.

Reaching out a hand, he picked up her glass and gave it a sniff. It smelled like pool water. The sulfuric scent of soda and lime filled his nose. His curiosity satisfied, he set it back down. She looked amused by the gesture.

“How long have you been sober?” she asked.

Surprised, Seth glanced up, and his eyes locked with hers.

“That’s an odd question.”

“My father’s retired army. He has a lot of friends in the program. After a while you get to know the signs.”

Seth rubbed a hand across his jaw and studied her. Small, pierced, and edgy, Tess was easy to dismiss—just another kid trying desperately to stand out. Her keen instincts were hard to ignore, though, and the total lack of a filter between her brain and her mouth was going to get her into trouble someday.

“It’s not him, you know,” she said, with all the certainty a nineteen-year-old could muster.

Seth suppressed a grin.

“Is that your professional opinion, Ms. Turner?”

“Tess,” she corrected him. “For starters, he’s not smart enough. Second, if he wanted Brooke, he wouldn’t have to work too hard. It’s not like she goes out to bars, so I figured she must like him to come here.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?”

“Not really. I mean, she hooked up with a guy at a party a few weeks back, but it was no big thing. The next day, she told me what a jerk he was.”

“Was he the type of guy who would stalk her?”

“They hooked up. That’s all. It was no big deal.”

*No big deal*, Seth thought. Sex had always meant more to him than that. But then, he’d married his college sweetheart. What did he know about teenage girls playing the field?

“Can you think of anyone who may have held a grudge against Brooke?”

“Well, there was that asshole at the bar.”

“The guy whose picture is posted on Brooke’s Facebook page?” Seth pulled his phone from his pocket and showed her the photo.

She nodded. “Yeah, that’s him. He was hitting on Brooke and it was creeping her out.”

“Creeping her out how?”

“Most guys will go away when you blow them off, but not him. He got angry. He started asking if she was too good for him, you know?”

“Is that why Brooke took his picture?”

“I snapped the photo, figuring if he was some kind of psycho-pervert, the fact we had his picture would freak him out.”

“Good thinking. Do you recall his name?”

“Who? Douchebag? I don’t know. I was just happy to see the back of him.”

“Did you see him leave the bar?”

Tess shook her head. “Lover boy was right about one thing: it was pretty crazy in here.”

Nobody liked getting snubbed, but was he crazy enough to do something about it—especially considering Brooke had his picture? If he took Brooke and her phone, he might have thought he was safe.

“Did you see Brooke post the photo?”

“No.”

“What happened after that?”

“I went to the bathroom. When I got back, Brooke was gone. I assume she got tired of lover boy ignoring her.”

“Did she drive here?”

Tess shook her head, the barbell stud in her eyebrow catching the light. “She’s got an app on her phone.”

Seth made a mental note to check Brooke’s account to see if she’d taken the service home.

“What did you do after that?” he asked Tess.

Cheeks turning pink, she twisted her small hands together on the table.

“Well, I met up with these other guys and left with them about one.”

“Where did you go?”

“A party at their house on Capitol Hill.”

“And when did you get back to the dorm?”

“Sunday afternoon.”

“Oh,” Seth said.

Tess looked away, and he wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was—he could just as easily be sitting with Brooke asking questions about Tess’s disappearance.

“And that’s the last time you saw Brooke?”

“I tried calling her later, but her phone went right through to voice mail. I knew her sister had some kind of music thing the next day. I didn’t think much about it until her mother called.”

“Did you think it was unusual for Brooke to take off like that?”

“I guess I didn’t think that much about it. Not until she missed class, I mean. She was pretty religious about school.”

Seth’s brow furrowed. No doubt the bar had surveillance cameras, but the quality of the video would depend heavily on how up-to-date the system was. Best-case scenario, he could track Brooke’s movements more closely, see if anyone had tailed her out of the bar. Worst case, they’d be chasing a shadow.

“Thanks for all your help, Ms. Turner, but I’ll take the investigation from here.”

Her lips pursed and she glared at him through narrowed eyes.

“I’m sure,” she snapped. She stirred her drink as a silence stretched out between them. “Have you ever considered plastic surgery for your scars?”

“What?” Seth asked. The bluntness of the question took him off guard.

“Your scars. I know it’s none of my business, but one of the guys from my brother’s unit had some pretty nasty burns from an IED in Afghanistan. The doctor he’s been seeing does really good work. You can still tell he has a burn, but it’s much better than it was.”

Seth blinked. Most people avoided uncomfortable topics, but Tess plowed ahead without the tiniest trace of embarrassment. She was honest. Real. Not something he saw much of in his line of work. Maybe that was why he liked her.

“Your brother is military?”

She nodded. “It’s the family business. He’s currently deployed. Afghanistan.”

Abruptly Tess jumped to her feet and pulled on an oversize army jacket. Her tiny frame swam in it. A patch above the pocket read *Turner*.

“One more thing, Ms. Turner. Do you know this girl?”

Tess’s face paled as she stared at the image on Seth’s phone. She gave her head a tiny shake.

“But you know who she is, don’t you?”

“I’ve seen the posters on campus enough times to recognize her. That’s Kim Covey.”

“Do you think Brooke knew her?”

She shifted her weight between her feet, looking grave. “You don’t think the same psycho who took Brooke also has her, do you?”

“We’re trying to rule out any connection between the two cases.”

Tess angled her head and looked away. “I don’t think so.”

Seth nodded and stowed the phone back in his jacket. He looked up and eyed Tess thoughtfully.

“What are you studying in school, Ms. Turner?”

“Forensic psychology,” she said, her lips curled in a trace of a smile.

Seth shook his head. A grin spread slowly across his face. “Figures.”

His cell phone rang.

“Crawford,” he answered.

“We’ve got a match on your photo.”



Jasmine-scented steam swirled from the brim of Alicia's teacup. She wrapped her long fingers around the porcelain, leeching as much heat from the glass into her hands as possible, and shivered like a flower petal in the wind.

"How are you feeling?" Drew asked.

She certainly looked like shit. Her face was pale and her eyes glassy. She should be home under a blanket, not huddled over a teacup fighting to stay awake.

"My throat hurts and my head's killing me. Seriously, would it kill them to turn up the heat in here?"

Drew reached across the table and pressed his palm against her forehead. She was burning up.

"It's not cold in here, sweetheart. It's you. Let's get out of here."

He looked around for the waitress but didn't see her. She was probably in the back flirting with the cook or the dishwasher, or checking her Facebook site, or whatever it was that kept her from doing her job. Alicia burrowed deeper into the folds of her sweater.

"You finish eating first."

Drew wasn't about to argue. This was his favorite Thai place in the city. From the outside it looked like a dive, with its pitched roof and rotting shingles. Bar none, it had the best pad thai. He shoveled another heaping portion into his mouth and savored the sweetness of the sugar, the warm, luscious noodles, the crisp, slightly bitter tang of the sprouts, and the crunch of the peanuts. This was sex on a plate.

Alicia's phone chirped. She pulled it out of her pocket and scowled at the screen.

"Who is it?"

"Gretchen."

Drew's lips twitched. Gretchen was the worst kind of friend. With no life of her own, she inserted herself into the lives of others, planting her poisonous little lies like seeds in fertile soil, waiting for them to sprout roots. That's what unhappy people did. Of course, Alicia didn't see it for what it was. They'd been BFFs since third grade, and Gretchen had probably been doing this sort of thing their whole lives.

But Drew knew a thing or two about manipulation. He knew there was nothing benign about Gretchen's meddling. She wasn't an overprotective friend looking out for her circle's best interests. She was a parasite.

"So, what's good old Gretchen up to tonight?"

"She's getting drunk and wants me to come join her."

Alicia held up her phone. Gretchen was a big white blur against the dark sea of humanity behind her. Even with the bad lighting, Drew recognized the U-shaped bar of the Chapel well enough.

He took another bite of pad thai, but the thought of Gretchen left a bad taste in his mouth. He swished a gulp of jasmine tea around in his mouth and swallowed.

"Are you going?"

Alicia thumbed the button on the side of her phone and stowed it back in her pocket.

"Are you kidding? It's Tuesday night. I've got work in the morning and I feel like crap. The only place I'm going is home to bed."

Drew looked up and caught the waitress's eye. He motioned for the check.

"That's a good idea. Some extra sleep and you're going to feel much better in the morning."

By the time he dropped Alicia off, she was coughing, and he figured that after downing a healthy dose of NyQuil, she'd be out for the night. He didn't drive home though.

Opportunity awaited him on a barstool on Capitol Hill.

• • • •

GRETCHEN HUNCHED OVER her phone. The black wraparound dress she wore gaped away from her cleavage and dipped low enough to reveal the edges of a turquoise lace bra. From all the way back here, he could tell she was frowning.

She looked desperate. Begging to be noticed. Slamming the phone down on the bar, she looked dangerously close to tears. Drew pushed away from the wall, knowing there would never be a better time to make his move.

Poor little Gretchen needed an ally.

"So, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" he asked, perching at the bar beside her.

"Fuck off," she said without glancing up.

Drew smiled. "Ugly talk for such a pretty girl."

"Where's Alicia?" she asked, her words a little slurred. She wasn't drunk yet, he realized, but she was on her way.

"She's sick. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

Gretchen rolled her bloodshot eyes.

"What do you want, Drew?"

"I'm hurt, Gretch. You don't look happy to see me."

She glowered, but didn't comment. A long-haired bartender deposited a fresh ruby-red drink in front of her.

"Hey, weren't you here on Saturday night?" he asked, squinting at the two of them.

"Yes," she said, a smile blossoming on her face.

Drew smirked. Jesus, she was easy to read. One glance from a good-looking guy pulled her right up out of her funk.

"I was hoping that maybe you'd seen a friend of mine. She's missing."

The smile wilted on Gretchen's lips. She glanced at the snapshot, and Drew's heart jolted as he recognized the girl. Brooke Parker.

"Sorry," Gretchen said. Orange curls bobbed around her face as she shook her head.

Beneath his crisp white shirt, Drew's pulse pounded. He was a dark blur behind Brooke's blonde head. A clearer image would have sent Gretchen racing back to Alicia with another story he'd have to explain away.

"You're sure?" the bartender asked.

"Sorry," Gretchen muttered, handing back the phone.

He turned his gaze on Drew. "What about you?"

Drew had no choice. He took the phone and studied the picture. "You said she's missing?"

"Disappeared Saturday night."

Drew shook his head. "Sorry, man. I wish I could help."

"Did you take any photos that night?"

"Me? No. I'll check with my girlfriend. I'm not sure how much help they would be. We were up there most of the night." Drew pointed to the balcony.



“Thanks,” the bartender said, pocketing the phone. With a grim look, he whisked the empty glass away, leaving the two of them alone again.

“What do we have here?”

Drew lifted the martini glass off the bar. It smelled fruity, sweet—cranberry with a slight hint of orange.

“It’s called an Angel’s Kiss.”

A wicked grin crossed Drew’s face and he took a sip. Cloyingly sweet, it slid down his throat, and he grimaced.

Angel’s Kiss? It tasted more like a Tacoma Whore to him.

“Hey.” Gretchen swatted his chest. “That’s mine, asshole.”

“And you’re welcome to it. It’s too sweet for my taste.”

“I thought you liked sweet things.”

A smile tugged at Drew’s lips. He liked Gretchen bitter. She was so much more interesting than the giggling bimbo he’d met Saturday night.

“What are you doing here anyway? Did Alicia send you on a mission of mercy?”

She didn’t look up. She propped her temple against her fist and half drained the martini glass. Drew kept his gaze focused on her until finally she raised her eyes.

“Alicia went home sick and I thought you could use a ride.”

Gretchen snorted.

“Really? So you came to my rescue all on your own? How fucking noble of you. I thought you were still mad over the coffee shop thing.”

“Look,” he said, leaning in, “I know we haven’t exactly gotten off on the right foot, and I was hoping we could change that.”

“I don’t see how.”

“Let me drive you home.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack, Gretch. You’re in no shape to drive, and taxis take forever. Come on. Let me do something nice for you.”

“I don’t believe you. What do you really want?”

“We both care about Alicia. Wouldn’t it be better for all of us if we tried to get along?”

Gretchen bobbed her head, her eyes fixed on the empty martini glass. She looked sad, defeated, like she didn’t have a friend left in the world. He leaned closer, his voice so soft only she could hear.

“So, what do you say we get out of here?”

“You’re not trying to pick me up, are you?”

Drew’s lips stretched into a crooked smile.

“What do you think?”



“So that’s your girl right there,” the tall, skinny cyber-tech said, pointing at the blurry footage from the surveillance video.

Seth’s hand splayed on the desk as he inched closer to the screen. It was Brooke Parker all right. “It’s grainy as shit.”

“Fred Flintstone technology. I’m surprised it records anything. Looks like the Chapel is in serious need of an upgrade.”

Seth nodded, his eyes locked on the monitor. Brooke Parker sat at the bar along with her friend, Tess Turner. A man approached them. Husky build. Frizzy, reddish-brown hair.

“That’s your guy. Charles Sully.”

“How can you tell?” Seth couldn’t make out any specifics from the video feed.

“We ran facial recognition on him from the photo you sent us and this.”

“The footage is usable?”

The tech angled his head.

“Well, not on its own. We’ve worked some of our magic on it, and even then, we needed the photo from the girl’s Facebook site.”

Seth nodded, watching the interaction between Charles Sully and Brooke. It fit with what Tess had told him. The guy was coming on strong and Brooke was pulling away and then . . .

“Who’s that?”

“The new guy?”

“Yeah.”

Seth leaned in closer to the screen. A tall, dark-haired man was standing behind Brooke. He squared off against Sully and Sully backed down. The dark-haired guy stayed with the girls. A few minutes later, Tess left for the restroom.

Why hadn’t Tess said anything about him? It didn’t make sense.

“I’m going to skip ahead some.” The tech grabbed the remote control, and the action skipped by, too fast to see, until he slowed it down again.

Seth saw Brooke trail the tall guy out of the bar. Charles Sully followed, several feet behind.

“That’s it?” Seth asked. “They left together?”

“No, the guy comes back in, like, thirty seconds later. Here.”

Seth watched the tape long enough to see the dark-haired guy stride back in through the doors. Sully did not.

“Can we figure out who the new guy is?”

“Tried that. We don’t have a good angle on his face. Even if we did, the quality isn’t good enough to run facial recognition on its own. We’d need something else to go on.”

“Thanks, man.” He clapped the tech on the shoulder and headed back to his desk.

At least now he knew the name of the guy posted on Brooke’s Facebook page. It was a start.



CHARLES SULLY WAS THE kind of sick bastard you didn’t want anywhere near your daughter. He was the kind of asshole you wouldn’t even let walk your dog, Seth concluded as he scrolled through Sully’s file. Convicted on a domestic abuse charge a few years back, Sully already had two strikes against him. One more conviction would send him away for a long, long time.

According to the police report, the beating Sully's last girlfriend had suffered was so severe that the judge ordered a psychological evaluation before Sully was released from prison. Seth made a note. He wanted that report. First thing in the morning, he'd call the forensic psychologist to see what other details he could dig up.

The other guy Tess had mentioned—the college guy Brooke hooked up with a few weeks back, was a dead end. He'd been visiting his parents in Kelso the weekend Brooke disappeared.

His phone beeped and he looked at the display. It was a one-word text from his boss, Lieutenant Alvarez.

*Update?*

Seth groaned. *The chief wants an update.* He was already an hour and a half late with his daily report. Rolling his eyes, he grabbed the keyboard, composing the e-mail in his head. If he delayed any longer, the text would turn into a call. And a missed call would turn into a summons.

Half an hour later, he sent the report. Tension coiled tight around Seth's spine. He tilted his head slowly from side to side, stretching his neck. It was late. He should go home.

*Home.*

The word sounded as hollow and empty as the house where he slept. He eased the desk drawer open a few inches and slid his hand inside. His knuckles scraped against wood and he hissed. He couldn't look at her face. Not tonight. Not if he wanted to sleep.

• • • •

SETH PULLED INTO THE driveway of his house. The security light flashed on, scaring off the neighbor's cat. The orange tabby leaped from the railing and landed with a thud on the hood of Seth's car. He raced by the windshield and disappeared through the laurel hedge.

Truth be told, Seth didn't mind the cat. He'd thought about getting one himself. Having another living thing in the house, even if it was a stupid cat, didn't seem so bad.

Seth glanced through the windshield at the house. The windows were black. Silent. Empty.

He put the car in reverse and pulled out of the driveway. Halfway down Fremont Avenue, he saw the bright neon lights of the Dubliner Pub and slowed down. Instinctively he looked for an open parking spot nearby. He could stop in for just one beer. Just one. Then he would go home. Then he would sleep.

The street was jammed with cars, no opening in sight. Disappointment rushed through Seth with relief following close on its heels. For a split second he thought about circling the block or maybe heading across the bridge to the Nickerson Street Saloon. Instead he pressed down on the accelerator and skimmed along the lakeside, heading south.

• • • •

MARISSA ROONEY ANSWERED the door in a white T-shirt and yoga pants. Seth didn't have to ask how she was doing. Her puffy red eyes spoke volumes about her state of mind. Marissa stared at him for a second or two, not speaking. Rain hammered against the door, and she ushered him inside.

"I'm making tea. Do you want some?"

"Sure, that would be great."

There was nothing fancy about the house. It was a whitewashed Cape Cod on a nondescript street. The rooms were small, cozy, and simple—not quite as manically precise as Martha Stewart, but close. He followed her into the kitchen. It was painted a sunny yellow that set off the white cupboards and gave a homey feel to the space.

Marissa set the teapot and cups down in the center of the round IKEA table and settled in the seat across from him. She folded her arms and crossed her legs, one foot jiggling in the air.

“Do you have news?” she asked.

“Not yet. I have a few more questions.”

More than questions, really. He wanted to know what kind of mother Marissa Rooney was. Whether Brooke had had a reason to run away.

“What about Jesse Morgan? Have you found him yet?”

“I spoke to him.”

“And?”

“He’s got an alibi for the night Brooke disappeared.”

Marissa raked her long blonde hair away from her face, looking like she had more to say.

“I understand they were close.”

“They were.”

“You didn’t like him?”

“I didn’t approve of the relationship,” she said, sounding defensive. “He was older than her, the kind of kid without a plan.”

Seth nodded, filling in the blanks. Parents instinctively wanted to protect their kids, and it didn’t take a genius to do the math. Marissa was in her midthirties, which would have made her a teenager when Brooke was born. The last thing she’d wanted was for her daughter to get knocked up by a high school loser. Whatever sins she’d assigned to Brooke’s father, she no doubt foisted them off onto the Morgan kid.

“Did he ever do anything that made you worry for Brooke’s safety?”

“Like hurt her? I wouldn’t have thought so, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Why do you say that?”

Marissa huffed out a breath. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“It seems strange to me that within a few days of his popping back into Brooke’s life, she disappears. Doesn’t that seem odd to you?”

He’d thought the same thing initially, but Jesse’s buddy had backed his story. So, with nothing more to go on, he’d pushed this lead onto the back burner. Unless the cyber-techs found something on Brooke’s e-mail or social media accounts to contradict what Jesse had said, he had to look elsewhere.

“What about other boyfriends?”

“There were a few in high school.”

“Anyone you can think of who might hold a grudge?”

“Of course not. Everybody loves Brooke.”

He knew it wasn’t true. It couldn’t be. Unless Brooke was an angel or a saint, there was someone out there who didn’t like her. Hell, even the pope got death threats. How many parents claimed their perfect children were incapable of committing the crimes they were accused of? He knew everybody had their own version of the truth—a story you told yourself so often you actually believed it. Even him. Especially him.

Marissa leaned forward, pouring hot tea into both mugs. Seth watched her. She was stressed, no doubt about it, but nothing she’d said or done so far gave him the impression she was lying or hiding information. And for some odd reason, he was glad. He wanted to like her—believe her.

The scent of orange and spice wafted off the hot steam. He thanked her and grasped the cup. Just then the door banged open, and in walked a tall, lanky teenage girl. She had straight blonde hair, jade-

green eyes, and a smattering of freckles across her nose. Catching sight of him, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Kelly, this is Detective Crawford,” Marissa said.

Kelly nodded without saying hello. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s investigating Brooke’s case. Come sit,” Marissa said.

Kelly dropped her backpack beside the wall. Her motorcycle boots scraped across the floor, and she slumped into the chair beside her mother.

Marissa’s brow furrowed. “What did you do to your face?” she asked Kelly, pushing her daughter’s bangs off her forehead.

A red abrasion was visible at the top of Kelly’s cheek. Kelly jerked away. She shook her head, and her hair settled back into place.

“It’s nothing, Mom.”

“What happened?”

Kelly scowled at her feet. “I cut myself shaving.”

Marissa shot her a look and Kelly dropped her gaze.

“I took a basketball in the face, okay?”

Seth watched her eyes and knew she was lying. The fine pattern of scabs was more like road rash than an impact mark, like the kind he got when he wiped out on the gravel with his bike. Whatever her reasons, her closed-off body language made it loud and clear that she had no intention of opening up.

“Your mother and I were just talking about Jesse Morgan. Do you remember him, Kelly?”

Kelly hitched a shoulder in a grudging shrug. “A little.”

“What was he like?”

“Cool. Brooke liked him. He came over after school sometimes when Mom wasn’t home.”

Seth caught Kelly’s sidelong look at her mother, as if waiting for some reaction. None came, and Seth continued.

“Did you know that Jesse and Brooke were back in touch?”

“So what if they were? I don’t remember him well, but he didn’t seem creepy, like the kind of guy who would do something crazy.”

“How would you know?” Marissa snapped.

Kelly tensed. She glared at her mother through narrowed eyes. “How would you? You were never home.”

“I was working.”

Kelly crossed her arms and lapsed into a stony silence. Seth sipped his tea.

He remembered what it was like to be raised by a single mother, long hours alone, just him and his kid sister. Cooking macaroni and cheese for dinner because his mother was still at work. Most nights they had eaten hunched over their bowls in front of the television, watching *Spider-Man*.

Things had changed after his mother remarried though. His stepfather was a good man. A cop. At last there had been someone else to help out around the house, someone who showed up at his soccer games and took him camping. Over the years they’d become a family. They were lucky. It didn’t always work out that way. Looked like it hadn’t for Kelly’s family.

Setting the cup back down on the table, Seth pressed on.

“Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Brooke?”

He studied Kelly’s expression carefully, watching for any flicker of emotion on the girl’s face, anything indicating she was hiding a secret. Sisters sometimes did that for each other, but Kelly shook her head.

“Family? Friends? Boyfriends?” he prompted.

“Family?” Kelly scoffed. “Mom’s been divorced three times. Apparently my father was Robert Plant. Mom screwed him in the back of a tour bus and ended up with me.”

“Kelly,” Marissa gasped, horrified.

The kid was a grade-A smartass. Barely acknowledging her mother’s rebuke, she kept her level gaze fixed on Seth.

“Well, it might as well be true. It’s not like I ever met him. Come to think of it, Rick was a bit of a nutcase. Him and his creepy son.”

“Who’s Rick?” Seth asked, trying to keep up.

“Rick Bowman,” Kelly answered, swinging toward him with two fingers raised in the air. “Lucky husband number two. The only one who hit us.”

Seth tensed as a gruesome image flashed through his mind. A woman’s face beaten to shit—shattered cheekbone, broken teeth, and vacant blue eyes. If the 911 call had come fifteen minutes later, she would have been dead. With the husband strung out on coke, it had taken Seth and his burly partner to subdue him. Days later, released from the hospital, she bailed the bastard out. She went back. Most of them did.

He wondered how bad things had gotten before Marissa had called it quits.

Seth glanced over at her. She stared down at the table, a bleak expression on her pretty face. At least she’d gotten out. Often the danger peaked when the woman left the relationship, but sometimes things happened later to trigger a violent episode. It was worth checking out.

“Rick Bowman?” Seth asked. Marissa nodded. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

“It’s been years, at least five.”

“Do you think he’s the type of guy to hold a grudge against you?”

“You think this is about me?”

“I don’t know. I have to examine a case from all angles.”

Her fingers brushed her lips as she answered in a toneless voice. “Rick and I didn’t have an amicable split, but I can’t imagine he’d come after us. Why would he? Why now?”

Rick Bowman wouldn’t be the first guy to blame his ex-wife for the bad things that happened to him. After five years of silence, it was a stretch, but he’d seen crazier shit. He’d check out all the people close to Brooke to see if something popped. The alternative was far worse. Stranger abductions were rare and difficult to solve. If a stranger had taken Brooke, odds were good she was already dead.

He felt Marissa’s gaze on him, and he was glad she couldn’t read his thoughts. Glancing down, he changed the subject.

“Is Brooke still on your medical plan?”

Marissa nodded. “I called the pharmacy. She picked up insulin three weeks ago. Based on what I found in her dorm room, the pharmacist thinks it’s unlikely Brooke has a vial of insulin with her. She probably has an insulin pen, maybe two.”

“Remind me of the difference.”

“The pen is a fast-acting insulin. She would use the pen to inject herself to counteract the spike in her blood sugar levels after she eats. She would take the other kind of insulin once a day, to lower her blood sugar levels over time.”

“Can she manage with just a pen?”

“For a while. She needs shots every four to six hours to stay in control, but when it runs out . . .” Marissa’s words trailed off. She didn’t need to say more. Seth already heard the ticking clock in his

head—with each shot of insulin, time was running out.





Gretchen settled into the deep leather seat beside Drew. He shot through the yellow light and raced down Pike Street toward Belltown. Traffic was uncharacteristically light, and Drew zigzagged through the other cars like they were standing still.

“Christ, Drew. Where’s the fire?”

“Relax.”

“I just want to get home in one piece,” Gretchen said. He saw her clutch the armrest as he dodged a slow-moving Toyota Camry.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t lost anyone yet.”

Gretchen didn’t respond. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. The thick floral scent of her perfume nauseated him, and he cracked the window an inch or two, just enough to let in the fresh air. He glanced her way.

“What’s got you down tonight, Gretch? Man trouble?”

Her lips twitched and he could tell he’d struck a nerve.

“So, who’s the guy?”

“No one you know,” she snapped.

She sounded so defensive he knew she was lying. He also knew there weren’t many guys in Alicia’s small group of friends. Confident he knew the answer, he kept prodding.

“Was he supposed to meet you at the bar tonight?”

“Something like that.”

“And he stood you up?”

Her sullen silence was confirmation enough. Drew turned onto Fourth Avenue. He spotted her building up ahead on the right. Gretchen heaved a sigh and sank lower into the leather seat.

“It’s his loss, you know,” Drew said, sounding part big brother, part concerned friend.

Gretchen’s shoulders sagged. “Why do men have to be such shits?”

“Hey, we’re not all bad.”

“All you want is a nice rack and a size-two ass warming your beds.”

“Who said you didn’t have a great rack?”

Gretchen snorted as Drew slid the car smoothly into a parking spot. She stared out the window with a forlorn expression on her cheeks, like it was the last place in the world she wanted to be. In the dim light, he could see tears streaking down her face. She brushed them away.

“Seriously, are you okay?”

Gretchen swallowed. Her breath came in short, stuttering hitches. “Do you want to come up for a nightcap?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Pocketing the car keys, he trailed her down the hallway and waited while she unlocked the apartment door.

“My place is a bit of a mess,” she said, looking embarrassed. “Work’s been busy and I wasn’t expecting guests . . .”

Drew stepped inside. A mess? It looked like a bomb had gone off in there. There were clothes, magazines, and dirty dishes scattered everywhere. The sight of blue mold spores growing in the bottom of a bowl on the kitchen counter turned his stomach. Avoiding contact with the germ-ridden surface, he folded his arms and leaned up against the wall.

Gretchen slid a stack of dishes into the sink to clear a space on the counter.

“I was planning to clean up tonight, before I went out, but . . .”

“Don’t sweat it. You should see my place,” he lied.

“Really? Alicia told me you were a bit of a neatnik.”

“I clean up when I know she’s on her way over.”

“She’s always telling me I should hire a cleaning lady.”

Drew heard an edge in her voice, and he shrugged. “Easy for her to say. She’s the one with a trust fund.”

A smile played at the corners of Gretchen’s plump lips. “I know, right? We’re not all loaded like her old man.” She opened a cupboard crammed with booze. “Her father pays her rent while I’m drowning in student loans. Drink?”

“Sure.”

“Pick your poison.” She swept a hand toward her collection of liquor bottles.

“Surprise me.”

She plucked a bottle of Wild Turkey off the shelf and went in search of clean glasses. She yanked open the dishwasher and pulled two off the rack, then rinsed them under the spray from the tap. She dried them with a grimy dishtowel. He eyed the greasy sheen of slime smeared around the rim and made a face, half smile, half grimace, silently praying the Wild Turkey would kill off any fatal germs.

Ice cubes tinkled in the glass, and she poured a generous splash of bourbon into each. Holding his by the rim, she handed him the glass. Hers slipped from her slack fingers and shattered on the floor.

“Dammit,” she said.

“Don’t sweat it.” Drew shrugged and handed her his glass. Stepping around the mess, he grabbed the bottle and headed toward the living room. The couch was littered with clothes. She scraped them into a heap and pitched them onto a nearby chair.

Drew sat on the edge of the spongy red sofa. He smelled dirty laundry and rotting food. The stench reminded him of his father’s place. Rick had been a slob at the best of times, but when he was off his meds and on a bender, it had been like living in a crack house.

Drew took a sip from the bottle and eased back against the couch.

“Nice place you have here.”

“Thanks. It’s close to work.”

Looking as nervous as a teenager on her first date, Gretchen fidgeted with her hair.

“Relax,” he said. “It’s only a drink.”

Gretchen stared at him, the corners of her lips sagging down, like she already regretted inviting him up here. Taking a hit of bourbon, he glanced at her, wondering how he could get her to open up. What would he say to Alicia if she were the one sitting across from him and he was trying to make a good impression? He dropped his voice, speaking softly to her, like a friend confiding a secret.

“Look, Gretchen, I’m on your side, I really am, and I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot. I’d like to start over, if you’re willing.”

“You mean that?”

Drew looked deep into her eyes and smiled. He reached out slowly and brushed a curl away from her freckled cheek.

“I know I come across as an ass sometimes, and I’m sorry. Guys are idiots. We know it. But if you give me another chance, you might find out that I’m really not half bad.”

She flashed a timid smile. It wasn’t much, but Drew knew it was a good start.

She sipped her drink and wiggled out of her perch. "I need to freshen up. Maybe you could find something to listen to." She gestured toward the stereo buried underneath a stack of DVDs.

He shuffled through an avalanche of fashion magazines and found the remote pinned between the current issues of *Vogue* and *Glamour*. Drew turned the stereo on. Z100 was blasting some insipid Kelly Clarkson song. He flipped stations until he found Deep Tracks. It was playing a trance remix of ZZ Top's "Asleep in the Desert" to set the mood. Mellow and psychedelic, it was the type of song you dropped acid to back in the 1970s or made out with a girl to in the back of your father's pickup truck. Perfect.

Satisfied, he dropped the remote on the littered coffee table. It rattled against Gretchen's phone.

Drew couldn't resist the temptation. Tossing a quick glance over his shoulder, he thumbed the power button. No passcode was set, so he clicked on the instant messaging client. His eyebrows arched as he read Gretchen's last text.

*I guess this means you're not coming.*

There was no response.

Quickly Drew scanned the message stream and grinned.

He'd known Gretchen had a crush on Liam. Anybody with half a brain could have picked up on it. But Drew had had no idea Liam had taken full advantage of the situation. Gretchen was Liam's fuck-buddy. Alicia probably didn't realize exactly what was going on between them. She wouldn't approve. Unlike Gretchen, Alicia would realize Liam was just using her friend, while poor little fucked-up Gretchen harbored fantasies of having an actual relationship with the bastard.

A toilet flushed near the back of the apartment, and Drew placed the phone on the table where he'd found it. It clattered against an empty plastic vial. He spun the bottle so he could read the label.

Prozac. He shook his head.

Gretchen settled back into place, and Drew stretched an arm out along the back of the couch. He touched her hair.

"So, tell me about this mystery guy of yours."

Gretchen sighed. She rattled the ice cubes around in her glass and took a gulp of liquid courage before she spoke.

"Not much to tell. He blows hot and cold. One minute he can't wait to see me, then he avoids me. I don't know what he wants. If he doesn't like me, why does he pretend?"

Drew propped his chin on his fist and met her gaze head on.

"Liam's a little shit, Gretchen. You know that, right?"

She gaped at Drew in wide-eyed alarm. "I didn't say anything about Liam."

"You didn't have to. I saw the way you looked at him the other night."

"You mean how he looked at Alicia?"

"That too."

Drew placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Gretchen didn't pull away.

"Why waste your time on someone like him?"

Her eyes misted over and she stared down at the drink in her hand. "When it's just the two of us, he makes me feel special."

*I'll bet he does.*

Drew paused, letting the emotional charge of her words dissipate before he spoke again.

"If he hurts you, Gretchen, he's not your friend."

"How do you know?"

Drew flashed a sympathetic grin. "Because I'm a guy."

Gretchen turned her head. Her eyes brimmed with fresh tears. They leaked over her eyelashes and flowed down her cheeks. She brushed them away with the back of her hand. Mascara pooled beneath her eyes. She looked like a crying panda.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” she sniffed.

“Because you deserve the truth.”

“The truth? Ha. That’s funny. Liam thinks you’re lying to Alicia. He’s hired somebody to check you out.”

Drew’s heart skipped a beat. He shouldn’t be surprised. Clearly Liam had no idea what a dangerous game he was playing.

Sensing the shift in his mood, Gretchen asked, “Are you okay?”

Drew cracked a wicked smile.

“You know what they say about a fool and his money? Well, if Liam wants to waste his time and money on a private investigator, let him. I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m just saying that a girl like you deserves better friends. Better than Liam, anyway.”

Gretchen took a sip of bourbon, and Drew thought about the Prozac. Mixing alcohol with antidepressants was a bad idea. Or maybe it was a good idea. The combination had sent his father into a deep pit of depression that only electroshock therapy could touch.

“I’m sorry I was such a bitch at the bar,” she said.

Dreamy guitars played in the background, and Drew curled a fat red lock around his finger. Gretchen froze like a spooked raccoon. Vulnerability and desperation flickered across her face. Her bottom lip trembled.

“Who am I kidding? I’m not the kind of girl anyone looks at twice, not around Alicia. She’s so smart, so beautiful. No one looks past her to me.”

A fresh stream of tears flowed down her face. Drew swiped them away with the pad of his thumb. She shivered.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” she asked again.

“Because you’re a good person. Smart. Funny. *And* pretty.”

She swiped her nose with the back of her hand, her eyes wide. “You think I’m pretty?”

“Look at you.” He ran his finger down her round cheek. “Gorgeous red curls. Cornflower-blue eyes. Perfect skin. What makes you think you’re not pretty?”

Steeling himself, Drew leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. She tasted like salt water and Wild Turkey. Gretchen moaned. Her eyes fluttered closed. She slid against him and Drew deepened the kiss.

Music filled the silence between them. The song ended and Gretchen opened her eyes.

“What about Alicia?”

Drew brushed a stray curl off her wide forehead.

“Alicia’s not here. How about another drink?”



Rain pattered through the tree branches and pelted the forest floor. Brooke shrank back against the wall and stared out into the gloom. Her breath billowed around her in a misty cloud of dew. Fuck, it was cold out here. The damp mist cut through the layers of clothes and blankets swaddled around her shivering frame to her very bones.

The front half of the cabin had caved beneath the weight of the fallen tree. A towering Douglas fir had crashed through the roof, sending glass and debris flying in all directions. Shattered glass from the window high on the wall had gashed her arm. She'd dressed the wound as best she could with a dirty pillowcase to stop the bleeding. The thin mattress she crouched behind shielded her from the worst of the rain.

Somewhere in the dark, beyond the line of trees, a yellow light wavered. She blinked, narrowing her eyes, trying to bring whatever it was into focus. Was it real or was she just seeing things? Judging by the way she felt—burning muscles, aching joints—her blood sugars were soaring up into the stratosphere. She hurt.

It was no use. She couldn't see anything clearly.

God, she needed a shot. When her sugars were high like this, her blurry eyes were like lenses coated in gel. She clenched her chattering teeth together and kept her eyes on the light. It wasn't real. It couldn't be. Still, she couldn't look away. A tiny sliver of her heart hoped that maybe someone really was out there, someone who could help her—that she wasn't already dead.

Her mouth, as dry as sawdust, yawned wide to catch the soft rain falling through the trees. The thin moisture coated her mouth. She swallowed. What she wouldn't give for a bottle of water. Hell, right now she'd take whatever she could get her hands on and guzzle it down in seconds. Of course, in five minutes she'd have to pee again. It was a vicious cycle.

The spark of hope in Brooke's heart flickered and died under the weight of the certain knowledge that her body was dehydrating and that she was going to die here alone at the bottom of the valley.

She had, what, maybe an hour before she lost consciousness altogether, and then maybe a few hours more? That was it.

She wanted to cry, but she had no tears left. Tree branches whispered in the wind, and she thought about her mother. And Kelly. And the life she had left behind. School. About Tess, and how close to perfect everything had been until this . . .

Brooke closed her eyes. Part of her wanted to give up. Dying would be easy. But then she thought of her mother and sister, and pictured *his* face in her mind. Anger displaced the desperation she felt. This was his doing. His sick plan. She couldn't let him win. Not while she could still move. Her eyes snapped open.

Where was her insulin pen? She swung her head from side to side. It was so dark. She couldn't see much of anything. And then there was the debris. Somewhere under the layer of glass and wood and branches was her insulin pen. She had to find it.

If she didn't, she was dead.

She shifted, rolling painfully onto her knees. The mattress shielding her body from the rain fell away. Inch by inch she crawled as far as the chain allowed. Her fingers scrabbled across the debris field, digging. Searching.

Wet strands of matted hair fell across her face, and she shook it out of her eyes. A quick stab of pain shot through her finger and she reared back. Glass. Dammit. Rubbing the cut against her leg, she

pitched forward again.

She heard a noise from out in the trees beyond the clearing. Her heart jolted. It wasn't the wind or the rain; it was something louder. Like footsteps. Something was moving out there.

*An animal? A wolf? Oh God.*

She sank back onto her heels and looked up. The yellow light was closer now. It darted through the trees, moving toward her. A flashlight?

Hope swelled in her chest.

Was it the police? A hunter? A search party? Had someone heard the tree crashing and come looking?

*Please. Please, God, let it be help. Let it be anyone but him.*

The yellow light swayed like a lantern in the gloom. She blinked. Her eyes refused to focus. Another sure sign her sugars were high and she was in trouble.

"Help," she cried, her voice dry and raspy. "Over here. I'm over here."

She could see something. A shadow. A man. Moving closer. She thrust her heavy arms above her head and waved them frantically, praying the motion would catch his eye.

She called out again. Louder. Blood rushed in her ears as his every step brought him closer. She squinted as hard as she could, willing her eyes to focus, wishing she could just see his face.

The light stabbed her eyes and she averted her gaze.

She waved her hands. Her heart pounded. It had to be the police.

*Please, God, if I ever asked you for anything . . .*

Footsteps scraped against the wooden floor. She wasn't easy to get to. She heard the crash of wood and debris as he cleared a path.

Her arms dropped to her sides and she wrapped them around her shivering body. She wanted to go home. She wanted to see her mother and sister again. She wanted to be safe. She wanted . . .

"I'm back here," she called, her voice cracking on the words.

Finally he stood above her. Desperate, she reached and grabbed a fistful of wet jeans. She looked up. Even this close, she still couldn't see a goddamned thing. He was a shadow, a blur, a black shape in front of her eyes.

He hunkered down. His hands gripped her shoulders. She stared into his shadowed face.

"What am I going to do with you now?" he asked.

Brooke shrank back, twisting free from his grasp. A high, keening wail wrenched from her chest. Her face dropped into her hands and she sobbed.





Marissa stepped into the Smith Tower's elevator car. Her head pounded. She'd barely slept, and what little sleep she'd managed had been plagued with nightmares about Brooke. She'd woken in the gray light of dawn, her pillow wet with tears.

All she wanted to do was hide under the covers and disappear into a cocoon of grief. But she couldn't do that. Brooke needed her. Kelly needed her. So, like a zombie, she dragged herself out of bed and faked her way through the morning routine.

Making herself small, she slid to the back of the elevator, not wanting to see anyone she knew. Trading pleasantries was beyond her capabilities this morning. She stared down at her shoes. Her arm collided with another passenger's, but she didn't look up.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Ms. Rooney, I was under the impression you no longer worked at the firm."

Benoit's sharp face was inches from hers. Like a Doberman pinscher's, her thin lips were pulled back in a sneer to expose a small row of mean teeth. Marissa groaned.

"Ms. Holt offered me a job."

"A job? Doing what?"

Marissa heaved a sigh. "Maybe you should ask her."

There was no time for a retort as the elevator reached the sixth floor. Shooting Marissa a nasty glare, Benoit elbowed her way through the crowd and exited the elevator.

With Benoit gone, Marissa's thoughts turned to the day ahead, and her stomach sank. She had no idea what Elizabeth Holt expected from her. She'd said yes to Holt's job offer out of desperation. She needed to support her family and find Brooke, but now, in the harsh light of day, she feared the two goals of helping Holt launch her foundation and finding her daughter couldn't be more different. And she had no skills or experience to qualify her for either.

The elevator stopped and the doors parted. Marissa stepped out onto the floor. Everywhere she looked she saw people. The high ceilings amplified the noise into an overwhelming crescendo of voices. Desperate, Marissa scanned the room, looking for the one person she recognized in the crowd.

Elizabeth Holt stood tall and straight in the center of the room, a pillar of sanity amid the churning sea of chaos. Fully in command, Holt barked orders and channeled traffic, making it all look easy. Behind her, Marissa spied a three-foot image tacked to the wall. Brooke's face stared out from the missing-persons poster. Marissa's shoulders sagged. Fear clenched tight around her heart.

Holt looked up. Her cobalt eyes caught Marissa's gaze, and she brusquely waved her over.

"Good. You're here," Holt said. "There are some people you should meet."

Holt's icy hand gripped Marissa's elbow lightly as she steered her through the crowd toward a slight, dark-haired woman at the center of the group. The woman handed a stack of flyers to a man standing beside her. She turned toward Holt.

"Marissa, this is Alice Chang. She's heading up the volunteer squad."

"Volunteers?"

Though Chang's hand was small, her grip was firm and sure. She nodded, angling her head close to Marissa's so she could be heard over the crowd.

"We're sending people out to post the flyers around the city, with the heaviest concentration around the university district, Wallingford, Sand Point, and Capitol Hill."

Marissa blinked, imagining seeing her daughter's face plastered on telephone poles and store windows across the city. A wave of heat shivered through her, and she felt like she might throw up.

"Are you all right?" Chang asked.

Marissa swallowed and forced a nod. "Yeah. I mean, yes."

"Good. We have a group of volunteers manning a tip line. The number is on the flyers. Any tips that come in will be logged and passed along to the police," Chang explained. "Then there are the searches."

"Searches?"

"Local parks, greenbelts around the university and Capitol Hill. Places where Brooke might have gone," Chang explained.

Panic spiraled at the pit of her stomach. Images flashed into her head—Brooke bleeding by the side of the road; Brooke trapped, unable to call for help; Brooke left for dead somewhere on the forest floor. She could be anywhere. How were they ever going to find her?

Her gaze shifted to the groups of volunteers getting their marching orders for the day—a sea of ordinary faces, good people who were here to help. A hoarse thank-you was all she could manage before Holt directed her away.

"The police will be here at ten o'clock sharp for the press conference." Holt glanced at Marissa sternly. "Ten o'clock. You hear me?"

"Yes."

"Good. The media will spread the word about Brooke's disappearance. The chief will kick off the press conference, but you'll need to say a few words."

Marissa's knees turned to water. Naïvely she'd hoped Holt would handle the whole thing. Stupid. She had been so focused on herself, on her own pain, that she was totally unprepared.

What was she going to say? How in God's name was she going to get through this?

She trailed behind Holt to her office. The doors closed behind them, dropping the noise to a dull roar in the background. The familiar smell of lemon furniture polish and stale cigarette smoke filled the air.

A man sat behind Holt's desk. Thin, middle-aged, he had close-cropped red hair and freckled skin. Short, strawberry-blond stubble covered his cheeks. He looked up from the monitor and stood as they approached.

"Marissa, meet Henry Cahill. He's an Internet security specialist. I've asked him to look into Brooke's case to see what we can find out about her social networking site."

Cahill nodded and shook Marissa's hand. His hands were callused, not the type of hands she'd expected from someone who spent his days behind a computer.

Marissa sagged into the comfortable green armchair across from the desk and scratched at the patch on her arm. If Holt offered her a cigarette now, she'd cave in a second. Holt didn't offer, so Marissa folded her hands in her lap and focused her attention on Henry Cahill.

"I'm analyzing the photos uploaded to Brooke's page."

"Have you found anything unusual?" Holt asked.

"Yes and no," Cahill said. "It's what I haven't found that's interesting."

"What do you mean?" Marissa asked.

She hated people who talked in riddles. It was as if they delighted in being the smartest people in the room. She waited for Cahill's condescending smile, but it never came. Instead he met Marissa's gaze directly.

“The photos from the night she disappeared were almost certainly taken and uploaded with Brooke’s cell phone camera. You see, most of the photos show the time and place where the images were uploaded. These are default settings for the social networking site your daughter uses, but this last one is different.”

“The one of the guy?” Marissa pictured his angry face.

Cahill nodded.

“What’s different about them?” Holt asked.

“Well, this last one doesn’t have a location or time stamp telling us where and when the photo was posted.”

Marissa stared at Cahill, trying to put the pieces together. “Why?”

Grinning like a teenager, Cahill bobbed his head. “Exactly. It’s like someone turned the default settings off.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Why indeed,” Cahill said, turning from Marissa to Holt and back again. “Your daughter has uploaded hundreds of photos to her Facebook site, all with the default setting, except this one.”

“Could she have done it by accident?” Holt asked.

“Those settings are buried deep in the user’s preferences. They’re not easy to shut off. You wouldn’t accidentally do it.”

“Why wouldn’t Brooke want people to know where the photo was taken?”

“Her post says she’s gone on an adventure. She might turn off her settings to hide where she is.”

“I’m not buying it,” Marissa snapped. “I know my daughter. She wouldn’t just take off. She—”

Cahill raised his hands in surrender. “There is another possibility.”

“Such as . . . ,” Holt prompted.

“What if Brooke didn’t post the image?”

“But who else could it be?”

“Someone else who has her phone or has hacked her account,” Cahill offered. “I’ll need to do some more digging.”

“But why would this man, Charles Sully, post a picture of himself on Brooke’s page? Why incriminate yourself?” Holt asked under her breath, her brow furrowed in thought.

Cahill shrugged. “Maybe Sully didn’t post it either.”

Marissa absorbed this in silence.

The door opened, and Evan Holt stepped into the office carrying a tray. He poured a steaming cup of tea into a bone china glass and handed it to Holt. The subtle smell of citrus wafted off the steaming cup.

Holt scowled at the intrusion and waved him away.

“Lizzie,” Evan said reproachfully.

Her scowl deepened and she grudgingly took the cup from his hands. Marissa saw him pass off a small white pill. Holt popped it into her mouth and sipped the tea. She reached for Evan’s hand and gave it a light squeeze. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, and Holt set the cup down. It clattered in the saucer. She turned back toward Cahill.

“Okay, so we know there’s something unusual about Charles Sully’s image. What’s next?”

“I’ve put a trace on Brooke’s phone. I’ve pinpointed all the locations she used the phone before it went dead.” Marissa flinched at the word, and Cahill cleared his throat. His cheeks flushed, and his gaze flicked back to the screen. “I mean before the battery was pulled. I’ve set up a script that will ping her phone. If it powers back up, we’ll be able to pinpoint the location.”

“Do you think that’s likely?” Marissa asked.

The look that passed between Holt and Cahill chilled her to the bone.

“We’re going to locate your daughter, Ms. Rooney.”

At least he sounded confident, and she wanted to believe him, but faith wasn’t her strong suit. She had to hope though. Without hope, there was no way she would make it through all of the minutes, hours, or days until they found Brooke and brought her home again. Hope was all she had.

“Thank you, Mr. Cahill.”

“Henry, please.”

“Henry,” Holt said. “Can you give us a few minutes alone?”

Henry rose from his chair and followed Evan out the door.

Elizabeth’s long, bony fingers stroked the amulet attached to the gold chain around her neck. She fixed Marissa with an appraising look.

“How are you holding up?”

Marissa was at a loss. How could she explain to a woman like Holt how totally overwhelmed she was by the situation? There was an army of volunteers out looking for her missing daughter. There were no solid leads. It was as if Brooke had vanished into thin air. And she was starting a brand-new job with no idea what to do or what was expected of her.

Holt was still staring at her, expecting some kind of answer. She swallowed.

“I’m okay,” she lied.

She was a lot of things—*okay* was definitely not among them. Holt wasn’t fooled. The old woman cocked her head and smiled kindly at her.

“I have to admit, Ms. Rooney, I’d have made a lousy doctor. I don’t have much of a bedside manner, and providing comfort has never been my strong suit. I can only offer you this piece of advice. You have to focus on your goal. Finding Brooke is the only thing that matters—not your pain or your fear. Not what the cops or the media say about the case. Sweep aside everything that distracts you from achieving your goal. It’s not helping you.”

“What happens if we don’t find Brooke?”

The words slipped out before she could catch them, and like wildfire, once voiced, the fear consumed her.

Holt arched an eyebrow. She tented her fingers thoughtfully beneath her sagging chin and regarded Marissa with the cool look of a lawyer assessing a client. “Ask yourself this, Ms. Rooney, do those thoughts make your situation easier to bear? Do they help you focus?”

Marissa stared at Holt in silent agony. She knew Holt was right, but how could she turn them off? She thought about Holt’s story about being attacked as a college student. Had Holt ignored her pain? Her hate? Maybe she was the type of woman who could compartmentalize her feelings, but Marissa . . .

Holt consulted her watch.

“We have an hour before the press conference. Let’s get to work.”

• • • •

“IT’S TIME TO HEAD TO the conference room, Ms. Rooney.”

Marissa swallowed, her mouth bone-dry. She rose on shaky legs and followed Evan Holt out of the office.

“Is there anything you need?” he asked. “A bottle of water?”

“Yes, please.”

Her hands trembled as she followed him down the hall. She balled them into fists at her sides and looked around. The conference room was jam-packed with reporters. Every news station in Seattle was in attendance. Marissa's head swam. Panic fluttered in her chest, and her mind went blank. Marissa searched for a familiar face and found Elizabeth Holt at the front of the room, standing with Chief Abrams. The two conferred quietly, expressions grave. Evan handed Marissa a bottle of water and joined his aunt at the front of the room.

Marissa twisted the cap, but the thing refused to budge. She sighed.

"Here," Detective Crawford said, taking the bottle from her grasp. He removed the cap and handed it back. Marissa shot him a look and he grinned. "You loosened it."

"Thanks."

She took a sip. Water dribbled down the front of her blouse. Crawford pretended not to notice. She wiped her lips and cleared her throat.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Panicking a little."

Crawford held her gaze, the look in his eyes gentle.

"It doesn't matter what you say, just speak from the heart. Everybody in this room is here to support you, Marissa. Tell them about Brooke. Make her real. If seeing all these people freaks you out, just pretend you're talking to me. Forget everything else, everyone else." He gripped her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. His fingers were warm. Strong. "You can do this."

Marissa smiled weakly and took another sip of water. She glanced back toward the podium.

"Do you know who those people are?" she asked, inclining her head toward the middle-aged couple standing behind Ms. Holt.

Crawford nodded. "They're Kim Covey's parents."

"The Coveys? I didn't realize they were coming."

"Ms. Holt didn't tell you?"

Before he could say more, Holt motioned for Marissa to join her. She looked around for someplace to put her water. A table. Something. Crawford took the bottle from her grasp.

"You'll do great."

Wiping her hands on her skirt, she took her place beside Elizabeth Holt.

Chief Abrams took center stage. The brass buttons of his dress uniform glinted in the bright lights.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming today. Two young women in our community are missing."

The screen flashed, showing two images side by side. Marissa's heart jolted as she was struck again by the strong resemblance between her daughter and the other missing girl.

"Kim Covey disappeared four weeks ago. Brooke Parker has been missing for five days. We believe these disappearances are the work of a serial kidnapper. This is a very dangerous man. We need your help before any more girls go missing."



Brooke's eyelids eased open. They felt as dry and scratchy as sandpaper. Grainy light filled the cabin. Staring up, she could see the unbroken line of cedar beams overhead and the steep angle of the pitched ceiling. It was unnaturally quiet. The rain had stopped and the wind was still. She was cold, but it was bearable, nowhere near the bone-chilling dampness she'd felt huddled behind the mattress.

Where the hell was she?

Brooke jerked fully awake.

This was a different cabin. He must have moved her here last night. This one was smaller, with a long, rectangular window on the far wall, about seven feet up. If she could get to it, maybe she could find a way out.

She swung her gaze wide, searching for something, anything she could climb on.

A pair of pale-blue eyes collided with hers. Brooke gasped, jolting into an upright position. She scrambled back on the hard pallet of the bed, her back flattened against the wall and gaped at the woman across from her.

The cold eyes looked ancient and alien in the bruised and blood-streaked face. The woman was young, maybe twenty or so, but her puffy eyes and swollen cheeks aged her. She was gagged. Dried blood crusted on the dirty cloth. The smell of stale sweat and urine filled the cabin.

It took a moment for the shock to wear off. Once it had, she eased toward the woman. Brooke grasped the woman's shoulders and gently turned her around.

The gag was tightly knotted. Gritting her teeth, Brooke struggled to loosen it, but it was no use. Days of soaring blood sugars rendered her fingertips numb. She didn't have the strength or the dexterity to pry the knot loose.

Her eyes swam with frustrated tears, and she blinked them away. She couldn't give up. She was this girl's only hope. Brooke struggled with the knot a few minutes more, but nothing she tried made any difference. So Brooke did the only thing she could. She pulled the knot tighter. The fabric stretched, maybe half an inch. Maybe more.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to work the gag out of the woman's mouth. She couldn't do anything about the zip tie binding the woman's wrists. Brooke sat back on her heels. Sweat beaded her forehead. The cloth hung like a limp, bloody noose around the woman's thin neck.

Revulsion mingled with the bile at the back of Brooke's throat, and she stared into the woman's battered face. She dropped her gaze, afraid she was looking into some kind of sick carnival glass. Was this her future? Would she end up looking like the woman on the floor, if she survived long enough?

"He shot something into your leg." The woman spoke in a voice that sounded hoarse and gritty from lack of use.

"Who are you?" Brooke asked in a trembling voice.

"Kim Covey."

Kim shook the long, matted mane of hair off her forehead giving Brooke an unobstructed view of her face. The purple bruises on her cheeks were fading to a muddy brown. The thin white shirt hanging off her shoulders was soiled and torn. The woman's stench overpowered the musty smell of the forest floor.

"How long have you been here?"



Kim shook her head. A hopeless look crossed the gaunt face and sent Brooke's heart racing. "I've lost count."

"I'm Brooke Parker."

Kim nodded, but there was no curiosity in her vacant stare. No fear either. What had he done to this woman? What was he going to do with her? Fear snaked its way through Brooke's mind, making clear thought impossible. She swallowed, trying to contain it, trying to focus on Kim Covey—the one human face she'd seen besides his in days.

"How did you get here?"

"He brought me."

All kinds of gruesome possibilities sprang to Brooke's fertile mind. Had he drugged Kim? Had he carried her bound and gagged down into the valley? Or worse. Had Kim been lured?

Looking into Kim's dead eyes, she thought she knew the answer.

"You came willingly?" Brooke asked.

"Didn't you?"

The bitterness in Kim's voice corroded Brooke's composure. Brooke shook her head. Tears filled her eyes, and hate welled up inside her. Hate for the monster who had brought them both here and tied them up like animals. Like some evil kind of god, he held the power of life and death in his hands. They were wholly dependent upon him for everything. Food. Water. Shelter. Everything. If he never came back, they would die here at the bottom of the valley, where no one would ever find them.

"What has he done to you?"

"What do you think?"

"He beat you," she said. Brooke reached out to touch the deep bruises around Kim's eyes, the cut on her lips. Kim jerked her chin away and Brooke dropped her hand. He hadn't just beaten this woman—he'd tortured her. "Did he..."

She couldn't force herself to say the word.

"Did he rape me?" Kim asked. The pain in her glacial stare was unbearable. Brooke dropped her gaze. She covered her eyes with her hands, not wanting to see, not wanting to think about what was going to happen to her—what fate awaited them both.

"Why is he doing this?"

"Because he likes to," Kim said.

The simple, awful truth of it hit her with all the force of a ten-ton weight. The tears she'd been holding back leaked from Brooke's eyes and slid down her cheeks. She pressed the pads of her fingers against her closed eyelids, trying to stop the flow. Crying was pointless. How many tears had Kim cried, and yet here she was, a broken version of herself.

"He shot something into your leg," Kim said again. "Some kind of needle. I saw him do it."

Brooke dropped her hands away from her face. The shock of seeing someone else had driven the words from her mind. She brushed the tears away and tried to focus. Yes. She felt different now. Her muscles no longer screamed at her. And though she was thirsty, her mouth had lost the cotton-dry feel of soaring blood sugars.

"Insulin," she said, running her hands down her skinny legs. The jeans that had fit like a second skin days ago sagged. She was losing weight. It wasn't a good sign.

"Insulin. You're diabetic?"

Brooke nodded, and Kim's expression darkened.

"He'll like that," she said.

A stab of dread sliced through Brooke, and she forced herself to look at Kim's battered face. "We need to get out of here."

Kim's thousand-yard stare stretched out beyond Brooke. Her nod was slow. Her smile was grotesque. Terrifying. Blood crusted her swollen lips, and for the first time, Brooke saw the jagged peaks of Kim's broken teeth.

"Oh, we will."



How many of the righteous sat in this very pew day after day, praying for miracles, praying for jobs, health, wealth? A myriad of secret hopes and dreams offered up to a faceless God. Pathetic souls, looking for forgiveness or deliverance, looking for something spiritual that would lift them up out of the mire and into the rapture, to a holy place. Heaven. Whatever.

But that wasn't why Drew Matthews was here. There was nothing he needed that he couldn't already get himself. He longed for neither salvation nor deliverance.

Once, a very long time ago, he'd believed the Sunday school stories about the power of prayer and a benevolent God. Night after night he prayed. But nobody came to his rescue, and left alone with an abusive drunk for a father, he learned all fairy tales lied. There were no happy endings.

And forgiveness? He was beyond asking for that. What would his poor God-fearing mother say about him now, had she lived long enough to see what he'd become? She'd joined her Savior in the heavens above when he was no more than a boy.

So what brought him here to this same pew week after week to stare at the same rosewood altar with the ornate carving of the crucifix hanging above?

The truth was, he liked the dark, the close smell of incense, the candles burning for the righteous, the murmured prayers of the faithful.

He liked the sense of solitude, looking up at the vaulted ceilings, knowing that there was no one staring down in judgment. No vengeful hand of God, poised to reach out of the sky and smite his black soul.

There was no rescue.

Most of all, he came here because he liked the ritual. That's what Catholics were good at, right? Say the same prayer over and over and expect different results. Yeah. Wasn't that the very definition of madness?

Slowly, almost reverently, Drew withdrew his mother's rosary from his pocket, the same rosary she had spent countless hours hunched over in her hospital bed, praying for deliverance. And, well, she'd gotten it now, hadn't she? Death had relieved her of sickness and pain. Death had removed her to a better place, and left him here. Alone, and very much alive.

He worked the beads methodically through his fingers. Ritual. It had become his friend too, something he could hold on to. Something he could take comfort in. Something that gave him release.

The long string of beads passed from finger to thumb, and still he remained silent. Drew knew the rosary prayers by heart, but he did not pray. Instead, words from his favorite Tennyson poem ran through his head like a song.

*Yet all things must die.*

*The stream will cease to flow;*

*The wind will cease to blow;*

*The clouds will cease to fleet;*

*The heart will cease to beat;*

*For all things must die.*

*All things must die.*

DREW'S GAZE REMAINED fixed on the crucifix until his fingers reached the cross. Only then did he smile.

The soft sound of Alicia's sniffing broke the spell, and he looked over. Dark smudges of mascara pooled underneath her eyes like slick, oily puddles on a blacktop road. He suppressed the grin and arranged his features into a concerned mask. The hand not holding the rosary reached across to pluck hers from her lap. Their fingers intertwined, and his thumb grazed the naked ring finger of her left hand. He'd place a new ring there. Soon.

His gaze paused on the polished coffin at the front of the church.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly.

Alicia dabbed at her eyes. Splotches of mascara stained the damp wad of tissues, like miniature inkblots from a Rorschach test. He heard the question posed by the state-appointed psychiatrist as clearly as if the man were standing here beside him.

*What does this one look like, Andrew?*

Drew stared at the mascara stains on the wadded tissue and said the answer without speaking.

*Pain.*

Alicia blew her nose softly and the choir sang "Nearer My God to Thee." Drew looked up. A cherubic-looking priest appeared behind the pulpit. With a round fleshy nose and gin-blossomed cheeks, he looked like he'd been hitting the sacramental wine too hard.

"There are no words of comfort at a time like this. We're gathered here today to say goodbye to Gretchen Lange, who was taken from us too young."

All across the church, Drew could hear an elegy of muffled sobs. The priest turned his head toward the ebony casket at the front of the church. A spray of pink roses was draped across the coffin.

Alicia shuddered beside him, and Drew slid a comforting arm around her shoulders. He tuned out the vicar's words. Instead he heard the snort of Gretchen's bovine laughter.

After an agonizingly long funeral mass, the priest concluded the service, and the mourners lumbered like cattle toward the huge double doors at the back of the church. Drew shepherded Alicia through the crowded aisles of the church toward the exit. He couldn't stomach another disingenuous eulogy from Gretchen's family or friends. In life Gretchen had been a pathetic waste of oxygen. Everyone knew it. In death, though, her family and friends glorified her as some kind of saint. Saint Gretchen. Patron of broken-down souls everywhere.

He was halfway to the door when Alicia spoke. Her soft voice didn't carry over the noise of the assembled crowd, so he bent his head closer.

"I can't believe Gretchen would do something like this. I mean, I knew she was depressed, but I didn't think she'd actually . . ." Alicia sniffled again. "You know? Kill herself. Why would she do something so desperate?"

Drew looked down into Alicia's tearstained face.

*Did you know she was on Prozac? Did you know she was fucking Liam?*

Drew said neither of these things. Instead he squeezed her hand reassuringly and said what any good boyfriend would. "No one realized how depressed she was."

"She should have opened up. I would have been there for her. We all would have helped her. If only we'd known."

"Sometimes there's nothing you can do," Drew murmured into her ear. "Sometimes the world has gone so black you can't imagine any other way out."

He thought about his mother and how desperate she'd been at the end.

"Why didn't I go to the bar that night?"

“You were sick.”

Up ahead he spotted a flock of Gretchen’s clucking friends. He was in no mood to hear another word about sweet Gretchen and what a waste it had all been. Alicia was so wrapped up in her own grief, she didn’t notice he was steering her away from them and toward the exit. Ten feet short of the door, he ran straight into the one person he least wanted to see.

Liam stood tall and solemn in his slim-cut Armani suit. His wavy blond hair was freshly cut. He looked fit and tan, like he’d just stepped off a ski slope in Aspen. There was no avoiding him. Liam blocked their path. Drew stiffened. Liam’s cold eyes took slow measure of Drew before his gaze turned toward Alicia. Only then did his glacial stare soften.

“Alicia,” he said in a strained, halting voice.

She stopped in midstride.

“I can’t believe you’d show your face here,” Alicia hissed.

“Please, Alicia, I had no idea what Gretchen was going through. I swear.”

“You expect me to believe that you weren’t using her? Poor Gretchen. She thought you were sincere. She thought you cared for her when, all along, you were only getting what you wanted. You don’t give a damn about anyone besides yourself. You never have.”

At a loss for words, Liam swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and a warm, pleasurable glow filled Drew.

*Really. Could this day get any better?*

Ignoring Drew, Liam took a step toward Alicia, a hand splayed across his chest.

“Alicia, you have to believe me. Until I heard about Gretchen’s suicide note, I had no idea she cared about me that way.”

Alicia’s face contorted. Outrage burned in her bloodshot eyes.

“You were hooking up with her, you sick fuck. Don’t try to deny it. She had pictures of you on her phone.”

Liam ignored the shocked stares from the people standing around him and kept his attention focused solely on Alicia. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter another syllable, she raised her hand, palm outward.

“Not another word, Liam. I don’t want to hear any more of your lies.”

“Why would I hurt Gretchen?”

“Because you’re a selfish douche. Because she was going to tell everyone what a shit you are. I will never forgive you for what you did to her. I never want to speak to you again.”

Liam’s face turned ashen. He fell back a step, and his gaze met Drew’s. In that moment he saw a flash of understanding flicker across Liam’s face and he knew one thing for certain.

They both knew Gretchen hadn’t written that note.



The slick black streets reflected the harsh glare of the car's headlights as Charles Sully sped south down I-5. Just past Boeing Field, he punched the accelerator down, and the car's powerful engine emitted a deep and throaty growl, like the snarl of a Bengal tiger. He blew past the little flamer in the Beemer. *Superior German engineering, my fucking ass.* He'd take a good old American classic over some fancy piece of Eurotrash any day.

Sully knew where he was going. The car could almost drive itself. It was still early by the clock, not even nine in the evening yet, but business on the strip would be in full swing.

He needed it.

Since Lara had gotten fat, he'd been getting his rocks off elsewhere. Maybe he'd stick around long enough to see if she lost the baby weight. She'd been smoking hot when they first got together. All that Latin spit and fire. But that was before she got knocked up. Now she was passed out and snoring on the couch by eight thirty every night.

Bad enough he had to listen to her moan about her backaches, deal with her mood swings, and eat Mexican every night because that's what she said the baby liked. If she stayed fat, he'd fucking dump her. He didn't want to be saddled with some big heifer.

At first he'd pushed for an abortion, even offered to pay for the whole thing himself, but Lara was dead set against it—said it was against her religion. He was pretty sure fucking was considered a sin too, but that didn't stop her from spreading her legs any time he wanted.

Lately he'd been thinking that maybe the kid wasn't such a bad thing after all. It might be nice to have a son. He could teach the kid about cars. Go hunting in the woods. All the things he hadn't learned from his old man, who'd spent much of his miserable life behind bars.

Sully slowed down on the long strip of the Pacific Coast Highway. The rain had quit and the local wildlife had all crawled out of its hidey-holes. Sully took his time skimming down the streets. Window-shopping was half the fun.

This car was the shit. He liked the way heads turned as he cruised on by. He'd done much of the restoration work himself, right down to the custom paint job at his uncle's shop.

The girl standing at the corner was cute, with wavy blonde hair hanging halfway to her ass. Tight jeans. White rabbit-fur coat. She looked hot. He skimmed the curb and rolled down the window.

She leaned in. She wasn't a real blonde, but that was okay. Her mocha-colored skin was a shade dark for his taste. Good teeth. Freaky green eyes. Pretty enough. Too skinny to be a cop.

"Do you date?" he asked.

"What kind of girl were you looking for?"

"Someone who is up for a bit of everything."

Sully didn't like the way she eyed him, like he was a rotting piece of meat. Fucking women and their big fucking attitudes. Would it kill her to smile and act nice? She was the one out selling her wares. A little sugar from her might help sweeten the deal.

"Fifty," she said, smacking her fat lips.

Sully's hands clenched the steering wheel. *Whore.*

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

He punched down on the accelerator and the tires squealed on the wet pavement. The girl jumped back just in time, and he merged back into traffic. Fifty bucks for her skinny ass? Jesus. Who the hell did she think she was? The Queen of fucking Sheba?



He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her standing on the corner, one hand propped on a bony hip. Her other hand flipped him the bird.

Half a block away, he spied another blonde. Black skin. He hadn't had someone like her in a while. He slowed down and she smiled. She was missing a tooth. Others had turned dark. Nasty little twaker. He sped up and cruised on by.

Pickings were slim tonight. The lousy weather wasn't helping. He might actually have to pay the bitch fifty bucks if he didn't find something better soon. He'd wipe the smug look right off her face.

Then he spied her stepping out from the shadows toward the edge of the curb.

Blonde. Skinny. White. Nice rack. Not as pretty as the first girl, but hey, what the fuck? He wouldn't be looking at her face.

He eased the car in beside her. She propped her pointy elbows on the window frame.

Up close she was young. Maybe sixteen or seventeen. Young was good. Smooth skin. Tight ass. He'd pay more for someone that young. And if she was really good, maybe he wouldn't hurt her.

"Looking for some fun?" she asked.

He felt himself stir.

"Always."

Sully pulled two twenty-dollar bills from the wad of cash in his pocket and set them on the dash. The girl stole a quick backward glance over her shoulder and climbed in.

Sully peeled off of the strip, heading east toward Military Road. Silver streetlights cut through the gloom. Houses and trees flashed by. There were a few places he liked to go—quiet, dark places where they could be alone.

The girl looked nervous. She sat staring out the windshield, digging around in her purse.

"You good?" he asked, shooting her a sidelong glance.

She nodded. Face pale. "Where are we going?"

She spoke well. Educated. Not like most of the girls around here.

Something wasn't right. Sully could feel it deep in his bones. His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, half expecting to see a cop cruiser tailing him, but the streets were empty. Good thing too. One more conviction and the only way he'd see his son was from behind bars.

"I said, where are we going?" she said, louder this time. More shrill. Like she was scared or something.

"There's this place not far from here I like. You'll see."

Sully swerved onto a side road. One of those dead-end streets that overlooked the valley. There was a turnout a mile or so ahead. He and his high school buddies used to come out here to smoke dope. That had been before the shit was legal. He spied a break in the pine trees and took it. He slowed down, and the trees closed in around them. Tires rumbled along the gravel path. Lights twinkled in the valley below. Sully killed the engine.

Sully turned toward her. Her face was in shadow. All he could see was the soft glimmer of her blonde hair. He reached out to touch it. But it felt wrong. She felt wrong.

"Is this where you brought her?" the girl asked.

Sully frowned in the dark, sparks of anger igniting in his chest.

"What?"

"Is this where you brought her?" Louder now. Accusing.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Sully's hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of blonde hair. It came away in his hand. His fingers popped open and the wig slid to the floor.

“What did you do with her, you sick fuck?”

Sully’s other hand shot out toward her, fingers grasping the thin fabric of her shirt. He yanked her toward him. Without the wig, he saw it. Green eyes. Short, spiky black hair. The lesbo from the bar. The one with all the attitude.

“You,” he growled between clenched teeth.

She wrenched free from his grasp and reared back, head smacking against the passenger’s window with a dull crack. The purse tumbled from her lap.

“What did you do with her?” she screamed at him.

“Who?”

“Brooke!”

“You’re fucking crazy, bitch.”

“I know what you did.”

“You don’t know shit.”

She’d pay for screwing with him.

The girl lunged for the door. He grabbed her and yanked her back by the hair. Her head twisted around. Hate spilled from her eyes. Sully cocked his fist. She knocked his arm away and Sully heard a hiss. He screamed, covered his face. His eyes were on fire.

The passenger’s door burst open and she spilled from the car. Sully screamed. He couldn’t let her get away, couldn’t let her go to the cops with some crazy story. They would think he was guilty.

He pushed open his door and stumbled after her. He slipped on the bed of wet leaves and landed hard on his knees. He lurched to his feet and lunged straight ahead. His fingers brushed the back of her jacket.

“Get away from me, you freak,” she yelled.

She was close. Sully staggered toward her, eyes burning, tears streaming down his face. He couldn’t see shit, but there was no fucking way he would let her go.

He grabbed her coat and jerked her back. She stumbled. Cursed. Sully grabbed hold of her. Her face was a small white blur. His fist closed, poised to strike. She’d learn to keep her fucking mouth shut.

Pain. A bright flash of pain bolted through Sully’s chest. His knees buckled and he tumbled to the ground.



Seth sipped the cold coffee on his desk and dialed the number on the pink message slip. It was late and he knew the chances of actually catching Dr. Rahul Jain in person were slim. He was already composing a message in his head when someone picked up the receiver.

“Dr. Jain.”

“Hey, Rahul. It’s Seth Crawford.”

“Seth. Right. I got your message. Sorry, I was too busy to call you back. You wanted to talk about Charles Sully. What’s he done now?”

The unexpected greeting knocked Seth off stride, and he knew he wasn’t going to like what came next.

“I’m investigating the disappearance of a college student, and I’m wondering if Sully’s our guy.”

“A girlfriend?” Rahul asked.

Past behavior was the best indicator of future behavior, Seth knew, and Sully’s record spoke for itself.

“No, just a chance encounter at a bar. Sully hit on her, and she blew him off. Is he the type of guy to retaliate?”

Rahul paused, mulling the question over for a moment or two.

“Typically I see two kinds of abusers in my line of work. Both are violent. The first is an iceberg. Calm. Almost glacial. With guys like this, their pulse rate rarely spikes during an assault. They attack and move on. The second is a volcano ready to explode. They tend to pick victims close to them, like family members or partners. They are all emotion and violence. Sully is the second kind.”

“So this girl’s rejection could have triggered him?”

“Could have, but I see Sully as the kind of guy who, after getting rejected at the bar, goes home and beats the shit out of his girlfriend.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Most bullies are cowards, and the girlfriend is a safe target.”

“But he’s a violent guy. He could have snapped.”

“It’s always possible. Maybe he had a bad day—fought with his girlfriend or someone at work. Could be that he meets a girl in a bar who says the wrong thing and triggers his rage. There is no doubt in my mind he hates women. But here’s the kicker—if he’s that close to losing his shit, chances are good he’ll take it all the way.”

“And kill her,” Seth said, dreading the inevitable, bloody outcome.

“Could be. But Sully’s not a planner. He’s not a slow-burn kind of guy. If an attack occurred, it would likely be a spur-of-the-moment thing. You saw Sully’s record. His mother has a no-contact order in place. The girl he beat was messed up pretty bad. In both cases the bloody fingerprints led straight to him.”

“Is it possible he learned to cover his tracks in lockup?”

“Anything is possible. Just when I think I’ve got it all figured out, someone manages to surprise me.” Rahul paused. “So, what do you think? Are you dealing with an iceberg or a volcano?”

“I don’t know yet.”

The answer, while honest, was wholly unsatisfactory, and Seth knew he had to answer it soon. Time was ticking. And if this was a serial lunatic, it was only a matter of time before he grabbed another girl.

The phone beeped, and he saw a familiar number flash by.

“Thanks for your help, Rahul. I’ve got to grab the other line.” He jabbed a button on his phone. “Crawford.”

“Do you know Tess Turner?” Detective Linda Garcia asked.

Seth’s brow wrinkled. “Yeah. I’m investigating her roommate’s disappearance. Why?”

“I have her in custody. You need to come down here.”

“I’m on my way.”

• • • •

LINDA GARCIA HAD THE face of an angel and the voice of a hard-core smoker. A ten-year veteran of SPD, she had worked with Seth on a number of cases, and he knew she was sharp.

“Where’s Tess?” he asked.

“In there, cooling off.” Garcia hooked a thumb toward an interrogation room.

“What happened?”

“A couple of kids called it in. They were out on Military Road when they heard screaming. Ms. Turner was attacking some guy with a Taser. He’s in rough shape. Apparently she pepper-sprayed him before she tased him, poor bastard.”

“What were the kids doing out there?”

“Smoking dope. Not that we caught them with anything.” Garcia rolled her eyes.

“Who’s the guy?”

“Charles Sully.”

“Aw, shit.”

“You don’t look surprised.”

“I’m not.”

“What do you want me to do with her?” Garcia asked.

Seth brushed a hand across his eyes and shook his head. Stupid girl. He had half a mind to let Garcia charge her with assault. Maybe then she’d learn her lesson.

“I’ll talk to her,” Seth said. “Where’s Sully?”

“In the room across the hall.”

Tess Turner slouched in a chair behind a long, bare table. He barely recognized her underneath the thick layer of makeup smudged across her face. She recognized him well enough. Her chin inched up at a defiant angle as their eyes locked. Seth closed the door behind him.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“Well, someone had to keep an eye on that psycho.”

Sorely tempted to slap some sense into her, Seth planted his clenched fists on the table.

“Detective Garcia wants to charge you with assault.”

“Me? What about that freak? He’s the one you should be arresting.”

“What for?”

“What do you think? He’s got Brooke.”

“And you know that how?”

Seth stepped away from the table, his hands swinging wide. Tess scowled like a petulant teenager. She crossed her arms and stared down at the toes of her boots. *Hooker boots*, he thought. *Goes with the hooker outfit.*

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? He was pissed at Brooke for rejecting him, so he went after her.”

“Do you have any evidence, Nancy Drew, or is your feminine intuition telling you this?”

Tess's mouth dropped open. Anger flashed in her eyes. "You know I'm right."

"Do I?" Seth raked a hand through his hair and reined in his own temper. "Okay, Ms. Turner, tell me about this brilliant plan of yours."

"I thought if I could get him to pick me up, I might be able to get him to confess."

"Confess? You think it's that easy? Do you know the kind of danger you put yourself in? What if he has Brooke? What if he recognized you?"

"He recognized me, all right."

"Jesus Christ."

Tess's skirt rode high up on her thighs, and she tugged it down an inch or two, still revealing more leg than was decent. Seth looked away, dropping his head into his hands.

"Maybe you should spend a night or two in jail. Maybe that would drill some sense into that thick head of yours."

"You can't be serious. I was protecting myself."

"It didn't look that way to the kids who called it in."

"He was going to hurt me."

"And what, exactly, were you expecting? You're dressed up like a hooker. You got into his car with him willingly. He drove you to a remote location. What did you think he was going to do? Read you poetry? He's a dangerous guy. Best-case scenario, you get raped and dumped off by the side of the road. Worst-case scenario, you disappear too. How does that help Brooke?"

"You could arrest him for solicitation."

"And you for prostitution?"

Tess didn't answer. She avoided his gaze, but Seth didn't let up. He glared at her. A heavy silence stretched out between them, and his anger finally subsided.

"Why didn't you tell me about the other guy at the bar?"

Tess stared at him with the wide, startled eyes of a doe. "Who?"

"Don't play games," Seth said. "I saw the surveillance video from the Chapel. Sully wasn't the only guy you talked to that night."

"Oh, him."

"Yeah, him. Who is he?"

Tess shrugged her tiny shoulders. The torn collar of her flimsy black shirt slipped down, exposing the strap of a hot-pink camisole. Crawford looked away.

"Nobody. Sully was being an asshole and this guy pretended to be Brooke's boyfriend to back Sully off."

"And it worked?"

"Yeah, Sully left Brooke alone after that."

"Did Brooke know the guy?"

Tess shook her head. "Neither of us did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think about it. He was a nice guy, not a creep like Sully."

"Are there any other unimportant details you'd care to share?"

Tess rolled her eyes. "No."

Seth blew out a long breath.

"I'm not going to warn you again, Tess. Stay away from Charles Sully. Now go wash that shit off your face. I'll have an officer drive you back to campus."

"I can find my own way home."

Defiance flashed in her green eyes. Seth's jaw tensed.

"I'm not kidding. I'll arrest you for interfering with a police investigation if I have to. Do you understand me?"

He stared her down until she answered.

"Yes, sir," she snapped.

"Get out of here."

Tess rose from the chair. She swayed her hips in an exaggerated gait on her way out of the room, no doubt for his benefit.

Seth rose from the chair and strode across the hall.

Charles Sully looked fidgety. Cracking his knuckles, he ran his gaze along the perimeter of the room. Looking for cameras, Seth surmised as he studied Sully through the one-way mirror.

"You want some company?" Linda Garcia asked, peering through the glass at Sully.

"Sure. It might unnerve him to have a woman in the room."

Seth opened the door. He slapped a thick file folder down on the desk, and Sully sneered. He rolled his red, swollen eyes skyward.

"Tell us what happened, Charles."

"Nothing."

"That's not what she says."

"The bitch is lying."

"Funny. She says the same thing about you."

Garcia was right. Sully looked like shit. His eyes were red and swollen, no doubt still burning from the pepper spray. Sweat beaded on Sully's forehead.

"You're a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than she is, and you expect us to believe she attacked a big guy like you unprovoked?" Garcia said.

Sully turned his sharp gaze her way. "That's what I'm telling you."

"Why would she do that?" Seth asked.

Sully's gaze turned back toward him. "I don't know. I wasn't doing anything."

"What were you doing out in the woods?"

"We were just talking."

"Talking?" Garcia emitted a short bark of laughter and exchanged a skeptical look with Seth.

Sully's jaw clenched. "I didn't lay a fucking hand on her."

"Then how did her shirt get ripped?" Garcia asked.

Sully's head tipped back. "I don't know."

"I'm sure."

Sully lapsed into a sulky silence.

Seth picked up the file and thumbed through the contents. He pulled out a photograph of Brooke Parker and placed it on the table. "What do you know about her?"

Sully's eyes flicked to the photo. This guy was no poker player. His cheeks flushed. A vein bulged at his temple.

"Nothing."

"Is that right? You've never seen this girl?"

Sully dropped his gaze to the floor. "Not that I recall."

"Were you at the Chapel last Saturday night?"

"I might have been."

"You don't recall?"

Sully shook his head.

“What would you say if I told you that we found Brooke Parker earlier this afternoon? She’s recovering now and soon she’ll be talking to our investigators about her ordeal. What’s she going to tell us about you, Charles?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing to tell.”

Sully’s eyes blazed with hostility. Seth closed the file folder and pitched it back on the desk. He laced his fingers on the table, his lips stretched into a smug smile.

“Okay, Charles. You’re free to go. We’ll be in touch.”

Seth watched Charles Sully stride from the squad room. He would have preferred not to push Sully right now, but Tess had forced his hand.

Garcia closed the door. “What do you think?” she asked.

“He’s lying. I have video placing him at Parker’s last known location. I have his photo posted to her Facebook page. What I don’t have is any physical evidence linking him to the actual abduction.”

“He’s an angry son of a bitch.”

“Yeah, but is he a killer?”





Charles Sully wanted to shred someone. Sprung from the police station, he beelined it to his favorite hangout, a dive bar not far from his house. The familiar smell of stale beer and cigarettes hit him as soon as he walked through the door. Management hadn't seen fit to change the carpets in the past two decades of spilled beer, blood, and puke. Some customers complained about the stink, but Sully didn't mind. To him the place smelled like home.

Some asshole stood blocking the path to the bar, and Sully shoved him out of the way. Guy was shooting pool with his buddies, too fucking stupid to pay attention to what was going on around him. The city was crawling with fucking clueless hipster douchebags. Why didn't they stick to their overpriced clubs with their stuck-up twat girlfriends? Why did they have to come here? This place had been blue-collar long before the tech industry had overrun Seattle.

"What's your problem?" the guy asked, trying to sound tough.

Sully didn't stop to answer. He just pushed his way through the herd of sheep crowded around the pool tables and followed the glow of the neon beer signs. The cell phone in his pocket buzzed. Gritting his teeth, he withdrew it.

Lara was calling. Checking up on him. Fucking bitch.

All he wanted was to sit and drink in peace, but no. The bar was crammed with stupid fucks who didn't have the common sense to get the hell out of the way. Then Lara, who couldn't spend one fucking night home alone without calling. He could already hear her whiny voice in his head.

*Where are you, Carlos? When will you be home, Carlos? Can you bring me some milk, Carlos?*

On and on and fucking on until he was ready to explode.

Planting his meaty forearms on the sticky bar, Sully ordered a beer and a shot of tequila. The fat bartender, Terry, nodded. Sully downed the first shot. The bitter taste of tequila burned down his throat and settled in a satisfying glow deep in his belly.

The fucking police had hauled him in. That's all he needed, the police poking around in his shit.

He wanted another drink, but Terry was gabbing with some fat fuck at the end of the bar. He eyed the slutty waitress buzzing around the bar in her miniskirt. She blew past him without sparing him a glance. Clenching his teeth, Sully pounded the shot glass against the smooth, lacquered wood hard enough to draw attention to the fact that he was sitting down here without a shot.

Was it too much to ask for Terry to get his fat ass down here with a refill instead of shooting the shit with some other douche at the end of the bar? It wasn't social hour. He had a job to do.

Terry turned, his beady eyes fixed on Sully. He held up the empty shot glass. Red-faced and annoyed, Terry nodded, getting the point.

*About goddamned time.*

Sully gripped the frosty pint glass in his fist.

Why couldn't they just leave him the fuck alone? Lara, the police, that fucking dyke that had set him up.

*Stupid fucking cunt.*

She had no idea of the hornet's nest she'd stirred up.

Sully guzzled down the pint. The chilled, frothy beer slid down his throat but did nothing to quench the burning anger bubbling up inside his gut.

The bitch should have minded her own business. She should have kept her mouth shut. She should have just left him alone. But no. She was too stupid for that.

Someone should teach her a lesson. Someone should shut the dumb bitch up.  
Fists clenched, knuckles turning white, Sully downed the second shot.



Thursday morning and Marissa felt on the verge of collapse. The emotional toll of baring her soul to the press yesterday, along with the constant panic of not knowing where her daughter was, had sapped what strength remained. And it was only eleven o'clock. There was still a hell of a lot of day to get through.

Henry Cahill had called them all into the conference room to discuss his latest findings. Detective Crawford sat beside her, a skeptical look on his face.

"So, Brooke turned off the location preferences on her social media account," Crawford said, repeating Cahill's words.

"Right. For this photo. Don't you think that's odd?"

"Not really."

"Why for this photo? Presumably the picture of a guy who wiggled her out?" Cahill asked. Crawford flipped his hand palm-up, his patience wearing thin. Cahill's brows arched. "So what if I told you the picture of Charles Sully replaced a different picture?"

Crawford leaned forward in his chair, fully engaged now. "What do you mean?"

"The database record has been modified."

"Hold it. You hacked into their database?"

"Well, hypothetically speaking, if one were to do that sort of thing, one might uncover an anomaly with the database record."

"Hypothetically?"

"Hacking into their database might be considered illegal, so let's say if someone were to do just that, they may be able to find out where the person was when they edited the posting, uploading the picture of Charles Sully."

Cahill's lips broke into a sly smile.

"Okay," said Crawford, "so say Brooke uploads a photo to her Facebook site, then Brooke . . ."

"Or someone else . . ."

"Right, or someone else changes the post, replacing the original picture with Sully's."

"Exactly. And let's say the new picture was uploaded in a coffee shop in Belltown on Sunday morning, a little after ten a.m."

"Hold it. I thought the location services were turned off."

"Well, what do you think is easier? Stripping the GPS data before the picture is uploaded, or not showing the GPS data in the user interface?"

"So all that info is still stored in the database? The preference controls whether the data is shown or not?"

"Gold star, Detective Crawford," Cahill said.

"Any chance of recovering the original photo—the one replaced by Sully's?"

"Unfortunately not. But if the coffee shop has a surveillance camera . . ."

"Right."

Marissa got lost in all the technical jargon, but looking pleased with himself, Cahill handed Crawford a piece of paper with the name of the coffee shop and the time of the transaction. The group stood and filed out of the conference room ahead of Marissa.

Just outside the conference room door, her cell phone rang. Marissa's heart jumped. Brooke? Please let it be Brooke. She opened her purse and started digging.

*Ring.*

Why couldn't she find anything in this damned purse? A hairbrush and wadded receipts spilled onto the floor as she frantically searched for the phone. Marissa ducked into the conference room and frisked the pockets.

*Ring.*

Desperate, she yanked the purse open wide and upended it onto the table. Coins whirred along the smooth surface. Keys clanged. She scattered the contents with trembling hands, fingers finally latching on to the phone.

She pressed the answer button and clamped the phone against her ear.

"Hello," she said, sounding like she'd just sprinted a mile.

"Ms. Rooney, this is Clarissa Erwin from Renton High."

*Kelly?*

"What's wrong? Is Kelly all right?"

"Well, that's what I'm calling about. There's been a fight on school property."

"A fight? Is Kelly hurt?"

"Not seriously, but . . ." The woman's voice trailed off.

*Not seriously? What the hell does that mean?*

"But what?" she demanded. "Where is Kelly?"

"She's been taken to the Renton police station along with the other students involved in the altercation."

"She's at the police station? What for?"

"Like I said, there was a fight on school property."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Maybe it's best if you just went down there."

It was the first thing the woman had said that made any sense.

Marissa hung up and yanked the purse open. She grabbed fistfuls of her belongings off the table and stuffed them back in.

"Ms. Rooney, is everything okay?"

Marissa whirled around. Detective Crawford stood in the doorway. He set a handful of her belongings on the table beside the purse.

"Yes . . . no . . . shit." She pressed her palms to her burning cheeks. "There's been a fight at school and Kelly's at the Renton police station. I need to go. Now."

"Want a ride?"

Marissa stared at him. She didn't have her car, which meant waiting for the train, which would take longer. She had no idea where to go or what she was walking into. Having a police officer with her would make things so much easier. Having Crawford with her revealed a reservoir of strength she hadn't known she had.

"Would you?"

"Let's go."

Marissa opened the door to Crawford's gray Nissan Altima. The pine-forest scent assaulted her nose as she settled into the passenger's seat. The interior was in pristine condition. There were none of the empty coffee cups, fast food wrappers, or other evidence of unclean living she'd expected to see in a cop's car.

They were halfway to Boeing Field before Marissa realized she'd left without telling Elizabeth Holt where she was going. Second day on the job and she'd gone AWOL, followed Crawford out of

the building like some kind of zombie.

Now they were speeding down I-5, heading south of the city. Industrial buildings flew by. They were making good time. Then Marissa looked up to see four lanes of red taillights ahead.

“Damn it,” she growled.

Crawford maneuvered his way to the left lane and flipped on a switch. The police light on his dash sprang to life, flashing red and blue. Drivers shuffled aside, grudgingly allowing them past.

“Did they tell you why Kelly was taken to the police station?”

“There was some kind of fight at the school. I’m not even sure if she’s hurt.”

“If she was badly hurt, they would have taken her to the hospital,” he said, sounding like a cop.

Marissa saw the flashing lights of a fire truck and a police cruiser up ahead, alongside a wide field of scattered debris.

“Has Kelly ever been in trouble before?” Crawford asked.

Marissa shook her head. “She’s never been a star student, but she was always able to find her niche—art, band, whatever.”

Crawford honked at a red Honda Civic blocking his way. The driver eased over and Crawford squeezed his car around on the shoulder. Closer to the scene now, Marissa saw a Dodge Ram stopped by the side of the road, trunk bunched in like an accordion. There wasn’t much left of the Subaru Outback smashed into the guardrail up ahead.

Marissa caught sight of the truck’s driver. Sprawled over the steering wheel, bright-red blood sheeting down one side of her pale face. The firemen were talking to her, but she wasn’t moving.

Marissa’s gut clenched as she thought about the woman’s family and how their lives would change. How at some point today they would get a call and their lives would take a hard right, forcing them off the path they’d been on and into the unknown.

She thought about Brooke. Alone. Scared. Hurting. Her stomach rolled. Covering her mouth, she looked away from the mangled cars.

A state trooper waved them over. Lowering the window, Crawford flashed his badge.

“We need to get to Renton ASAP.”

“Well, shit.” The state trooper looked at the scene, then back at Crawford. “Stay as far left as you can manage.”

Crawford nodded. The trooper straightened away from the car and waved them through. Glass and plastic crunched and popped beneath the Nissan’s wheels as the scene disappeared in the rearview mirror.

Bare trees lined both sides of the highway. Their naked branches scratched the bleak sky. The familiar sprawl of Westfield Southcenter Mall passed, and Marissa knew they were close. Five more minutes and they’d reach the station. And then what?

“You said Kelly just started at this school?”

“We moved to Renton in June. She was at Redmond High last year.”

Crawford whistled. “Redmond to Renton. That’s a pretty big change.”

Marissa stiffened. She knew the schools weren’t as good here. Redmond was full of white-collar professionals, folks who worked at Nintendo, Microsoft, Group Health, and other large conglomerates. Renton was a blue-collar town. Aside from the Boeing plant, the downtown was small and grimy, filled with stores struggling to stay afloat in this tough economy. Renton was all she could afford within driving distance of the city since the split.

“Yeah, well. Divorce sucks,” she grumbled.

Crawford didn't respond. Marissa glanced over. There was no ring on his finger, and she wondered if he was divorced, if he knew what it was like to cleave your life from another person's. How messy it all was.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Crawford pulled into the salmon-colored building off Grady Way. He flashed his badge and told the clerk whom they were there to see. She was escorted to the waiting area while he disappeared through a heavy steel door.

Half a dozen people filled the waiting area. A man with a scrubby beard and overbright eyes turned toward Marissa.

"Rejoice, sister," he said. "Those who know not suffering know not God."

Marissa turned away and stared at the door. The minutes crawled by.

Finally Crawford emerged from the back, striding down the hall with Kelly in tow.

Marissa rushed forward and clasped Kelly in a fierce hug. Pulling away, she caught sight of the bruises and swelling around Kelly's eyes. Chin held high, Kelly stared at her mother as if daring her to say a word. Marissa kept her jaw clenched tight, not trusting herself to speak.

They walked to the car, and Kelly slouched in the backseat. Marissa glanced over at Detective Crawford. God, what he must think of her. Of her family. Everything was so screwed up.

Marissa was surprised when Crawford didn't drop them off at the curb outside their house. He followed them inside. Kelly dropped her backpack on the floor beside the closet door and turned on Marissa.

"Before you accuse me of doing anything, I want you to know, I didn't start it."

Marissa bristled at Kelly's defensive tone.

"If you didn't do anything wrong, what were you doing at the police station? Why did I have to leave work to bail you out?"

"Nobody bailed me out."

"Really?" Marissa fisted her hands on her hips. "You really want to get into a semantic argument with me right now?"

Kelly's face flushed red as she glared at Marissa. Her mouth opened and she was about to blast back when Detective Crawford silenced her with his open palm.

"Apparently Kelly was jumped by a group of girls. She defended herself."

"If Kelly was attacked, why was she pulled into the police station?"

Crawford exchanged a glance with Kelly before looking back at Marissa.

"Because she had a knife."

"What? You brought a knife to school?" The sudden realization of how much worse the situation could have been hit her with full force.

"Have they been threatening you, Kelly?" Crawford asked.

"Yes," Kelly said, ignoring Marissa. "They've been on my ass ever since I started. On Monday they knocked me down and took my flute."

"They stole your flute? Why didn't you say anything?"

"What could you do about it? Call their mothers?"

"Kelly," Crawford said.

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously," she muttered under her breath.

"I can't believe you brought a knife to school. Jesus."

Anger and incredulity flashed in Kelly's eyes.

"You'd rather I let them beat the shit out of me? You don't know what it's like there. You want everything to be fine, but it's not. You're not the one dealing with the shit that goes on there, Mom—"



the drugs, the gangs, you name it. I'm not going back there. I'll drop out of school. I'll . . .”

Angry tears shone in Kelly's eyes and Marissa took a step toward her, desperately wanting to close the distance between them, but Kelly turned away. Marissa wrapped her empty arms around her torso. As if sensing how close she was to the breaking point, Crawford intervened.

“Can I have a minute alone with your mom?”

“Fine.”

Kelly stormed from the room. The bedroom door slammed so hard the walls shook, and Marissa was left alone with Crawford. She pressed her hands against her burning cheeks and stared at the floor.

“I suppose you're going to tell me I'm handling the situation wrong.”

“I wouldn't presume.”

Marissa leaned back against the cupboard and waited for the lecture to begin, but it didn't. Crawford sat down at the table and motioned for her to join him. She didn't want to sit. She wanted to march into Kelly's room and settle this thing. But she couldn't ignore his request. He'd been good enough to come to her rescue at the police station. She owed it to him to hear him out.

Reluctantly she pushed away from the counter and took the chair across from him.

“How much trouble is Kelly in?”

“The police aren't going to press charges, but it's quite likely Kelly will be suspended. Maybe even expelled.”

“Expelled? But what about the girls who attacked her?”

“They'll be disciplined too. Unfortunately Kelly's choice of weapon will weigh heavily into their decision.”

An angry bark of laughter bubbled up from Marissa's chest.

“So Kelly gets attacked and they're worried about what kind of knife she brought to defend herself? This is insane.”

“It's not fair. From Kelly's point of view, she felt threatened by these girls, and rightfully so. It's a rough school. While I don't agree with what she did, I understand why she did it. Bottom line, you need help.”

“Psychological help? Like a therapist or something?”

Crawford smiled gently. “I was thinking more like family support, like maybe Kelly should transfer schools.”

How was Marissa supposed to arrange that? It wasn't like she could drive across to the Kent school district and enroll Kelly there. Besides, who was to say any of the local schools would be any better? And she sure as hell couldn't afford private school.

“Do you have family? Someone who can help out with Kelly?”

“It's just me. It's always been just me.”

Marissa sighed. She was pathetic. Thirty-six years old and what did she have to show for it? She had no one she could count on, no one to support her. Tears stung her eyes. Horrified, she covered her face and bit the inside of her cheek. She wouldn't cry in front of him. If she cried now, she might never stop.

“It's going to be okay,” Crawford said, resting a hand on her elbow.

She flinched away, dropping her hands and glaring at him.

“I'm not stupid. Things are not okay. Brooke is missing. Kelly hates me. I've done everything I can to give these girls a decent life. I fed them, clothed them, made sure they went to school, stayed off drugs, didn't get pregnant. I worked any job I could get to put a roof over their heads. I tried to

build a family for them, and every single time things fell apart. Shit just doesn't work out. I learned that the hard way. I make mistakes. I pick the wrong men. Maybe my mother's right. I deserve this."

She dropped her gaze to the table, wrapping her arms tight around her chest. She couldn't spend another second looking into his kind eyes without losing it.

"None of this is your fault, Marissa."

A pained smile twisted her lips.

"The day I left home, my mother said God would punish me for my sins. Apparently she was right."

"Parents say a lot of things they don't mean."

Marissa gave a shaky nod and cast her gaze toward the window at the gloomy sky. She wished she could believe him, but she'd stopped believing in God when she was just a kid. Maybe this was his punishment, his way of getting even.

"I have to get back to the station," Crawford said, breaking into her thoughts. "Are you all right?"

Marissa nodded. Crawford's chair scraped against the tile floor. She rose from the table and followed him to the door. She had a crazy urge to grab his hand. She didn't want him to go. He was so calm. So sane. She wasn't sure she could handle any of this alone.

"Thanks for helping out with Kelly today."

"I was glad to help."

His hand gripped the doorknob, and he hesitated, turning back toward Marissa.

"I don't want to overstep here, but I do have one small piece of advice. Just listen to Kelly. She needs to know you understand her side of the story, no matter what it is."

"You're heading back to the station?"

"I need to get the surveillance footage from the coffee shop where the photo of Charles Sully was uploaded."



Tree branches whipped her face. The wet wind plastered her hair to her head. She could see the headlights shimmering up ahead. She had to keep running. Faster. He was close behind.

“Brooke,” he screamed, his voice filled with rage.

Another burst of adrenaline shot through her. He was gaining.

Her muscles burned with lactic acid. Her blood sugars soared and she panted, trying to catch her breath. Her lungs were on fire, and close behind her, she could hear his heavy footsteps closing in, crashing through the brush.

The hillside was steep, and she clambered up the slippery terrain. Her feet slid. She grabbed a fistful of vines. Blackberry bushes. The spikes bit into her hands, drawing blood, but she didn't care. She climbed. The lights drew closer. She had to get to the road. Ten or fifteen feet. That was all. She was close, so close.

A hand closed around her ankle and gave it a vicious yank. She fell. She tasted mud and filth and blood.

*Oh God.*

The blood rushed through her ears, as fast and as constant as the rising river outside the cabin. Brooke's eyes opened. Her vision was blurred. Her blood sugar was soaring, and she was dying of thirst.

Her heart still pounding, she pressed her hand to her chest, trying to shake off the panic, but the nightmare had seemed so real. So real. Oh, shit.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position and brushed her hair back with trembling fingers.

He wasn't here. But he would come back.

Time was running out. She felt it in the screaming of her muscles, the aching of her joints. She needed insulin, but she only had one pen. How many more shots were left? Without a glucometer, she had no way of telling how much she really needed. And when the insulin ran out, she was as good as dead.

No. She didn't want to die here. She had to wake Kim. They had to find a way out. Together they could figure it out.

Pain throbbed through Brooke's body. Moving was hard. She shifted onto her knees and squinted in the waning light. But Kim wasn't on the bed.

Confused, she swung her gaze wide. Rocking back on her heels, she looked up.

Bile rose at the back of her throat. The breath rushed from her lungs, and she screamed.



Outside the window the gray sky turned black. Marissa ripped off the nicotine patch she'd applied earlier that day and rifled through the kitchen drawers, searching for the last package of cigarettes she'd stowed there—for emergencies. Well, this sure as hell qualified. She slammed the junk drawer shut and opened the next. Nothing. Dammit. She finally found a pack in the bottom drawer, shoved underneath a stack of hideous blue place mats.

Her fingers shaking, she pulled out a cigarette and lit up.

It tasted stale as shit, but that didn't stop her. She cracked the kitchen window open an inch and blew the smoke outside, not wanting Kelly to know just how weak she was. Halfway through she ground the cigarette out in the sink. Her head pounded with a blistering headache. Nine Inch Nails blasted from the speakers in Kelly's room, and Marissa knew she was stalling.

Hours had passed. She had to talk to Kelly. She had to stay calm, because Crawford was right. She needed to listen to her daughter, without interrupting, without losing her temper.

Marissa crossed the kitchen and knocked on her daughter's door.

"Kelly," she called, and waited for some acknowledgement. The music blared. "I know you're angry, but we need to work through this."

She rested her forehead on the cool surface of the door. Her temples throbbed to the bass line of "Head Like a Hole."

Marissa knocked again, louder this time, and still Kelly didn't answer.

"Look, I know I shouldn't have yelled at you, but I was scared. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you. I'll go to the school and talk to the principal. I know you don't feel safe there. We'll figure something out. I promise."

Dammit, Kelly was every bit as obstinate as her father was. Every single time they'd gotten into a fight, he had gone storming out, leaving her behind to stew. Sometimes he'd be gone for days, leaving her alone with the kids. She'd never known whether he was coming back or not. And then one day he hadn't.

Marissa hammered on the door.

"Come on, Kelly. Hiding in there won't fix anything. You have to talk to me. Are you even listening? Turn the music down."

Marissa waited. The music wailed and Kelly stubbornly refused to respond. Anger bubbling over, she grabbed the knob and flung the door wide.

The room was dark.

"Kelly?"

No answer. The bass guitar throbbed in time with her pounding headache. Marissa pressed a hand to her temple and flicked on the lights. Kelly was nowhere in sight. Her heart raced. Panic filled her chest.

"Kelly!" she screamed.

Cold wind blew in through the room. The window was open a crack. Marissa ran across the room and peered outside. The street was empty. No sign of anyone anywhere.

Marissa's head swirled in a dizzying sway just before her knees gave way. She fell to the floor. Her mouth opened, but she couldn't even scream.



“What am I looking for?” the tech asked, loading the coffee shop’s surveillance video onto his computer.

“This guy,” Seth said, handing over a grainy printout of the mystery man talking to Brooke at the Chapel.

“You’re kidding, right?” the tech said, squinting at the printout. “Don’t you have anything better? I mean, I can’t tell anything from this.”

True. There was no way of telling what the guy looked like—eye color, facial features, or tattoos. The resolution of the camera was shit.

“He’s a white male, clean-shaven, six feet tall, dark hair. It’s the best we’ve got,” Seth said.

“Right. That narrows it down.” The tech shook his head and glanced back at Seth. “I’ll call you when I’ve got something.”

“Thanks,” Seth said, heading back to his office.

Gripping his car keys tight in his hand, he yanked open his desk drawer. Holly’s face stared up at him. Her pretty smile pierced his heart, and suddenly he was thinking about the pain he’d seen in Marissa’s eyes. With one daughter missing, the last thing she needed was Kelly’s fit of teenage rebellion. But life was like that. Just when you thought things couldn’t get worse, they did.

He slammed the drawer shut and rubbed his eyes.

“Crawford.”

Seth glanced up. Lieutenant Alvarez cut across the busy squad room, angling directly toward him. Before he even opened his mouth, Seth knew what he wanted.

“Catch me up to speed on the Parker case.”

“We’ve got a couple potential suspects. First up is Charles Sully, the ex-con who was hitting on Brooke at the bar.”

“You talk to him?”

“He lied about meeting Brooke at the bar. Says he knows nothing about her disappearance. He’s got a record, convictions for solicitation and domestic assault. According to the forensic psychiatrist, Sully’s a bit of a head case.”

“Does he feel like our guy?”

“Too soon to say, but there is something definitely off about him. Just need to figure out what. Then there’s the mystery man Brooke was talking to at the bar.”

“ID him yet?”

Seth shook his head.

“Not yet. The surveillance footage from the Chapel is useless. I’ll call Tess Turner . . .”

“Parker’s roommate?”

Seth nodded.

“I’ll have her come down to the station to work with an artist.”

“Good. What else?”

“Holt’s hired a super-geek to crawl through Parker’s social media site to see what he can find out.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t know, but maybe Cahill will find something useful.”

“I suppose it’s worth a shot. What about the girl’s condition?”



Inwardly Seth cringed. He didn't like to think about how Brooke might be suffering without her medication. Investigating the disappearance of a teenager was scary enough. The extra pressure of trying to find a teenage diabetic magnified the ticking of the clock in his head. Each passing hour could mean life or death for Brooke.

"Well, if she's got her insulin pen with her, she'll be able to squeak by for a few more days."

"And if she doesn't?"

Seth shrugged. If Brooke didn't have access to her insulin, she might already be in a coma, or worse. He didn't need to spell it out for the lieutenant.

"And the mother?"

"She's holding it together. Barely."

"The chief wants your daily report. It's late."

"I know."

"Get on it."

"Yes, sir."

Alvarez strode back to his office. Seth picked up his cell phone and dialed Tess's number. He got her voice mail.

"Tess, I need you to come down to the station." His landline rang. "Call me when you get this," he said, and picked up. "Crawford."

The panic in Marissa's voice drilled an ice pick of dread into his chest. She was talking so fast he could barely understand a word she was saying. He pitched his voice low and calm as he interrupted her.

"Hold on. Slow down. Tell me again what happened."

"It's Kelly," Marissa said. "Kelly's gone."

Seth slumped back in his chair. Seriously? The odds of two girls disappearing from the same family were slim to none. After fighting with her mother, Kelly was probably out blowing off steam. Quite likely Marissa was overacting. Still, he couldn't ignore the situation.

"Tell me everything."

He closed his eyes and listened intently while Marissa relayed the events since he'd left her house a few hours ago.

"What's her cell phone number?"

Seth scribbled the number down on a note pad and made her promise to call if anything changed. He grabbed his car keys and headed for the door.

• • • •

THE KITCHEN SMELLED like Pine-Sol and cigarettes. Marissa's red-rimmed eyes looked huge and frightened in her pale face, and Seth followed her down the hallway to the back of the house, where the bedrooms were located.

The door to Kelly's bedroom yawned open. The dove-gray walls were covered with posters. Above the bed hung a framed picture of a gothic angel, ragged white wings against a stormy purple-and-black sky. Laptop and books on the desk. Clothes on the floor. Messy. A typical kid's room.

Seth scanned the room slowly, methodically, not wanting to miss a single detail.

"She's not answering her phone," Marissa said.

She stood close to him, looking small and frightened. He looked past her, his gaze darting to the window. He stepped over Kelly's orange backpack, pulled the sleeve of his leather jacket up over his

hand, and slid the window wide. The peeling paint on the white frame didn't look damaged. There were no locks on the window, and it didn't look as if it had been jimmed from the outside.

"Is there anything missing?" he asked.

"No. I don't know. I . . ."

"Has she ever taken off before?"

Seth heard a choking sound and he turned. Marissa's hand covered her mouth. Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks. He sighed. He rounded the bed and clasped her shaking shoulders in his hands.

"It's going to be okay," he said. "We'll find her."

Marissa's head tipped forward, falling softly against his chest, and nestled in the curve of his shoulder like it belonged there.

She smelled like lilacs in springtime. It had been so long since he'd held a woman. Not since his wife. The heat of her body against him stirred long-dormant feelings in him, and he knew this was wrong. He knew he should let her go, but he didn't want to. His fingers burrowed into her silky hair, and he breathed in the sweet floral scent of her for a few seconds more. Finally he gripped Marissa's shoulders and eased her away.

She swiped her eyes. Mascara smudged the backs of her shaking hands. Seth turned away, searching for a box of tissues. Spying one on the desk, he plucked two and handed them to her.

"I'm sorry. I'm usually not this much of a mess . . ."

The phone rang, cutting her off.

The color drained from her face. Seth grabbed the cordless phone off Kelly's desk and hit the talk button.

"Hello," he said.

"May I speak to Marissa?"

It was a man's voice. His eyes swung toward Marissa. She looked as stiff as a statue, with her hand clamped over her mouth, as if stifling a scream.

"And you are?"

"Logan Rooney."



Marissa splashed cold water on her face. The faucet hissed as she met her stare in the mirror. She looked like hell. Pale. Frightened. Dark circles puffed like bruises beneath her eyes. After turning the water off, she grabbed the white hand towel and dried her skin. She folded the towel neatly and hung it on the rack beside the handmade glass sink.

Kelly was hiding upstairs, afraid to face her, and Marissa felt like the worst parent in the world. She'd failed Kelly, and her daughter had run straight to the one person she still trusted. Logan.

Emerging from the bathroom, she smelled the faint scent of flowers and honey, a sure sign that Logan had brewed some chamomile tea—something to soothe her frayed nerves. But her nerves weren't just frayed; they were ragged, more in need of Valium than tea.

Logan leaned against the counter, his tanned arms folded. He looked fresh, like he'd just finished a game of tennis at the club, while she looked like she'd been dragged through the wringer.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Marissa squelched an absurd urge to laugh, scream, cry. No, she wasn't okay. She was nowhere close to okay. Her life was a mess.

"Any news on Brooke?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, Marissa. I'm so sorry."

Logan poured them each a mug of tea and sat down at the dining room table. Marissa perched on the chair and wrapped her chilled fingers around the steaming glass mug, wishing the tea were something stronger.

Everywhere she looked she saw the elegant trappings of the life she'd left behind. The sleek modern furniture. The gleaming bamboo floors. The small telltale signs of luxury her new life no longer afforded.

No wonder Kelly resented her.

And as much as she didn't want to drag Logan into their drama, Kelly had given her no choice.

"I suppose Kelly told you what happened."

"She said some girls attacked her at school."

"I had to go to the police station to pick her up. She had a knife."

Logan landed the first blow.

"She must have been really scared to have brought a knife to school."

Marissa winced. Leave it to him to consider Kelly's motivations while she'd just gone postal.

"Yeah, and I yelled at her," Marissa admitted, regretting her choices. Hating herself.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I don't know how you're holding it together."

Logan placed his hand on her arm. While part of her wanted someone to lean on, she couldn't forget the reasons she'd left. Marissa straightened away, and Logan's hand fell back to the table.

"She's probably going to be expelled."

"I'd like to help," he said at last.

"Help? How?"

"Let Kelly stay with me for a while. I'll call the school, see if I can smooth things over."

Gentleness was Logan's weapon of choice, and it had always been her undoing. Marissa wished it could be that easy. She needed help. Crawford had said that just a few short hours ago and he was right. She did need help. But Logan?

“I can’t let Kelly go. We’re family. We have to find a way to work things out. She’s my daughter, Logan, and you’re just . . .”

“Your ex,” he finished for her, looking resigned.

“She’s not your daughter.”

“You’ve said that already. Look, there’s no way you can handle everything yourself.”

“And you think you can? You think being a single parent is easy? You think . . . ?”

Marissa stopped herself. None of this was Logan’s fault. All he wanted to do was help, and here she was yelling at him, her anger and fear pouring out in a torrent of ugly words.

Damn Logan for being so sane. Damn him for being so . . . so right.

“Mom.”

Kelly appeared at the bottom of the staircase.

Marissa sprang to her feet and threw her arms around Kelly, never wanting to let go. Kelly hesitated. Slowly her arms circled around Marissa’s back.

“Thank God you’re okay.”

With Marissa’s arm still looped around Kelly’s shoulders, they walked side by side back to the table. Kelly sat between her and Logan. Marissa wanted to speak, but she held back, remembering Detective Crawford’s advice.

*Just listen.*

It sounded easier than it actually was. There was so much she wanted to say. Even so, she waited.

“I’m sorry I left without telling you. I just needed someone to talk to.”

The words landed like a punch to the gut.

“Why don’t you tell your mom what you told me?” Logan prompted softly.

Kelly swallowed. She stole a quick glance at Logan, who nodded reassuringly, before she spoke.

“Mom, I can’t go back to that school. Those girls . . . I don’t think today’s the end of it. I don’t know how they’re going to react. It will be worse next time. I know it. Then there’s Brooke. You have to help find her. You can’t do that if you’re worried about me.”

Dread settled at the pit of Marissa’s stomach. She knew where this was going. Kelly was building a case, and as much as she wanted to, Marissa couldn’t argue the facts. Kelly wasn’t safe at school and would quite likely be expelled. And with Brooke missing . . .

“I want to stay here for a while. At least until we figure out the school situation. I think it would be best for everyone.”

If she let Kelly go now, would she ever come back? It was an impossible choice. Bone-tired, Marissa turned her gaze on Logan.

“What about your job?”

“I’ll take time off,” he said. “Look, I know you’re still angry with me, Marissa, but please let me help. I can’t help you find Brooke, but I can be here for Kelly. I can do this, if you let me.”

She knew Logan was sincere. She knew staying here was probably the best thing for Kelly right now. Still, she couldn’t stand the thought of going back to that house. Alone. She’d go crazy. All of those silent hours to fill while she waited for some break in Brooke’s case, for some word about whether her daughter was alive or dead. But that was selfish.

She stared into Kelly’s hopeful face. Years flashed by in an instant—teddy bears and pigtails, lesson books and skinned knees—a lifetime full of memories.

“You can stay,” she whispered.

“Thank you, Mom.”

Kelly threw both arms around Marissa, and they held on to each other for a long moment. Finally Marissa pulled back and cleared her throat.

“Honey, I need to speak to Logan. Alone.”

“Okay,” she said. Kelly wiped the tears from her eyes and cast a quick glance over her shoulder before climbing the staircase.

“I’ll do this, Logan,” she said, once Kelly was out of earshot, “but you have to tell her the truth.”

A pained expression crossed Logan’s face. He closed his eyes and slowly nodded.

“I’ll tell her everything,” he promised.



East of the highway, the crumbling forestry roads were bumpy and slick. He turned off the radio, needing to focus. The headlights cast a narrow band of light, showing the way ahead as he wound his way toward the valley floor. He parked down at the main camp, not daring to drive all the way in. It was too wet down here. Getting stuck would spell disaster. It wasn't like he could just call AAA for a tow.

The heaving engine died. He pulled the key from the ignition and stepped out of the vehicle.

The woods came alive at night. As far back as he could remember, he'd loved the smell of pine trees in the cold air. Slinging the strap of the cooler across his shoulder, he gripped the flashlight in his hand but didn't turn it on. The dark welcomed him like a friend, enveloping him like a thick black cloak as he walked through the trees by memory.

The spongy earth dampened the sound of his boots, and with each step his anticipation grew. Each sense was heightened, which made him feel more awake, more alive. Darkness unfurled inside him. Out here he didn't have to hide who he was. Out here he was God. He held the power of life and death in his hands. The more they begged, pleaded, prayed, the more he liked it. Fear was addictive. Fear was power. Fear was a chalice full of tears, salty and delicious on his tongue. And once he had tasted it, there was nothing else like it in the whole world.

Rain fell through the trees in an ancient rhythm, an atonal symphony as old as the forest. Halfway through the stand of trees, he heard a noise behind him—a discordant note in an otherwise perfect movement. He stopped. Without the flashlight it was impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. He turned and listened. Ears strained.

The trees rustled in the wind.

It was probably just an animal looking for food, maybe a deer. Winter was closing in. Any day now the snow would start flying, choking off the forestry roads, and hunting season would end.

He heard the noise again and picked up the pace, knowing full well he wasn't the only dangerous thing out here. A wolf's keen sense of smell would pick up on the food in the cooler in no time. Best get moving. There were two girls waiting for him—one whose time was coming to an end, and the other whose time was just beginning.

The dense line of evergreens broke up ahead. He could make out the shadowy forms of the cabins in the distance and he felt himself stir.

A week, maybe two, then he'd have to give up the game. The new one wouldn't last very long, but tonight . . . tonight was his. Tonight he would get everything he wanted, and the other girl would get to watch. Learn. See the kind of fun she was in for before the grand finale.

The porch floorboards creaked beneath the tread of his heavy boots. He stuck the key in the lock. He felt the slow, grinding clack of the metal lock disengaging.

Darkness engulfed the cabin. He swung the beam of his flashlight around the room, illuminating the small space in bright slices of light.

His heart lurched. The cooler clattered to his feet, spilling water bottles and plastic-wrapped sandwiches across the bare plank floor.

“Jesus Christ,” he roared, not believing his eyes. “Jesus fucking Christ.”





Kim's lifeless body hung from a six-inch nail protruding from a beam. How? How the hell had she done it? Then he saw. The gag. The fucking gag. The other bitch must have worked the gag from Kim's mouth, and Kim had used it as a noose.

But how? How had she gotten all the way up there? She must have climbed up on the bed, hooked the noose around the nail and then let go.

Son of a fucking bitch.

His heart slammed like a jackhammer against his rib cage. He cast his wild gaze around the room until he found her. Crouched underneath a blanket—thinking what? He wouldn't see her? She was safe? Fuck that.

He'd give her a wake-up call she wouldn't soon forget.

He marched across the room, heavy boots booming against the wood floor, and thrust his hand into the mop of yellow hair. Teeth clenched tight, he yanked her to her feet. She cried out, a feeble, pathetic cry. Pain. Terror. He didn't care which.

All at once she sprang to life. Like a feral cat, she dug at his hands with her nails. Finding skin. Ripping. Slashing. He hissed.

Breath heaved from his lungs and he dragged her across the floor. Not caring if he ripped every last hair out of her stupid fucking head. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her chin, and he wrenched her jaw up high until she was staring at Kim's lifeless form.

"See what you did? See what you did? This is your fault. All your fault, you stupid fucking bitch."

He curled his fist and let fly. As his knuckles struck flesh, his ring ripped her skin—a bright-red gash across her cheek. She cried out, dropping to her knees, palms pressed to her face. Hot sticky blood flowed down her white skin.

She raised her hands to shield her head. He batted them away and cold-cocked her. One fierce blow to her head sent her reeling to the floor. She landed in a heap.

He kicked the cooler with all his might. It flew into the air and exploded against the wall with an earsplitting crack. Chunks of plastic rained down on the floor below. He swung back toward the girl, but she was out. A dark bruise bloomed against her pale forehead, and he wanted to hit her again. He wanted to keep hitting her until the anger ebbed from his veins, but what good would that do?

She looked like her whore of a mother and he wanted to make her suffer. She'd pay for fucking up his plans.

But not yet.

Grabbing the insulin pen off the floor, he spun the dial and plunged the needle into her leg. He pressed down on the dispenser and heard it click. Shot complete, he pulled it out, replaced the lid and dropped it to the floor. That should last her for a while.

He reached out and yanked the chain around her neck. The MedicAlert dog tags broke off in his hand. He stuffed them in his pocket.

Turning back toward the bed, he stared at Kim hanging from the rafters.

He ground his teeth together and thought about the duffel bag in the back of the cargo hold.

Then he got to work.



Marissa arrived home to a dark house. A blistering headache pounded behind her eyes. She hadn't eaten since early that morning, and she knew her body needed food. But eating was the last thing Marissa wanted to do. With her stomach tied in knots, she didn't think she could keep anything down.

Too tired to bother turning on the lights, she shuffled into the bedroom and stripped off her clothes. Marissa let them fall to the floor and slid sideways onto the bed. She prayed sleep would come, ending this hellish day.

Her head throbbed to the slow beat of her pulse. Her eyes opened in the dark, and she stared sightlessly at the ceiling. In the silence of the empty house, the day's events replayed in her mind like a trailer for a Lifetime movie. Brooke's face on the missing-person poster. The call from the school. Kelly's bruised face. And Logan.

The bed felt like a metal slab, and she rolled over onto her side, drawing her knees toward her chest. Rain pounded down on the roof, and Marissa shivered, shrouding herself in the comforter.

She tried to empty her mind, but dark thoughts flew through her brain like a flock of ravens, spiraling and twisting—dragging her to deeper and more dismal places than she'd ever been. Every mistake. Every bad moment she'd ever experienced replayed in her mind like the highlight reel of a wasted life.

Like getting pregnant at sixteen and dropping out of high school. Like everyone looking at her as if she were some kind of slut. Like her mother kicking her out of the house, saying that God would never forgive her sins. Like her back killing her after a nine-hour shift at 7-Eleven—her swollen belly sticking out for everyone to see. Like Jason screwing some waitress down at the sports bar and leaving her when Kelly was just a baby.

Rick crying after he'd hit her the first time and her forgiving him because she was stupid—because the one thing she wanted more than anything was a family. Marrying Logan, believing she'd found a happy ending at last and that she and her daughters would be safe.

All lies.

Exhaustion and sorrow pressed down on her heart, black and choking. She couldn't make it through another day. Another day of waiting for the phone to ring. For Crawford to find Brooke. For Kelly to come home. For Elizabeth to fire her. Another day of waiting to lose everything she'd fought so hard to keep.

You reap what you sow, her mother had said, quoting Bible verses while Marissa stood pregnant with her suitcase in hand, tears streaming down her face.

Maybe her mother had been right. Maybe she deserved all the shitty things that had happened to her. Her whole life was falling apart around her, again, and it was all her fault. Again.

Her mistakes.

Her bad choices.

Alone in the house with no one to hear, she let loose a torrent of tears into her pillow until there was nothing left but the rain outside, the darkness all around, and the pounding inside her head.

Three in the morning and sleep eluded her, withholding reprieve from her pain. Marissa rose from the bed and staggered down the hall, thinking that maybe if she could stop the headache, sleep would come.

A bottle of Excedrin Migraine sat on the middle shelf of the medicine cabinet, and she reached for it. Her hand stalled in midair. Beside the bottle of Excedrin sat a little orange vial of pills.

Sleeping pills. The ones her doctor had prescribed for her after the split with Logan. She plucked the bottle from the shelf and shook it. Then she twisted off the lid and dumped the contents into her hand. Tiny white pills filled her palm. She stared at the perfect white disks, transfixed, and counted each one.

*Fourteen.*

In the silence of the house, she heard her mother's voice whispering about how she'd failed. How she would never get her daughters back. How God would punish her for her sins. How she deserved this for being wicked. Sinful. How every bad thing that had ever happened was her fault. Her fault.

She looked down at the pills in her hand and swallowed.

Were fourteen pills enough?

Marissa closed her eyes.

Letting go would be so easy.

No more pain. Or worry. No more heartbreak or sorrow. No more fear. Or shame. Nothing. Just release.

No one would miss her. The world would be a better place without her.

Marissa opened her eyes and gripped the tap with a shaking hand. Water hissed into the stained porcelain sink. She grabbed a nearby glass, filled it with water, and stared at the pills—so shiny and white and perfect in her palm.

Peering into the bathroom mirror, Marissa saw her mother's hard face staring back. Her lips twisted into a pained smile.

She raised the glass, fingers curling around the pills in her hand.



No sign of dawn in the sky. Close to 4:00 a.m. and the rain continued to pound down, soaking the Seattle streets. He'd rather be sleeping right now, but thanks to that brainless bitch Kim, he had more work to do.

North of the city, he circled the winding suburbs of Shoreline. He knew all about Charles Sully and the incident at the bar. No doubt Brooke Parker's stupid little roommate had already blabbed to the police, making his job easier.

So he'd spent time learning what he could about the prick. Tracking his online boot-prints wasn't hard. Between Facebook and Twitter, he knew Sully was obsessed with muscle cars and porn. No shock there. A little more digging had revealed the name of the construction firm Sully worked for, as well as the locations of his last few job sites. A criminal background check courtesy of another online service confirmed Sully had a record and had served time for domestic violence.

If Sully wasn't the police's main suspect in Brooke's disappearance, he would be soon. Windshield wipers frantically swiped the hard rain from the windshield while he circled the block where Sully lived—looking for any signs of life in the dead of night. He didn't know if Sully was being watched, so he'd set a diversion to draw any unnecessary attention away from Sully's building.

Gasoline fumes clung to his black leather gloves. He had set a fire two blocks away.

Fire reminded him of who he was and where he had come from. Two boys. One can of gasoline and a blazing garage fire. How he'd loved watching the orange flames arc into the dark night. Two boys, only one of whom had paid for their crime, while the other got off scot-free.

*But here's the thing. Karma's a bitch.*

Karma caught up with everyone sooner or later. So while one boy paid for burning down the garage by spending two years in juvenile detention, the other didn't pay for a long time. In the end, though, everyone paid. The second boy had paid with his life. Karma was coming, and tonight was Charles Sully's night.

Glancing at the clock, he shook off the thought. He had to remain sharp. Before long all the little rats would awaken and get ready for another day in the maze. He was already pushing his luck, and Kim had made his job harder. In two short hours he needed to be tucked into bed beside his girlfriend.

He pulled off the quiet street into Sully's apartment complex.

Sully's car was easy to find. The dick-wad took more pictures of his precious car than of his girlfriend. Near the back of the lot, the bastard had straddled the line, taking up two spots beneath one of four streetlights.

At least Sully had backed in. He'd caught a break there. He angled into the spot beside the Super Bee, backing in so the two vehicles were trunk-to-trunk.

The air was heavy with the scent of rain, pine trees, and engine oil. Cold fingers of rain ran off the peak of his Seahawks cap, down the collar of his jacket.

He rounded the back of the vehicle and opened the cargo hold. He shifted the duffel bag out of the way and grasped the nylon tool kit he'd brought along.

The blinking red light on the Super Bee's dash warned him the alarm was set. The alarm didn't worry him though. You could learn a lot of skills in juvie. Breaking into cars was just one of the many things he'd learned to do while locked up with a bunch of underage felons.

The trunk lid popped open. He glanced back up at the apartment building. Yellow light spilled from more windows. Damned Boeing workers and their early-morning shifts.

He lifted the trunk lid wide, and his heart jolted as he peered inside.

*What the fuck?*

Hot sweat popped on his forehead, mingling with the cold rain. The unmistakable smell of death wafted up from Sully's trunk. She looked small—not much bigger than a child. If it weren't for the girl's waxy pallor, she might be sleeping.

Charles Sully was a very bad boy indeed, and now his plan was no longer simple. He supposed he could close the trunk and find someplace else to dump his body. But where was the fun in that?

He glanced up at the apartment building. Another light flickered on as fire engines and police flocked to the dumpster fire a few blocks away.

*Ticktock. Time to move.*

He hefted the duffel bag out of the cargo hold and set it on the pavement behind Sully's car. Then, reaching into Sully's trunk, he scooped up the dead girl. She felt light in his arms. He laid her in the back of his vehicle, placing her carefully on the tarp. Then he covered her with the ends, hiding her away from prying eyes.

The tailgate closed with a soft thump. Working fast, he muscled the duffel bag into Sully's trunk. He pulled Brooke's MedicAlert dog tags out of his pocket and tossed them in. The lid slammed down hard. The car horn blared.

*Fucking hell.*

He spied a large, jagged rock at the edge of the lot, back where the asphalt met the grass. He grabbed it and with one vicious throw heaved it at Sully's car. Glass rained down on the parking lot and crunched beneath his feet as he ran back to his vehicle.

He landed behind the wheel and pulled out onto the street. Half a block away, he glanced in his rearview mirror.

Blue and red lights flashed behind him.

He drove slowly through the neighborhood, stopping at a red light. The police cruiser turned left into Sully's complex. He grinned. The light turned green and he eased through the intersection.

The interstate loomed ahead. South of Shoreline, city lights glittered in the gloom. He couldn't go home. Not yet. Thanks to Charles fucking Sully, he had more work to do. And daylight was fast approaching. He had to make it home before his girlfriend awoke.

First he had to dump his cargo. But where?

He thought about all the things he'd learned about Sully—where he lived, where he worked, and where he played.

Then he knew.





Charles Sully awoke to the sound of sirens blaring. He bolted upright in bed, his heart beating faster than a 486 Hemi.

Beside him Lara rolled on her back.

“What time is it?” she yawned, rubbing her eyes.

“Early. Go back to sleep.”

Sully pulled on a discarded pair of boxer shorts. A sharp stab of fear cut through him as he jogged through the dark apartment, catching his leg on the corner of the coffee table. He swore under his breath but kept going. The patio door overlooking the parking lot loomed dead ahead.

A police cruiser was parked beside his car, lights flashing.

Sully froze. His chest constricted, making it difficult to breathe. He knew what was in that trunk. If they looked inside, he was fucked.

“What’s going on?”

Lara’s voice jolted him into action. He limped through the living room, jostling Lara on his way past.

“Jesus, Carlos. What the hell?”

In the darkened bedroom, he ignored the blood seeping down his leg and pulled on the same jeans and shirt he’d worn to the bar the night before. Stale beer and cigarette smoke clung to the soiled fabric. In his haste he slid his bare feet into his boots and grabbed the car keys off the nightstand. He was almost out of the room when he remembered.

He yanked the nightstand drawer open, grabbed the gun, and stuffed it into the waistband of his jeans.

Lara was yelling at him, but he couldn’t hear what she was saying over the buzz in his head. It didn’t matter. He had to get out of here. Now.

Sully snapped the lock open and jerked the door.

A beefy police officer filled the doorway.

“You Charles Sully?” he asked.

Sully nodded, running a hand through his tousled hair.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come with me.”

“What’s going on?” Lara called from behind, rubbing her massive belly like it hurt.

“Ma’am, are you okay?”

“You try carrying a bowling ball around in your uterus for seven months and tell me how good you feel.”

The officer preceded Sully down the hallway. Doors were opening, and the faces of his nosy neighbors peeked out. He could feel their judgmental stares follow him down the hall.

They took the elevator down to the first floor. Sully’s shirt clung to his clammy skin. The cold metal of the gun dug into his hip. His hand snaked around his back, reaching for the gun. Just then the door opened and another cop entered the building. Sully cringed, silently swearing, allowing his hand to swing back to his side. He was too late.

“Officer, what’s going on?” Lara panted behind them.

Sully cringed. Why couldn’t the fat fucking bitch stay in the apartment and mind her own goddamned business? What was she doing out here?

*Now.* He had to do something now while he still could. Once they saw what was in the trunk, it was all over.

“Ma’am, it appears there’s been a car prowler.”

Sully stopped. Lara ran into his back.

“Carlos!” Lara complained. Sully ignored her.

“Someone broke into the car?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

Like coolant filling a dry radiator shaft, relief flooded through Sully.

“If you’d come with us, sir, we can write up the report and get out of here.”

Charles followed along, able to breathe normally now. Lara was still yapping, but he kept his eyes on the officer ahead.

The officer made small talk with Lara, something about a rash of robberies in the neighborhood. Sully wasn’t paying them much mind. He just wanted to get the cops away from his car as soon as humanly possible, before this whole situation blew up in his face.

“You’re lucky. We were nearby,” the cop said.

“Why’s that?”

“Some asshole set a dumpster on fire a few blocks down.”

“This neighborhood just gets worse and worse. You know they found a dead hooker in the dumpster by the 7-Eleven. Awful place to raise a baby. I keep telling Carlos we should move, but . . .”

Sully clenched his teeth, wishing she’d shut up as he exited the building. But she didn’t. Lara kept on yammering. The cop seemed good-natured about it though. There was another cop shining a flashlight into the backseat of his car. Tension coiled inside Sully, but he forced himself to stay cool and to keep walking.

It took forever to cross the parking lot. Fat pelts of rain pattered on his head. Oblivious to the cold, Sully’s mind whirled. If he could just give a quick statement, the police would fuck off and he’d be fine. Fine.

“Oh, Carlos, your window,” Lara said.

The driver’s side window was shattered.

“Fuck,” he muttered, loud enough that the cop turned.

“Expensive to replace?”

Sully nodded. He glanced toward the trunk. Rain soaked his shirt, hiding the sweat stains.

“If you could take a look, Mr. Sully, to see if there’s anything missing, we’ll write up our report and be on our way.”

“Don’t bother. I can file a report later.”

The cop shrugged. “We’re here. Might as well do it now.” He turned toward his partner. “Any other cars hit?”

“Not so far,” the other cop called back.

“Looks like you’re the lucky one,” the cop said, turning back toward Sully. “Let’s take a look.”

The cop approached the car and peered inside. The other cop, the one with the flashlight, circled to the back. Sully’s throat constricted.

“Want to open her up to see if there’s anything missing?”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Sully said again. His pulse rate spiked.

“*Chulito*, you spent a fortune on that stereo. Why don’t you do what the officer said and take a look?”

A streak of white-hot fury shot through Sully, and he just barely stopped himself from lashing out at her. *Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.* He could handle this if she just . . .

“Mr. Sully?”

The cop was eyeing him now with that look that cops get. Suspicious. Accusatory. He’d seen it before. He had no choice. He fingered the car keys in his pocket and thought about the gun.

With a slight shake of his head, Sully wrenched the keys from his pocket. He opened the car door and slid the key into the ignition. The alarm died. He glanced around. The stereo was still there. Nothing had been touched, as far as he could see.

“It’s good,” he said, easing his torso out of the car.

“Dave,” the cop behind the car said, and nodded toward the trunk. The tone of the man’s voice signaled a warning.

Sully straightened. The cop was eyeing him harder now. One hand near his hip. Inches away from the holstered Glock at his side. Beads of sweat trickled down Sully’s forehead.

“Could you open the trunk, Mr. Sully?”

“You got a warrant?” Sully asked.

The cop’s eyes darted to his partner, then back to Sully’s sweating face. His dark eyes were cold and hard as marbles. Sully’s heart throbbed. This was it. They knew. Somehow. They knew. He was fucked. His kid was fucked. He’d spend the rest of his life trapped behind bars like his father.

*No.*

Sully grabbed a fistful of Lara’s sleep-mussed hair. He jerked her hard toward him. She stumbled a few steps, let out a yowl, and crumpled to her knees on the rain-soaked asphalt.

With the other hand, he pulled the gun from the waistband of his jeans. He jammed the muzzle hard against her temple.



Seth's heart boomed in his chest. He thrashed in the sweat-soaked sheets. Underneath his splayed hand, the green door was hot to the touch. In the far-off distance, he heard the wail of sirens, the bleat of horns. Help was on the way. But they were too late. Orange flames lapped at the windows, and Seth knew they wouldn't get here in time. He'd stood right here staring at the door more times than he could count, and they never made it in time.

She was in there.

Tendrils of smoke streamed through the cracks around the door. Sheer panic took hold, and with one vicious blow, Seth drove his shoulder into the green door. A white-hot flare of pain shot through him as the door splintered. He stepped through. Sharp spikes of wood clawed his skin, and he stumbled inside the burning house.

The roar of the fire was deafening. He swung his head wildly from side to side, desperate to find her. Smoke filled his lungs and he coughed. Burying his nose and mouth in the crook of his elbow, he dove deeper into the flames.

"Holly!" he yelled.

No answer. All he could hear was the sounds of the house dying around him. Light bulbs popped. Picture frames fell. Glass shattered. Bright-orange flames slithered up the walls. The heat was unbearable, like the fires of hell. He screamed her name.

Racing through the living room, he spotted a figure slumped on the floor. Holly lay wedged between the sofa and the coffee table. He sprinted toward her. Seth fell to his knees and turned her over.

He stared into her upturned face.

And his heart stopped. His hands jerked away. Marissa's dead blue eyes stared up at him like the sightless eyes of a broken doll.

Seth started awake. A jarring buzz sounded close to his ear. It was still pitch-dark in his bedroom, and he was woefully short on sleep. He heard the buzz again, and his cell phone shimmied an inch or two across the wooden nightstand. He fumbled for it. In the dark his outstretched fingers sent the alarm clock clattering to the hardwood floor.

"Shit," he muttered, rolling over, his fingers finally grasping the phone. "Crawford."

"You're going to want to hear this."

The voice was unmistakable. It was Lieutenant Alvarez. Seth ran a hand across his eyes, trying to shake off the remnants of the horrific nightmare. His thoughts snapped to Brooke Parker, and a half-dozen scenarios flashed through his head. All bad. All ending in a trip to the morgue.

"What is it?"

"Charles Sully is holding his girlfriend hostage. SWAT's been deployed."

The words hit Seth like a shock wave, bringing everything into sudden, painful focus, and he remembered Dr. Jain's warning. Sully was like a volcano ready to explode.

"What happened?"

"You'd better get down here. Now."

"Text me the address. I'm on my way."

Seth groaned. The heavy rain clattered against the roof. Oh-dark-thirty, and there was no hint of light in the sky. He flicked on the bedside lamp. If there was any consolation for spending his nights alone, it was times like this, when he was the only one jolted awake by a shrieking phone call.

He glanced over at what should have been Holly's side of the bed. The sheets lay cold and empty and untouched while his were a damp, tangled mess. He remembered Holly—the way the room held her scent, soft and rich and floral. He remembered the sound of her deep, steady breathing as she slept beside him and how he used to tell her she purred. A pang of loss and longing filled him. His fingers grazed the rosy scars along his cheek.

The phone chirped, pulling him back into the moment. A text message flashed on the screen. This was his reality. He'd earned this, Seth thought bitterly. Resigned to his fate, he reached down to the floor and pulled on the clothes he had shed just a few short hours ago.

• • • •

THE PREDAWN AIR SMELLED like car exhaust and bacon grease. A line of squad cars set the perimeter. Blue and red lights flashed in the muddy gray dawn. News trucks parked hastily on the far side of the street. Held back behind a series of folding white gates, neighbors gathered to watch the spectacle.

A quick flash of his badge and a cop waved Seth through the barricade. He caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd. Officer Pete Morris, recently assigned to SWAT, was approaching the scene on foot. Seth jogged to catch up to him.

“What's going on?”

“Crazy fucker snapped. He's holding a pregnant woman hostage.”

“Aw, shit.”

Seth cringed. Cold rain pelted his hair and ran down his neck like an icy torrent of tears. From across the parking lot, he could hear Sully yelling. Although the words were indistinct, he recognized the tone. Panic. Rage.

“That him?”

“Yeah.”

“Who's the negotiator?”

“Phelps. He's getting nowhere though. We're going tactical.”

“Fucking shit,” Seth muttered.

“You said it. Happy Friday,” Morris grumbled, and strode off toward the command center.

Alvarez spotted him and broke away from the tight knot of high-ranking officers huddled around the SWAT commander.

“What happened?”

“Officers were leaving the scene of a dumpster fire and responded to a car alarm. It's a high-crime area. Extra patrols every night just trying to get on top of things. Anyway, they heard a car alarm, figured it was a prowler. It was Sully's car. When they brought him outside to check out the vehicle, he freaked.”

“Do we know why?”

Even before he asked the question, Seth feared he knew the answer.

“We think there's something in the trunk.”

“Do we know what it is?”

Alvarez shook his head. Rain droplets were flung off the ends of his spiky black hair. “He grabbed his girlfriend, Lara Menendez.”

“Shit.” Seth groaned and wiped the rain from his face. “SWAT's going in?”

Tendrils of dread slithered loose in Seth's gut, like a writhing nest of pit vipers. He glanced at the Dodge Super Bee's unopened trunk. Whatever Sully had hidden inside was worth trading off not only

his girlfriend's life but the life of their unborn child. His thoughts flashed to Brooke Parker. Was he going to have to tell Marissa her daughter was dead?

Alvarez shrugged.

"He's highly agitated. There's no telling what he'll do."

"We've got to keep him alive. If he's got Brooke, he's our only link to finding her."

"I know."

"Can I talk to Sully?"

Alvarez paused, weighing the request.

"This isn't our dance," he said, his expression grave.

"I know him. Maybe I can get through to him."

"We can't afford for this to go south."

"It won't," Seth said with more confidence than he felt.

Alvarez sighed. "Let me see what I can do."

He turned away from Seth and returned to the command squad. The SWAT leader shot Seth a dubious glance. Alvarez's large hands flew out in exasperation. The SWAT commander fisted his hands on his narrow hips. Twitchy as a spider, Seth pulled out his cell phone and called Dr. Jain.

"Crawford. This better be good," Rahul Jain growled into the phone.

"Sully's on television."

"Sweet Jesus."

"SWAT's going to take him out if we can't talk him down. I need your help."

"Okay. Tell me."

Seth briefed Jain with what little information he had. Jain didn't interrupt. When Seth was finished, he swore again.

"Sully's a powder keg and they've lit the fuse."

"How do we stop it?"

"The baby. Focus on the baby. Tell Sully he doesn't want his child to grow up without a father like he did. His child can have a better life, but only if he makes the right choice. You've got to clear the scene, Seth. SWAT steps in and you give Sully no choice."

"I know."

"Do you want me to come down there?"

"Couldn't hurt."

"Okay. Where?"

"Turn on the news. You'll find us."

Just as Seth hung up, Alvarez broke away from the command squad and marched back toward him. Alvarez shook his head. Seth's stomach dropped.

"I just got off the phone with Dr. Jain, and he said . . ."

"They're going tactical."

"No. Listen, I have an idea. Just let me talk to him . . ."

"Are you fucking deaf?" Alvarez snapped.

Seth's hands clenched into fists, and he fought to control the anger that bubbled up inside him.

"If we push him, he's going to go off."

"It's out of our hands."

"Fuck."

He wanted to drive his fist into the lieutenant's face and keep hitting him until he didn't get up. He was so fucking sick of the bureaucratic bullshit. Of the politics. Of all of it. Half of him wanted to



disobey orders, stride into the scene, and talk Sully down. The other part of him wanted to shove his badge down Alvarez's throat and walk away.

As frustrated as he had sometimes been over his many years with the force, he had never once even considered walking away. Sully's yelling snapped him back into the moment.

Seth stepped closer to the perimeter. Alvarez's hand grabbed his arm. Seth shook him off. He pushed as close to the perimeter as he dared. His eyes fixed on the horrific scene unfolding.

Floodlights illuminated the far corner of the parking lot. Sully stood feet away from the bright-green Super Bee. His girlfriend, Lara, was slumped on the ground at Sully's feet. Seth's gut twisted. She was quite far along in her pregnancy, about seven months.

All he could think about was the baby in Lara's belly. Ten fingers and toes. A little boy or girl who didn't even have a name yet.

Sully was a man unhinged. His broad chest heaved beneath the soaked T-shirt. A combination of sweat and rain beaded on his wide forehead. His red face contorted with rage. Sully yanked Lara's hair. Her head snapped back. Seth heard her cry out. Pain. Fear. Tears streamed down her face.

Seth's eyes fixed on the muzzle of the gun pressed tightly against Lara's head. All the tension he felt was reflected on the thin, taut features of Phelps, the police negotiator.

"If you do this, Charles," Phelps called, his voice echoing across the parking lot, "there's no going back. I can help you, but only if you put down the gun."

"Help me?" Sully scoffed. "How many red dots do I have on my fucking chest? How many? Ten? Twenty? I lower my gun and you blow my fucking brains out."

"We don't want to shoot you, Charles. We want everyone to come out of this safely—you, Lara and the baby."

Sully wasn't stupid. He knew what was at stake. Seth wished Dr. Jain were here. He wished he had a chance to talk Sully down. Phelps extended a hand toward Sully in a slow-down gesture.

"Just lower your gun, Charles, and let Lara go. Let your son live."

Seth's breath caught. He leaned toward Alvarez.

"The baby. Yes. Phelps has to focus in on the baby. Dr. Jain thinks it's the only way to get to him."

Alvarez muttered into his radio. Phelps touched a finger to his ear.

"Your son, Charles. Think about him," Phelps said.

The muscles in Sully's jaw bulged, and the crowd held its collective breath. The sound of the rain driving into the asphalt filled the supercharged silence. Seth watched Sully's face for some signal, some sign of hope. Sully stood still as a statue. Seth counted the seconds ticking by.

Finally Sully's shoulders slumped. His chin dropped toward his chest, and the muzzle of Sully's gun lowered, easing away from Lara's temple. Relief flooded Phelps's face. Seth could almost feel tension drain from the crowd. It was going to be all right. Lara and her baby would live.

Then Sully's stance changed. Seth's gut heaved in a sickening twist and he reached for his gun.

Too late.

"My son's not going to jail. Fuck you, cop," Sully screamed.

The sound of the single shot was deafening. A fine mist of blood and brains sprayed across the wet asphalt. Lara's lifeless body crashed to the ground. Behind Seth the crowd screamed. Sully pointed the gun at Phelps. In the next instant, a half-dozen rounds were fired, and Charles Sully landed in a heap.

Screaming. The EMTs rushed in to check on Lara Menendez and Charles Sully. It was a waste of time, Seth knew. They were already dead. What a mess. What a goddamned mess.

"The baby," one of the EMTs yelled.

All medical personnel loaded Lara's prone form onto a gurney and rushed her to an ambulance.

Seth pushed through the crowd, heading toward the Dodge Super Bee.

"We need a crowbar," the uniformed officer closest to the car yelled.

Seth stared at the closed trunk lid. Whatever Sully had stashed inside, he'd been willing to die for it. Chilled by the cold rain, he wiped his face and willed them to hurry the fuck up. He needed to see what was inside. Was it Brooke in there? He'd promised to find her. He'd promised Marissa he'd find her. But not like this. God, not like this.

A uniformed officer wedged the end of the crowbar under the lip of the trunk and heaved. The lock gave way with a pop, and the trunk lid yawned open. Numb, Seth looked inside. A large duffel bag filled the trunk. The rancid smell of rotten meat was unmistakable, and he knew.

A young officer turned and rushed away from the scene. Dimly Seth heard the sound of retching. Seth could tell by the bulging biceps and clenched jaw of the officer heaving the bag from the trunk that it was heavy.

"Good Christ," Alvarez said.

Seth didn't respond. He didn't look over at the lieutenant. His eyes were fixed on the duffel bag. The zipper of the bag purred open.

"Jesus. Fuck," the officer said, and stepped away. Horror and revulsion contorted his face.

Seth looked inside. Was it Brooke? He turned away as he caught sight of the body. The realization struck him like a sucker punch to the gut. There would be no quick identification of the victim. The bitter taste of bile filled Seth's mouth.

"There's something else," said the cop leaning over the trunk.

Seth looked up. Surely this day couldn't get any worse. He turned to look at the object the officer held in his hand, and he realized he'd been wrong.

Things got worse all right. They got a whole lot fucking worse.



Drew eased Alicia's apartment door open. She sat at the table with a cup of coffee in one hand and his cell phone in the other.

"Where have you been?"

She fixed him with a prison guard's stare, and he knew he was in for a blast of shit. What was she doing up so early? She should have been sleeping. Her alarm wasn't set to go off for another hour. But here she was, wide-awake and spitting mad.

"I woke up early and thought I'd get us some croissants for breakfast," he said.

"I don't see a bag. Did you eat them already?"

"The line was out the door, so I thought fuck it."

Alicia arched an eyebrow like she didn't believe him.

Anger rolled like thunder in the pit of his stomach. His hands clenched into fists. Picking a fight with him now was a bad idea. If Alicia knew what was good for her, she'd keep her stupid mouth shut.

"Do you know how odd it feels to wake up and find you gone? I didn't know what to think."

"I couldn't sleep."

He didn't need to explain himself to her. If she was smart, she'd leave it alone. But she didn't. She just kept pushing.

"You're usually such a sound sleeper. What woke you?"

"You snore like a fucking chain saw."

Surely someone had mentioned this before, but looking down into her shocked face, he wondered if all her other lovers had been too polite.

"I do not." Alicia frowned and propped a balled fist beneath her chin.

Drew took a deep, calming breath and lowered his pitch.

"I couldn't sleep so I went out for a walk."

Her eyes brimming with righteous indignation, she glared at him.

"How would you like it if I left in the middle of the night without leaving a note or anything?"

"What exactly did you think I was doing? Out screwing the neighbor or something equally vile?"

It sounded ludicrous when he said it like that, and Alicia's hard expression crumbled. She dropped her gaze and looked contrite.

"I'm sorry. I know it sounds silly, but when I woke up and you weren't there, I was worried."

Drew didn't answer. He stalked into the kitchen and poured himself a mug of hot coffee. God, he needed this—needed something to help get him through the rest of the day. He downed half the mug in silence, then marched out of the room to the shower.

Hot water sprayed his face, and Drew rubbed his eyes, feeling like he hadn't slept in a week.

He propped his hand against the shower stall and dipped his head low. Water sluiced down his back, washing any trace bits of blood and God knew what else off his body.

Last night had been a huge fucking failure. He still couldn't believe Kim had taken the coward's way out and Brooke had done nothing to stop her. Not to mention what that freak Sully had hidden in his trunk. Another complication in what had already been a horrendous night.

But that's what happened when you went off script. You took risks. You fucked up. You got caught.

Back in the living room, Alicia stood staring at the television, coffee cup in hand.

"Have you seen this?"

He glanced at the screen.

The marquee read “Standoff in Shoreline,” and Drew recognized Charles Sully’s apartment building in the background. His arms went slack. A television reporter spoke into the microphone, her expression sober.

“Early this morning, police responded to a hostage situation in Shoreline. Charles Sully held his pregnant girlfriend, Lara Menendez, at gunpoint. The half-hour standoff with police ended in tragedy as Charles Sully shot Ms. Menendez point-blank. Mr. Sully was shot dead at the scene . . .”

Alicia covered her mouth, still staring at the screen.

“My God, Drew, she was pregnant. What kind of monster would kill his girlfriend and his baby?”

That wasn’t all Sully had done, Drew thought as he strode across the room to the table where he’d left his coffee cup. Behind him the reporter droned on.

“Police found the remains of a dead woman in a duffel bag in Sully’s trunk. The identity of the victim is not yet known.”

“How awful,” Alicia said.

Strolling into the kitchen, Drew allowed himself a small smile. That dumb son of a bitch had gotten himself killed. Execution by cop. A fitting end for a fucked-up night. Without Charles Sully alive to testify, everyone would believe he had been responsible for Kim Covey’s murder. And with one of Brooke’s things thrown in for good measure, the case would be closed.

Drew sipped his coffee, feeling suddenly energized. The day might have started off shit, but it was getting better with each passing minute.

Alicia whirled toward him, remote control still in hand. She clicked off the television.

“I can’t believe this city. What’s next?”

“I know. It’s terrible.” Drew draped an arm around Alicia’s shoulders, pulled her close, and pecked her cheek. “I’ll call you later.”

“Okay.”

Grabbing his coat, he stopped just shy of the front door.

This day was going so damned well, he felt like celebrating. Drew thought about the engagement ring in his dresser drawer. He thought about Charles Sully’s explosive exit from this world and how he might not have a luckier day. He turned back toward Alicia.

“Why don’t we go out for dinner tonight? Wear something nice.”



Marissa's cell phone rang. Groaning, she rolled onto her side and plucked it off the nightstand, checking the call display. Her heart lurched.

*Kelly.*

"Hi, Mom."

The words were like sweet rain on parched earth, soaking into her heart and easing the pain of last night. They spent a few minutes just talking—nothing profound. It was just so good to hear Kelly's voice. Marissa thought about how close she'd come to ending it all. Staring into the bathroom mirror, her hand filled with pills, she'd realized she couldn't do it. She couldn't abandon her girls. No matter what, she would find Brooke. She would win Kelly back. She would fix her broken family.

Fueled by that realization, she pushed herself out of bed and took the train into work.

"Ah, you're here, Ms. Rooney," Holt said, looking surprised to see her. "Do you mind if I . . . ?"

Her words trailed off, and she waved toward the fan on the desk. Marissa shrugged. Why should she care if Holt smoked? Her lungs were probably screwed anyway.

"You left suddenly yesterday. Is everything okay?"

Marissa folded her coat over the back of her chair and nodded.

"Kelly was attacked outside her school. She was taken to the Renton Police Department."

Holt's expression changed. Concern filled her gaze as she drew a long white cigarette from the pack stowed in her desk drawer. She flicked the button on the cigarette lighter, touched the orange flame to the end of the cigarette, and sucked deep. A plume of silvery smoke issued from her lips. Reaching out a bony finger, she turned on the fan. The whirring turbine sucked Holt's sins from the air.

"Was she hurt?"

"She's okay. She's staying with my ex-husband for a while."

Holt tapped the gray stack of ash off into a black onyx ashtray. She took another drag on the cigarette and held the warm smoke in her lungs for a beat before releasing it into the air. Looking deep in thought, Holt watched Marissa and fiddled with the gold pendant hanging from the gold chain around her neck.

"Ms. Rooney, I see now it was unfair to offer you this position. How can I expect you to focus on the foundation when you are under such enormous pressure at home?"

Marissa needed this job. Money aside, how could she possibly stay sane if all she did was sit alone in her kitchen waiting for the phone to ring? She knotted her hands together on the desk and stared across the room at Holt.

"I can do this, Ms. Holt. I need to do this," she said in a shaky voice. "This is my best shot at staying close to the investigation. Please."

Marissa rose. She pulled a piece of folded paper from her pocket. She'd spent the entire train ride into the city writing, and while she knew it wasn't perfect, she hoped it was enough to show Holt she was serious about the job.

"I've been working on a press release for the foundation."

Holt took the copy from her outstretched hand and quickly scanned it. Her eyebrows rose. Marissa didn't know if this was a good or a bad thing.

"Did you do this yourself?"

"I did a little online research." On her phone.

Writing didn't come easily to her. She could take dictation and draft business letters, but capturing the foundation's mission statement in a press release had been like composing a sonnet in Klingon. Her purse was filled with crumpled drafts.

Holt read the copy out loud.

"The Holt Foundation is here to help victims of violence piece their lives back together by providing support and services to help those in need. Our network of professionals can help victims deal with the trauma of victimization while also providing critical legal support in the courtroom and criminal justice process."

"It's a little rough," Marissa admitted.

Elizabeth nodded and picked up a red pen. She marked up the page with broad strokes, slashing some sections and scrawling notes on others before handing it back to Marissa.

If doctors were notorious for their bad handwriting, lawyers weren't much better. Holt's cramped and narrow script was worthy of a third grader. Marissa glanced at the edits and stowed the paper beside the keyboard on her desk. Anxious to show she'd put some thought into the matter, she turned back toward Holt.

"It's a good start, Ms. Rooney."

"Thank you," Marissa said softly.

Holt gripped the pendant between her fingers, looking pensive.

"Work saved me. After the attack, I mean. I decided to go to law school. That's how I worked through my grief. My rage."

"You became a lawyer."

A short bark of laughter escaped Holt's lips.

"Yes. In my weaker moments, I fantasized about prosecuting the man who raped me, which was ludicrous, of course. And while things never worked out exactly the way I planned, it was still the right path for me. The law. I think the foundation is the right place for you, Marissa."

Holt's cobalt eyes held Marissa's, and she could feel a frank sincerity in the old woman's words. Like Kelly's call this morning, they brought a measure of comfort.

"I hope so too, but . . ."

Marissa was interrupted by Holt's upraised hand.

"No. No more self-doubt. I've read your file. I know you have overcome your share of obstacles. You have raised two daughters single-handedly, put yourself through school, and worked hard to build a life for your family. I believe you can do whatever you set your mind to. It is time you started believing in yourself."

No one had ever believed in her before—not her parents or her husbands. Not herself. "I've rendered you speechless." Holt smiled.

She had.

Overwhelmed by Holt's confidence in her, Marissa focused on something concrete—the next steps for the foundation.

"I've been thinking about the types of professional services the foundation could provide. Like helping with the search for missing persons," she said, thinking of Alice Chang and her army of volunteers. "And legal support, of course. And maybe counseling."

"Counseling." Holt nodded.

"Absolutely," Marissa said, thinking about the handful of pills swirling down the bathroom sink and how close she'd come to making a desperate decision. "Families need support. And the victims, once they're safe, will need therapy."



Holt's lips stretched into a satisfied smile, and she stretched back in her chair, her sagging chin tilted toward the ceiling. She took a drag on her cigarette, collecting her thoughts.

"I like the way you're thinking. Investigators."

"Investigators? You mean like Henry Cahill?"

"Yes, and we'll need others. Private investigators, maybe former police officers. We'll need a network of people who have different types of expertise to engage in the different types of cases."

Marissa jotted down some notes. Maybe Detective Crawford knew some retired cops she could contact. More staff meant more expenses.

"All of this will cost money," Marissa said.

"I expect our network will consist of paid employees, special consultants, and experts who volunteer their time. But yes, money is key. The heartbeat of any foundation is its ability to fund-raise. You need money to do good work, and although I've already seeded the foundation with enough money to get it off the ground, it will eventually need to become self-sustaining. We need other benefactors. To that end I've arranged a fund-raiser on Saturday night. It's a black-tie affair at the convention center. I'll send you the guest list. I want you to add three more Seattle VIPs. Call them. Pitch the foundation. Get them to come."

Marissa swallowed. She didn't know any VIPs. How was she supposed to find willing benefactors with deep pockets? Why didn't Holt just give her the names so she could call them?

Then she got it. It was a test. Holt wanted her to dig. Teach a man to fish, or something like that. She had some contacts through the law firm. Mr. Regis. Maybe Logan knew some people too. It was a starting point, and if all else failed, there was Google. There had to be a list of wealthy Seattle philanthropists posted somewhere online. She would find it.

"What else?"

Holt smiled. She took another pull on her cigarette. A fierce coughing spasm rattled her gaunt frame. Holt grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on her desk and covered her mouth and nose.

Evan Holt burst through the door. Elizabeth Holt's watery eyes glanced up, and she held out a hand warding him off. Finally the coughing fit subsided. Marissa stepped back. Holt tossed the wad of tissues in the trash can, but not before Marissa noticed the bloody streaks of mucus. Evan handed her a glass of water, and Holt sipped slowly.

"Are you going to put that out?" Evan asked, nodding toward the smoldering cigarette.

Holt cocked her chin at a defiant angle and took another long drag on the cigarette. Evan frowned and shook his head. Marissa could feel disapproval radiate off him. Even she was surprised by the depth of Holt's defiance.

"Lizzie . . ."

Evan's rebuke was interrupted by a curt knock. Detective Crawford entered the room. Marissa felt a twinge of surprise, and something else. Fear.

Crawford's eyes met hers. She knew by the look on his face that something was very wrong.

"Have you been watching the news?"

Marissa shook her head, her throat closing tight.

The color drained from Holt's face. "What is it, Detective?" she asked.

Looking stricken, he locked his eyes on Marissa's.

"We found a . . . a girl."



Marissa gritted her teeth. Traffic oozed like lipid-rich blood through sticky arteries. Everywhere she looked, the city streets were choked with gridlock. Moronic drivers paid more attention to their electronic devices than what was going on around them. She cursed pedestrians for crossing against the lights. Most of all, she cursed the city planners for designing a system so fundamentally broken it took half an hour to drive ten lousy blocks.

The girl in the morgue could be her daughter. *Oh God*. The thought was so terrible, so unbearable, that Marissa struggled to breathe. She cracked the window an inch. Cold air blasted her face and helped quell the waves of nausea.

“Can’t you go any faster?”

“Two more blocks and we’ll be there,” he assured her.

Marissa covered her eyes and focused on her breathing. She’d always believed she could face anything as long as it was the truth. But now, faced with the horrifying possibility that her daughter was dead, she knew she’d been wrong. For the first time in her life, she dreaded the truth.

“Is it Brooke?” Marissa asked Crawford in a small, scared voice she didn’t recognize as her own. “If you know, you’ve got to tell me now, before we get there.”

Crawford shot a concerned glance her way.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not good enough. How can you not know? What does that even mean?”

Crawford hesitated.

“I wish I didn’t have to tell you this, but the body...” He stopped and Marissa braced for more bad news. Nothing prepared her for the horror of what he said next. “This girl has been severely mutilated.”

Marissa felt the weight of Crawford’s stare, but she refused to look his way. She couldn’t bear to see the compassion, the pity in his eyes. She was barely holding it together. She needed proof. She needed to see for herself this girl wasn’t her daughter. Proof was still blocks away, though, as they continued their agonizing crawl through city traffic.

Marissa’s head pounded with a sickening thud as a migraine took root behind her eyes. She didn’t drop her hand away from her face until she felt the car stop.

The King County medical examiner’s office looked like any other office building located at the base of Capitol Hill. Modern construction, made of concrete and glass, it stretched fourteen stories up into the gray sky.

On shaky legs Marissa entered the lobby, trailing a step or two behind Crawford. It felt like they walked for miles along the arterial maze of hallways pulling them deeper into the building’s core. Each step came slower, harder, weighted down by the paralyzing dread she felt that her worst fears might soon be realized.

If it was Brooke, if it was, Marissa didn’t know how she would face it. How she would get through the rest of her life. Hell, the next few days, hours, minutes—if Brooke was dead.

She stopped, staring at the double doors ahead like she’d reached the gates of hell. Crawford turned. His compassionate gaze met hers. She trembled as her fears overwhelmed her.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“I do,” she said at last. “I have to know. If it’s Brooke back there . . .” Her voice caught. She swallowed and pushed the painful words out. “If it’s Brooke, she shouldn’t be alone.”

Steeling herself for whatever truth lay beyond, she stepped toward the doors. Crawford gave a solemn nod. Placing a hand on her back, he guided her down the remaining stretch of hallway. Grateful he was standing by her side, she pushed through the doors.

• • • •

NOTHING HAD PREPARED Marissa for the smell. The sharp scent of ammonia did not mask the deeper sickly sweet, coppery smell in the room, like rotten meat. Marissa's head pounded, and her stomach took a nauseating dive. She pressed a hand against her mouth to stop from gagging.

She remembered once riding on her bike past a dead raccoon smeared on the road. She might have been ten, maybe eleven, at the time. Flies swarmed around the carcass, and Marissa had pedaled faster, desperate to get away from the stench, from the horror of the poor animal's remains. A lifetime had passed, and still she had never forgotten the smell of death.

A thin middle-aged man in green scrubs stood by the table. He turned and greeted Crawford with a nod of his head.

"Detective."

"Dr. Meeks, what can you tell us?"

"This girl is in her twenties. Approximately five foot four inches tall, she weighs between one hundred five and one hundred fifteen pounds."

Marissa stood frozen to the spot. She felt the room spiral around her and only just managed to hold on to what he was saying. Meeks's broad description fit Brooke. She looked past Meeks, her eyes drawn to the steel table like iron filings to a magnet.

Crawford's brow furrowed.

"You're sure you can handle this?"

Fear gripped her throat in its choking grasp, robbing her of any words. She wasn't sure at all, but she nodded anyway and he led her forward.

Marissa gasped, horrified by the sight of the body laid out on the cold metal table. Her knees buckled. She would have fallen if Crawford hadn't caught her arm. He held her steady in his strong grip.

The body didn't look real. It looked like someone had hacked apart a little girl's doll and reassembled it on the table in some grisly form, like a jigsaw puzzle. Marissa's stomach heaved. Bile rose in her throat. She swallowed hard, forcing it back.

"The police are still looking for the head," Meeks assured her, but Marissa barely heard him. A black rose blossomed in front of her eyes, and she swayed against Crawford. He gripped her with both hands, gently shaking her as he stared straight into her eyes.

"Look at me," he said.

She did, blinking hard, knowing she would never be the same again. Nothing would erase the horror of this moment. Unable to stop herself, she turned back and stared at the severed hand on the table. The fingers were bruised. Swollen. Unrecognizable. These weren't Brooke's delicate fingers.

How many times had she held Brooke's hand to keep her safe as she crossed the street? How many times had she trimmed Brooke's fingernails and painted them with sparkly pink polish? How many times had Marissa brushed Brooke's golden curls away from her forehead or stroked the silky-soft skin of her cheeks?

What kind of animal could do something like this? He had taken a beautiful girl and defiled her in every possible way. Only a monster would cut up another human being and discard her like trash. Only a monster would kill another person like this.

Tears filled her eyes. She turned away from the body on the table, unable to look for another second longer. Her watery gaze fixed on a set of X-rays pinned to a light box above the table. Cold, bluish light illuminated discrete sections of bones: arms, legs, hands, pelvis, and clavicle. Documenting the disembodied parts of a girl who could never be made whole again. The X-rays swam in front of her eyes. Marissa blinked her tears back.

In a flash she remembered Brooke playing on the monkey bars. She had been little, no more than five. Hand over hand Brooke swung, blonde curls fluttering in the breeze, until that awful moment when she let go.

Marissa's mouth dropped open as a sudden thought dawned on her. She turned back toward Dr. Meeks.

"I don't know if this helps." Her small voice echoed in the sterile room. "But Brooke broke her wrist when she was five years old."

Crawford shot a keen look at the medical examiner. Meeks shook his head. His narrow lips twitched.

"There were no broken bones on the X-ray."

A crushing wave of relief flooded through Marissa. It wasn't Brooke. It wasn't her baby lying here. Just as quickly, though, relief gave way to a deep, aching sadness. Slowly, haltingly, she stepped forward. Her fingers trembled as she reached out toward the table. She touched the bruised and swollen hand.

The brush of cold flesh under her fingertips felt alien, and Marissa wished the girl's family were here so this poor girl wouldn't have to be alone. No one should be alone in a place like this. She thought about the girl's family and the horrible news awaiting them. Like her, they had a missing daughter. And like her, they were no doubt desperate for news, for her safe return. Suddenly she understood Holt's mission in a way she never had before.

"Marissa?"

She turned at the sound of Crawford's voice. With a heavy heart, she followed him to the door.

• • • •

MARISSA STARED LISTLESSLY through the rain-streaked car window, feeling empty and alone. No place would ever feel like home again until both of her daughters were back where they belonged.

"How do you do it?" she asked, resting her head back against the seat and staring at the empty husk of a house.

"Do what?"

He sounded surprised, and she angled her weary gaze back toward him.

"Look at death every day and still stay sane?"

"You've got to disconnect from it."

"And you can do that?"

"My first few years on the force, I brought every case home with me. Every victim, every family, until I reached a point where I couldn't do it anymore."

"So you disconnected?"

"You have to maintain some distance so you can remain objective about a case, otherwise you're going to jump to the wrong conclusions, not to mention ruin your life outside of work."

"And do you have a life outside of work?"

Marissa wasn't sure what had spurred her to ask the question. Crawford's expression closed, and she realized she'd pushed too far. Whatever the truth was, she imagined he kept it close to the chest.

She hoped she was wrong. She hoped he had family to go home to, something more than just his job. But the more she thought about it, the more certain she was that Crawford's life was as empty as the house awaiting her.

Marissa climbed out of the car. She hesitated, feet glued to the sidewalk. Cold drizzle chilled her to the bone. All the adrenaline-induced panic had drained from her body, and she felt like she had aged twenty years in the blink of an eye. Behind her she heard a car door close. Crawford's light tread approached.

"Are you okay?"

Lies were easy. Dozens of worthless ones sprang to mind, but she dismissed them all. She shivered. Without thinking, she closed the distance between them. She wanted to step into the warm circle of his arms and hang on to him like he was the only thing that could stop her from drowning in a deep pool of fear and uncertainty.

His face was turned toward her. It wasn't the twisted mass of scars she saw when she looked at him, but the fine arch of his eyebrows, the sharp angles of his cheekbones, the full curve of his lips.

He took a quick step back, as if reading her intention, and she knew there wasn't going to be a replay of the scene in Kelly's room, where she had been able to draw on his comfort and support. An invisible wall formed between them.

"Marissa," he said, and gave a small shake of his head. "I should go."

She shivered and trudged down the cracked sidewalk to the empty house.



Drew propped an elbow on the bar and fingered the small velvet box in his pocket. Alicia was running late. On any other night this might have irked him, but tonight he was on a roll.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Grey Goose martini. Dry and dirty.”

“You’ve got it.”

“Have I seen you before?” Drew asked, eyeing the bartender. There was something familiar about him.

“Could be. I work a bunch of places. Jesse Morgan.”

Drew shook the bartender’s outstretched hand. His phone beeped, and he pulled it out. The text was from Alicia. Drew frowned.

“Bad news?”

“Just my girlfriend. She’s stuck in traffic,” he said, and slid the phone back in his pocket. “You’d think the dumb shits in this town would learn how to drive in the rain.”

Jesse chuckled.

“My wife never made it anywhere in her life on time,” said a middle-aged man with a bulbous nose and gin blossoms staining his cheeks. “Except for divorce court. Goddamned right she made it there on time.”

Jesse shook his head. He strained the drink into a chilled martini glass. He skewered a couple of olives and plopped them into the briny drink.

“Big night?” he asked Drew, placing the glass on a cocktail napkin.

“You could say that.” He pulled out the velvet box and opened it. The diamond ring sparkled in the light.

Jesse pursed his lips and emitted a low, appreciative whistle. For good reason—the ring had cost a fucking fortune.

“Lucky girl.”

Gin Blossom snorted. He inhaled a sip of his drink and swiped a hand across his fleshy lips.

“You got something to say?” Drew asked, glaring down the length of the bar, fixing his cold gaze on Gin Blossom’s face.

“Listen, kid, if it were me, I’d just give the bitch half now and save yourself the trouble.”

Imagine, a catch like him, divorced. Drew sneered. No doubt the drunk asshole had gotten everything he deserved. No point in saying so. Guys like him, like his father, weren’t the introspective types. They were experts at foisting blame for their shit onto others. Nothing was ever *their* fault. It was always the booze or the drugs or the socks they’d left on the goddamned living room floor that started it.

*Why can’t you ever do anything right? Why are you so fucking stupid? Go on, cry. Cry, you little pussy faggot.*

Drew shook his head, banishing Rick’s voice from his mind. He gulped his martini. Alcohol burned down his throat. He grimaced and turned his attention to the television behind the bar, where Charles Sully was the big story of the day.

“Crazy bastard had a body stuffed in his trunk,” the drunk said, pointing his raised glass at the screen.



“I hear he hacked her up,” Jesse answered, pulling glasses off the revolving dishwasher behind the bar and drying them.

“I wonder how many more bodies they’re going to find,” Gin Blossom said, and slurped noisily from his drink. “Where there’s one, there’s more. And for once the cops did the right thing by killing him. Jail’s too good for the bastard.”

“Oh yeah, mob justice is totally the way to go,” Drew quipped.

“Well, if you can’t kill Gary Ridgway in this goddamned nanny state . . .” Gin Blossom’s voice rose. He lifted his glass and pointed it at Drew.

“You mean execute?” Drew said, cocking an eyebrow.

“Exactly. If you can’t execute the Green River Killer, then . . .” Gin Blossom trailed off, slurping from his glass.

Drew’s lips stretched into a condescending grin. He shook his head and turned back toward the television.

So far everything was going better than planned. The public believed Sully was a monster. And he was. The body Drew found in the Super Bee’s trunk confirmed Sully was no Boy Scout. Once the police identified the body and found the MedicAlert dog tags in the trunk along with the duffel bag . . . well, Charles Sully’s death tied a very nice bow on a very big mess.

At the far end of the bar, Gin Blossom’s head snapped around, and Drew glanced up.

Alicia walked through the doors wearing a form-fitting ivory dress that left her shoulders and arms bare. Her dark hair was swept away from her face, pinned at the back of her long, graceful neck. Earrings dangled from her earlobes like golden dewdrops. Drew stirred at the thought of what he’d like to do to her.

“Yours?” Jesse asked, inclining his head.

“Mine,” Drew confirmed, draining the last of the martini.

Jesse grinned and stuck out his hand. “You’re a lucky man.”

Drew shook Jesse’s hand and dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar.

Alicia’s full lips parted in a warm smile as she caught sight of him. She showed no signs of still being miffed from this morning’s argument. Leaning forward, he brushed a kiss across her cheek. Nuzzling her ear, he felt her shiver. The sweet floral scent of her perfume filled his head. He froze. Gretchen flashed into his mind. Had she been wearing the same perfume the night he drove her home? Impossible. Drew pulled back and brushed thoughts of Gretchen aside like he was dusting lint from the lapel of his jacket.

“Hello, beautiful. How was your day?”

Goosebumps dimpled the smooth flesh of Alicia’s bare arms.

“Sorry I’m late. Traffic’s a nightmare.”

“Our table is waiting.”

He extended his arm, and Alicia started off toward the dining room. Drew paused beside Gin Blossom’s stool, stooping low to whisper into the old man’s ear, “You don’t even dream this good.”

Gin Blossom grunted. Alicia turned with a questioning look and Drew smiled.

The mouthwatering smell of crispy duck and braised rabbit filled the dining room. Having skipped lunch, he was starving. He couldn’t wait to dive into the evening. This would be a night both he and Alicia would always remember. He would make sure of it.

The host led them through the dining room to a small table for two crammed into the corner. With a courtly, sweeping gesture, the host pulled out Alicia’s chair and held it, waiting for her to sit.

Irritation bristled at the back of Drew's neck like tiny needle pricks racing across his skin. There was no fucking way he was going to get stuffed in a dark corner. Not tonight of all nights. Not with Alicia looking so perfect and the dining room only half-full. Didn't he look like the type of guy who could afford a place like this? Didn't he fit Maximilien's clientele?

Drew forced a chilly smile. "I specifically asked for a window table."

"Sir, we're booked this evening, I . . ."

"Booked? The place is half-empty. I don't see 'reserved' signs on any of *those* tables."

Alicia looked up. A crease formed between her perfectly arched brows. "Really, Drew, this is fine."

"It most certainly is not. There's a table right by the window. That's where we're going to sit tonight."

"But, sir, it's reserved."

Drew forced a smile and stepped close to the host. Placing a hand on the back of the man's narrow shoulder, he leaned in. With his other hand, he grasped the man's balls with a firm grip. They felt like overripe plums in his hand. The host gasped.

"Listen close. If you're smart, you'll seat us over there. Got it?"

The man gave a terse nod. Drew released his grip and stepped back. Anger pinched the corners of the host's mouth, but Drew refused to back down. Finally the host cleared his throat.

"Of course," he said in a tight voice.

With a stiff, upright gait, he marched toward the window table. Head bowed, Alicia followed. She quietly thanked the host as he held her chair. The man gave a stiff nod. Satisfied, Drew took a seat and unfolded the crisp linen napkin on his lap. He turned to admire the view.

The rain had stopped at midmorning, and while thunderclouds gathered heavy and black to the north, the skies over Puget Sound were uncharacteristically clear. Moonlight rippled silver across the cobalt waves. Out on the pier, tourists rode the garish Ferris wheel. The spokes lit up, forming a spider web of blue and green.

Drew turned his gaze on Alicia. She sipped her water and studied the menu in a thinly veiled attempt to mask her ire. She was pissed at him for making a scene. While he wasn't the type to indulge her moods, Drew reached across the table, laying an open hand in the space between them. After a slight hesitation, she placed her hand in his. He squeezed her fingers and stared directly into her blue eyes.

A waiter approached. Before he could ask about drinks, Drew ordered a bottle of Dom Pérignon and waved him away. Alicia raised her eyebrows.

"Are we celebrating?"

"Of course."

"Anything in particular?"

"The day I met you."

"Really?" Her lips twisted into an impish grin. "Do tell."

"The day I met you, everything changed. I went from a guy who was drifting through life to a man who finally knew what he wanted. Everything I want, Alicia, is sitting right across the table from me. I know it's fast. I know it may seem crazy. I also know that there is no one else in the world more perfect for me than you. And so, Alicia Wright, will you do me the great honor of being my wife?"

Alicia's eyes popped wide as she spied the box he slid onto the table. One hand fluttered to her lips. Her eyes glistened with tears. Unable to speak, she nodded.

The waiter arrived on cue, champagne was poured, toasts were raised, and by the time they ordered dinner, Alicia's two-carat diamond sparkled around her slender finger. After a slight hiccup, everything was back on track. Drew sipped champagne, his mood soaring higher than the top of the Space Needle.

Dinner came and went. The food was as good as the reviews said. Local ingredients. Clean flavors, everything expertly prepared. He had the rack of lamb, with new potatoes and baby carrots. The meat was tender, succulent. Alicia looked pleased with the scallops. She all but licked the butter sauce from the plate before the waiter arrived to whisk the table clean. So far the night was living up to his expectations.

Alicia excused herself and strutted her way across the dining room toward the ladies' room. Drew was quite sure he wasn't the only man admiring the view as she exited the dining room.

The night was full of promise. Drew turned to gaze out at the pier. Puget Sound glittered like a sapphire in the moonlight. He was thinking about Alicia and all the ways he wanted to celebrate after they got home, when her cell phone whistled.

Curious, Drew reached across the table. He slid the phone along the smooth white tablecloth. The display sprang to life, and Drew thumbed the message icon.

The gentle buzz from the champagne evaporated. His eyes narrowed. Incredulous, he read the text twice.

*I know you're still mad at me, but there's something you should know. Drew is not who you think he is. I'm serious. Call me.*

A fast-burning anger ignited like a fuse inside Drew. Goddamn Liam. Stupid motherfucker didn't know how to leave well enough alone. Alicia had made it perfectly clear at Gretchen's funeral she never wanted to see him again, and still he refused to fuck off.

If the Crown Prince of the Dot-Com had hired a private investigator to dig into Drew's past, there were all kinds of secrets he might have discovered. None of them good. He should have dealt with Liam sooner. Naïvely, he'd hoped Liam would just go away. But like a pot left on a stove unattended, he had just boiled over.

Drew clenched the cell phone hard in his fist. He'd gone to great lengths to escape his past, and he wasn't about to let Liam ruin everything. There was no way he was going back to being Andy Bowman, high school dropout. Andy Bowman with the criminal record and the crazy father. Andy Bowman the loser. He'd risked everything to become Drew Matthews, and he wasn't about to lose it all now—his job, his money, his fiancée, maybe even his life—by letting that entitled little shit spill his guts to Alicia.

Drew considered pocketing the phone but decided against it. Alicia would notice its absence. Instead he deleted the text, flipped Alicia's phone into airplane mode, and slid it back into position beside her champagne flute.

Just in time, as it turned out. Alicia's high heels clicked on the floor behind him. Her fingers trailed along his neck as she passed. She stopped to press a gentle kiss on his lips. He tasted the champagne and caught a whiff of her sweet perfume.

Drew took a sip and forced a smile, as if he didn't have a single care in the world. There was nothing forced about Alicia as she smiled brighter than the diamond on her finger.

In life, perfect moments were rare, and he wasn't about to let Liam ruin this one. He'd deal with Liam soon enough.

"What's bothering you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

She nodded toward his hands. “You always play with your ring when there’s something on your mind.”

He released his grasp on the bloodstone ring. “I do?”

She nodded. He grasped her hand and raised it to his mouth. Drew ran the tip of his tongue along the ulnar nerve on the soft underside of her wrist. Alicia’s breath caught, and she shivered.

“You’re right. I do have something on my mind. What do you say we skip dessert?”



The search party called it in just after one o'clock in the afternoon. Another body. Another dead girl. Seth got the news moments later. The entire drive up the I-5 corridor, he prepared himself for the inevitable. Though the report was short on details, a few things struck him right away.

The body had been found close to one of the job sites where Charles Sully had worked. North of Redmond, the new housing developments were popping up like acne on a teenage boy's face. This one backed up onto a large greenbelt. The densely wooded area had all the makings of a great dump site. That's why Seth had pointed Elizabeth Holt's volunteers off in this direction.

According to the volunteers, the body had been left intact, out in the open, not sliced and diced like the one they'd found in Sully's trunk. Why would he take such pains in dismembering one girl and just dump the other? Had the girl they found in Sully's trunk done something to make him angry? The difference in the MO was interesting, and unusual. Maybe this girl had been killed first. Maybe he had been trying to throw them off the trail.

Seth hadn't missed the frightened look on Marissa's face when the news came in. Although she tried to present a brave front, he could see the terror in her eyes. Worried she might insist on coming with him, he was already formulating his response when she surprised him by making a feeble joke.

"We can't spend all of our dates identifying bodies, right?" she said.

He admired her pluck and was thankful she didn't want to come. Strong as she was, he wasn't sure she could make it through another scene like the one at the morgue. He didn't want to put her through it, not unless he had to.

Staring at his GPS, Seth gritted his teeth. Where was this damned place? Housing developments were popping up so fast in this area, the map applications couldn't keep up. Wending his way down the twisty hillside, he read the street signs. Finally, at the bottom of the valley, he spotted the neighborhood.

Dozens of cookie-cutter houses dotted the streets, all in various states of completion. The half dozen or so at the end of the cul-de-sac glistened with postcard-perfect coats of fresh paint. Each had been given its own unique touch—different trim color, different front door, some subliminal personalization preventing you from striding into the wrong egg crate and scaring the hell out of your neighbor's wife. Soon the landscapers would work their magic and "For Sale" signs would spring up like the golden heads of dandelions from freshly planted grass.

Mid-afternoon, the cul-de-sac was blessedly deserted. Seth was relieved. After Sully's very public suicide by cop, he didn't want any more publicity.

He parked behind a line of SUVs close to the trail where the search team leader waited. He followed two uniformed police officers up the trail. The terrain was rugged. Rocks slid underneath his feet, making it slow going. All around him he smelled the fresh pine forest.

Tall trees closed in overhead. The canopy of branches rustled in the wet wind. He remembered camping trips with his stepfather deep in the Cascade Range. Campfires and lakes brimming with fish. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was hunting game in the forest with his stepfather instead of searching for the body of another dead girl.

Ahead the dense stand of trees thinned. Seth could see a semicircle of people gathered around the small clearing, speaking in hushed tones. Some angled their faces toward the sky while others looked at him with sad expressions.

The circle dispersed as Seth approached, and he glimpsed a pair of black leather boots. Small. Women's size six or seven. Brooke Parker sprang to mind, but Brooke had been wearing high heels the night she'd disappeared.

With a sense of foreboding, he stepped closer.

Her face was hidden beneath the branches of a small tree. Squatting down, he smelled the rank sweetness of decaying flesh. Bracing himself, he angled the branches gently away.

Seth's shoulders slumped. He raked his hands through his hair. Equal parts anger and sorrow flooded him as he stared down at the girl laid out on a bed of brown pine needles. What a waste. What a goddamned fucking waste.

He wanted to turn away, but he couldn't. He needed to look. He needed to see. Seth felt the eyes of the volunteers on him. Reluctantly he gazed down at the dead girl. She looked like a wood sprite sleeping peacefully on the forest floor. Her sightless green eyes stared up blankly at the darkening sky. He knew from the bruising around her throat and the unnatural tilt of her head that her neck was broken.

His heart heaved in his chest.

*Tess Turner.* He would recognize her face anywhere.

Waiting for the techs to arrive, Seth eyed the scene with the clinical detachment he'd perfected analyzing dozens of crime scenes. Tess hadn't been killed here. There were no signs of a struggle, no blood on the ground. There were no drag marks. She had been dumped here. Like trash. The son of a bitch had carried her up the trail.

Whoever he was, he was strong, and Seth thought about Charles Sully's husky build—his broad chest and thick shoulders. He'd been used to heavy work and he'd known the neighborhood.

It was well past eight o'clock when Seth left the scene and returned to the office. His initial shock had faded, giving way to anger. He'd warned Tess to stay away from Sully, and with all the invincibility and swagger of a nineteen-year-old girl, she'd blithely ignored him. And now she was gone. She'd had such a bright and lively future ahead of her, and someone had snuffed it out in the blink of an eye.

If this had been Sully's handiwork, death had been too good for him. He'd deserved to live a long miserable life in jail as some asshole's bitch buddy for the lives he stole. Instead he'd taken the easy way out, and it was those left behind who would suffer. Good people, like Lara's family. Tess's family. Marissa. Kelly. So much blood. So much death.

Seth propped his elbows on the desk and ran his hands across his face. He stared down at the report he'd just completed. The techs would compare Tess's DNA to that of the blood samples lifted from the trunk of Sully's car. But what good would that do?

The case would be closed, and Tess would still be dead.

It all seemed so fucking pointless.

Seth sighed. Paper work complete, there was only one thing left to do. He opened his desk drawer and reached for his car keys. His hand stalled. Holly's photo lay facedown in his drawer. He wanted to slam the drawer closed and get the hell out of there, but he didn't. He pulled the picture frame out of the drawer and turned it over.

Holly's frozen smile stared up at him. Accusing him. He'd let Tess careen off into harm's way. He hadn't been able to save her. He hadn't been able to save his own wife. He couldn't save anyone.

Seth closed his eyes. All he could do was react to the shitty things that happened every goddamned day.

Find the killer.

Bury the dead.

Some fucking job.

He jammed the picture back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

• • • •

TESS TURNER'S PARENTS lived in a modest brick rambler in Everett. Lights were on in the living room. Seth passed the Ford F-150 in the driveway on his way to the door.

Luke Turner answered on the second knock, and Seth saw where Tess had gotten her dark hair and lively green eyes.

"Can I help you?" Turner asked. His thick eyebrows furrowed as he took in Seth's appearance.

"Luke Turner?"

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

"Detective Crawford, Seattle PD." Seth showed his badge. Concern flashed in Turner's bright eyes. "May I come in?"

Turner shifted in the doorway, and Seth caught sight of a woman coming down the hallway. She was middle-aged, petite, with bright-red hair and trendy glasses with electric-green frames. Her husband's wary expression stopped her in midstride.

Seth followed the Turners down a short hallway to a large, comfortably furnished family room. The Turners sat close together on a cream-colored sofa. Seth took the brown leather recliner across from them. Everywhere he looked, he could see family photos—Tess as a freckle-faced girl, Tess graduating from high school, a young man he could only assume was her brother in army fatigues, family pictures of smiling faces.

A flag case sat on the top of the entertainment center. The stars and stripes filled the triangular case, and Seth thought back to what Tess had said. Her brother was currently overseas, serving in Afghanistan. He wished the Turners' son were home with them now instead of thousands of miles away. They would need all the support they could get.

Seth glanced back at the Turners. Mrs. Turner leaned forward, her brown eyes filled with alarm.

"I have some news about your daughter."

"Tess?" Mrs. Turner asked, clasping her hands tight together, as if in prayer.

"Yes. I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but something's happened to her."

The color drained from Luke Turner's face. Seth dropped his gaze and stared at his feet.

"Is she all right?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Turner."

Emotion thickened Seth's voice. Anger. Sadness. Regret. Most times he could shut things off. Compartmentalize. Delivering bad news was part of the job, but this case had become personal. He'd liked Tess, and the tragedy of the situation overwhelmed his default coping mechanisms.

"Goddammit. What are you saying? Is she hurt? Is she . . . ?"

Seth raised his eyes with a look that confirmed Turner's worst fears. The man's voice broke. Turner sagged back against the sofa cushions. His wife reached for his hand, her fingers knotting with his. Tears filled her eyes.

"How?" Mrs. Turner gasped. Shock rippled across her face.

Luke Turner's chin sagged, and he dropped his face into his hands. Her eyes blazing bright with tears, Mrs. Turner never took her gaze from Seth's.

"How? How could you have let this happen? Her roommate is missing. Didn't anyone think that our daughter was in danger? Why didn't you protect Tess?"



Each word pierced Seth's heart like a bullet. He should have done more to protect Tess. He should have driven her back to the dorm himself. He should have drilled home the danger she was in if she kept chasing Charles Sully. But he hadn't. He'd let her go. He'd failed her and her family in every possible way.

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? You're sorry? Our girl is dead, and that's all you have to say for yourself? Get out. Get out of my house."

"Teresa," Luke said softly, grasping his wife's hands.

"Get out."

Luke followed Seth to the door. In hushed tones, Seth imparted the logistical details he was obligated to pass along. He handed Luke his card, and the door closed.

With a leaden heart, Seth lumbered to his car. His cell phone rang. Pulling it from his pocket, he saw the number. It was Alvarez, no doubt looking for the chief's daily report.

Aw, fuck it. Not tonight. He'd had enough for one day.

• • • •

GREAT BIG SEA, A FOLK band out of Newfoundland, Canada, blasted through the speakers at the Dubliner Pub in Fremont. The familiar smell of cedar and beer embraced him like a lover. He didn't recognize many of the faces. Once a regular, Seth hadn't set foot in the place for over a year. Not since he'd gotten sober. But tonight he spied an empty stool at the bar.

Tonight he had every intention of falling off the wagon with a definitive thud and surrendering to the sweet haze of oblivion offered by as much scotch as he could stomach.

The bar was full. Saturday night was dart league night, and teams were scattered around the dart boards, drinking and laughing. Seth paid them no mind. He spied the green bottle of Glenlivet winking at him in the bar's amber light.

His cell phone rang. He pulled it out and checked the display. Marissa. Shit. He knew he should talk to her, put her mind at ease. But he couldn't. He didn't want to tell her about Tess. Alvarez had left a voice mail. Instead of checking it, though, he placed the cell phone on the bar and powered it down.

The bartender turned.

"What can I get you?"

They both stared.

Jesse Morgan was the first to speak.

"Don't tell me you're here on official business."

Seth set his keys on the bar and shook his head. "Not tonight."

Jesse's gaze turned thoughtful. He wiped the bar in front of Seth with a damp white cloth.

"In that case, Detective, what'll you have?"

"Glenlivet. Neat. Make it a double."

Jesse grabbed the bottle and set the glass on the bar in front of Seth. He poured a generous three fingers into the glass.

"Bad day?"

Seth didn't answer right away. He focused on the neon Guinness sign behind the bar and took a long swallow from the glass. He set it back down on the bar with a thud. The scotch burned a fiery path down his throat. He felt the welcome fire of it warm his belly, like a campfire on a cold night.

"You might say that."

He couldn't get Teresa Turner's voice out of his head. He didn't want to hear. He wanted the pain to go away.

"I've been watching the news," Jesse said. "No word on Brooke?"

Seth eyed Jesse with a sharp look. Suspicion was an occupational hazard, but Jesse looked genuinely concerned, nothing more, and Seth changed the subject.

"What are you doing here? Did you quit the Chapel?"

"I make too much money there to quit. No. I'm just filling in for a buddy of mine. He runs the place. Occasionally he books my band in here."

Seth nodded. He remembered. Acoustic Tuesday was a regular thing at the bar. Once or twice he'd found himself onstage with a guitar in his hand. But that had been before the fire. Before he'd lost Holly. That had been back when his life had actually made sense.

He drained the contents of his glass and ordered another. At this rate he'd pass out before midnight. It was the first cheerful thought he'd had all day.

Jesse poured another shot.

"I hear they found another body."

Seth looked up, wishing the kid would shut his mouth and go away. Let him drink in peace. He thought about moving to a table in the corner, but all the tables were taken. He sighed and cupped the glass in his hand.

"I can't talk about that yet."

Jesse nodded. He fisted his hands on the bar in front of Seth. The colorful tattoos wound their way up his muscular forearms, disappearing into the sleeves of his sweater.

"I've been asking the regulars at the bar if they saw anything the night Brooke disappeared. There was one girl, Daria, who was out celebrating her birthday."

Seth sighed. He hoped this was going somewhere. He'd come to the Dubliner to get away from work, not to rehash the case. Draining the contents of his glass, he waited for Jesse to get to the point.

"I showed her Brooke's picture, and she sent me a photo. In the background you can see Brooke talking to a tall dark-haired guy."

Seth straightened with sudden interest.

"Do you have it with you?"

Seth gestured toward the glass, and Jesse refilled it before he went off in search of his phone. The scotch tasted even better than he remembered. He took another swallow. It had been so long since he'd gone on a good bender, the effects were almost instantaneous.

Jesse returned with his phone. He flipped through his pictures until he found what he was looking for. Setting the phone down, he slid it across the bar. Seth squinted at the tiny screen. It was hard to see anything in this light. He inched the phone closer. A redheaded girl smiled in the foreground. Behind her, a few barstools down, he recognized Brooke's wavy blonde hair. She was talking to a young man.

The hairs prickled on Seth's arms, and he looked up. It was too small for identification purposes at this resolution, but maybe with some work, they could get something useful.

"Can you send me this? I'll have one of our guys look at it."

"Yeah."

Seth knew he should forward it to the computer forensics team, but given their backlog of cases, it might take days for them to get to it. Brooke Parker didn't have days. Henry Cahill, on the other hand, was at Holt's beck and call. He forwarded the photo to Cahill and asked him to look at it ASAP.

"Did she remember anything else?" Seth asked.

“Nothing useful.”

“Thanks.”

Jesse nodded and drifted down the bar to serve other customers, leaving Seth alone with his thoughts. He wasn't stupid. He saw the looks around the office, the careful way Alvarez eyed him ever since Sully's public suicide. They were all waiting for him to crack under the pressure. They had been ever since Holly died. Maybe he had already cracked, he mused, picking up his glass. He was, after all, off the wagon. So while he was here, why not have another?

Seth held up his finger. Jesse spotted him. He was still too sober by half. One more for the road, and then he had to head home. Tomorrow would come. In all likelihood the results of the DNA tests would be waiting for him.

With that cheery thought, he downed his next drink.



Marissa pulled alongside the curb. Coming here was crazy. Desperate. She'd tried calling him, but he wasn't answering his phone. So after leaving three messages, she'd sweet-talked Henry Cahill into giving her Seth's home address, making some lame excuse about paper work. They'd both known she was lying. She had to see him. She had to look him in the eye when he told her what the volunteers had found.

Marissa's fingers drummed the steering wheel. Fat drops of rain pounded relentlessly down on the roof of her car and streamed down the windows. A thin film of condensation coated the driver's-side window, and she swiped it away with the palm of her hand.

A few lights blazed inside the house. Seth's Nissan sat in the driveway. He was home. And she was stalling. Because she knew she shouldn't be here.

Surely if Seth had found Brooke's body, he would have told her by now. Intellectually she knew this was true, but she needed to see him. She needed . . . what, she asked herself again. Assurance? Comfort? Something more?

Marissa stopped the thought before it could fully form in her mind, knowing that the longer she sat there, the less likely she was to act. Without giving herself another second to reconsider, she stepped outside and pocketed the car keys.

The wet wind assaulted her as she sprinted for the porch. Marissa pounded on the green door of the small Tudor. And waited. How would Seth react to her showing up like this? Would he be angry?

She should go. No. She had to talk to him. There'd be no sleep until she did.

It took thirty excruciating seconds for him to answer, each second giving voice to her doubts.

Seth's bloodshot eyes widened at the sight of Marissa standing on his doorstep.

"I tried calling, but you didn't answer. What did you find?" she asked, skipping the usual pleasantries.

"You shouldn't be here."

"Dammit, Seth, I know the search party found something. Was it Brooke? Did you find my girl?"

Marissa's chest ached with the need to know. She couldn't spend another second agonizing, waiting for her cell phone to ring, waiting for him to show up at her door with horrific news. She couldn't spend another night wondering if it was Brooke they'd found. Wondering if her daughter was dead or alive. Not knowing was like having a gaping hole ripped through the center of her heart.

Seth shook his head. All afternoon she'd feared the worst. Now a wave of relief flooded through her, so strong Marissa's knees buckled. Seth reached out to steady her. She looked up into his face.

There was something he wasn't telling her. He looked haggard. Beaten down. She could smell the alcohol on his breath. She hadn't pegged him for a drinker, so whatever it was must have shaken him. Badly.

"What is it?" she demanded.

Seth released his grip and stared past her, out into the rainy night.

"What aren't you saying?"

"Go home, Marissa."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me."

He hissed out a sigh and glared at her. His gray eyes smoldered with frustration. Anger.

"Tess is dead."

Tears flooded Marissa's eyes. Her hands flew to her mouth.

“Oh my God,” she murmured. “No.”

Without thinking, Marissa wound her arms around Seth’s waist and held on tight. He tensed in her embrace, but she refused to let go. She thought about Tess, with her quick smile and her bright-green eyes, so full of life, and a deep sadness shrouded her heart. Tears spilled over onto her cheeks, dampening the front of Seth’s T-shirt.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders, and Seth gently eased her away. Though she loosened the tight band of her arms, she refused to relinquish her hold. She glimpsed the pain in his eyes as he looked away.

“You should go,” he said again, his voice gruff.

“No,” Marissa said.

She planted her hand on the scarred side of his face. Pushing up onto her toes, she pressed her lips to his. Everything she felt, all of her fear, all of her longing, she packed into that kiss. The salty taste of her tears blended with the sharp tang of scotch. Seth’s shoulders tensed. He pulled back, but Marissa refused to let go. She wound her fingers into his damp hair and pressed against him in another kiss.

Seth’s resistance fled. His strong arms closed around her, pulling her hard against his body. His lips opened, and she felt the raw hunger, the need in his kiss. A rush of heat surged through her at the brush of his tongue.

She was dimly aware of the door closing behind her as Seth pushed her back until her shoulder blades pressed against the wall. He kissed her hard and she pulled him close, reveling in the taste of him, taking pleasure from the sure strength of his body against hers.

The zipper of her jacket purred open, and Seth’s hands closed on her waist. She tugged on his T-shirt, pulling it free from his jeans, and slid her cold hands inside his shirt. A wave of desire overwhelmed her senses. She kissed his neck, his chin, every part of him she could reach. All rational thought fled. And there was only Seth, so warm and so real.

Her hand slid down to his waist, fingers skimming lightly beneath his belt. Seth’s breath caught, and she could feel him shudder. His hot breath fanned her cheek, and he stared down at her.

“Not here,” he said.

Marissa nodded. Seth took her hand, and he led her through the living room toward the back of the house. The bedroom was dark, the shades drawn. Seth turned to her, a question in his eyes. She answered with a kiss. She reached for his belt, but Seth caught her curious hands and locked them behind her back.

His lips blazed a trail down her neck to the swell of her breast. She felt a dizzying spiral of sensations flow through her. She swayed unsteadily and curved her body into him, wanting more, wanting to feel like there was something good still left in the world.

Seth released her hands. He gripped her hips and pulled her against the full length of his body. Marissa nuzzled his earlobe, drinking in the scent of his skin. Sandalwood and scotch. His hand slid inside her shirt, cupping the fullness of her breast. She groaned, wanting him, needing him. She whispered his name.

Marissa fumbled with the buttons of her shirt. Seth brushed her hands impatiently away. He grabbed the hem of her shirt, stripped it up over her shoulders, and tossed it to the floor. His hungry lips devoured every inch of her newly exposed skin. He lost himself in the feel of her, in his need.

Marissa shuddered. Her cheeks flushed, her breath coming fast, she gripped his shoulders as his fingers smoothed her bra away. Her hands knotted in his hair, and she pulled his mouth back up to

hers, tasting him. Seth's hands unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down. She kicked them away and shed her panties.

As she fell back on the bed, Marissa's long hair tumbled loose behind her. Seth stood above her staring down. In the dark, his face engulfed in shadows, she could no longer read his expression. She raised her hand toward him, her fingers outstretched.

His fingers twined with hers, and she pulled him closer. Marissa pushed up onto her elbows, her kisses seductively soft, the thrust of her tongue slow. Teasing.

Seth eased away and she heard the jingle of his belt buckle. She reached out and felt his body respond to her touch. A surge of dizzying heat flashed through her, and she pulled him down. Her knees parted and he slid slowly inside her.

Marissa gasped at the exquisite rush of sensations filling her. She arched her hips, matching his rhythm stroke for stroke. Point and counterpoint, they moved to the beat of a song that had no words. Was it a minute? An hour? A year? Marissa had lost all sense of time as Seth's mouth found hers and she spiraled off the edge of insanity.

She cried out in the dark room, fingers digging into the taut muscles of his back. Seth's body shuddered in release. Spent, he leaned down and kissed her gently on the mouth. She reached up to touch his face, the stubble on his jaw scratchy against her hand, the puckered skin of his scars like thick ropes of satin beneath her fingertips.

Marissa pressed her lips to his scarred cheek, all the tenderness she felt expressed in her kiss. Seth rolled onto his back, and Marissa's heart began to slow. She settled into the warm curve of his shoulder. There, in the circle of his arms, hand resting over the steady beat of his heart, she felt safe. Finally, she slept.

• • • •

MARISSA OPENED HER eyes. Seth lay on his side, facing her in the morning light, the scars on his face hidden by the pillow. His gray eyes were open. Alert. And she wondered how long he'd lain awake studying her in the morning light. Snuggling closer into his chest, she planted a soft kiss on his neck, wanting desperately to feel safe.

"This is a great way to wake up," she said.

"We should talk about this."

His words chilled her like ice water running down her back. She closed her eyes and pressed herself against the warmth of his body, unwilling to let go of the moment.

"Let's not."

Seth's hand closed around her shoulder, and he gently edged her away. The look on his face was sober in the full light of morning. He rolled onto his back and she saw his scars. Marissa pulled the sheet close around her. The rush of air took on a sudden chill.

"This shouldn't have happened."

"I suppose you're going to tell me this was a mistake, that you didn't want this to happen."

"Marissa . . ."

"Because if you try to tell me that," she pressed on, "I'll know you're lying."

Seth closed his eyes and ran his hands over his scarred face. His sober gaze met hers.

"Not to overstate the obvious, but I'm the cop assigned to your daughter's case. There are lines that shouldn't be crossed . . ."

Marissa's eyes locked on his, refusing to budge an inch, and Seth gave his head a weary shake. Easing up from the mattress, she watched him pull on his boxer shorts and jeans.

“I’m going to make some coffee.”

Once she was alone in Seth’s room, self-doubt set in.

Yes, she was lonely. Yes, Seth was critical to solving Brooke’s case. Yes, getting involved now muddied whatever relationship they might have. But she couldn’t deny the way she felt about him. He was a good man. Strong. Caring. Despite all the complications, what she felt wasn’t wrong, and she wasn’t going to let misplaced guilt spoil whatever it was they had.

With so much chaos and uncertainty in her life, she didn’t want to lose the one good thing that had happened since this whole nightmare began. She wouldn’t let Seth push her away. She didn’t know if she could bear that on top of everything else.

Gathering her resolve, Marissa rose. Instead of donning her own clothes, she pulled his SPD-issue T-shirt over her head. She raised the fabric to her nose and breathed in his scent, sandalwood and cordite, then let it fall loose around her hips. The thick cotton hem brushed against her thighs as she exited the room.

She walked down the hall, getting the first real glimpse of the house. The living room was sparsely furnished, with modest leather furniture and a small flat-screen television. The dining room, or what she thought was the dining room, was absolutely bare. There wasn’t a table, a chair, a rug—nothing to show it was lived in.

Marissa stared at it. She looked around. There were no pictures, no artwork on the walls, no personal touches of any kind. The place had the empty, un-lived-in feel of a mausoleum. Seth was a ghost drifting silently through the purgatory that was his existence, not really living. Merely surviving.

The thought chilled Marissa. She turned and continued down the hall.

Seth stood in the kitchen. He stared out the window, his face a granite mask. She studied his profile, taking in the angry red scars on his cheek, the stubborn jut of his jaw, and the downward cast of this mouth. Behind him, on the tidy kitchen cupboard, the coffee maker growled and popped. Dark, rich coffee dripped into the clear glass pot.

He turned at the sound of her bare feet approaching. He looked at her, his expression grim. Resolute.

“I hope you don’t mind I borrowed your shirt.” She perched on a stool beside the kitchen counter.

“It looks better on you.”

She held her hand out, wishing he’d take it. He didn’t. Instead Seth held up one of his own, warding her off. Rejection hit her like a slap across the face. She knotted her fingers together on the countertop. She could leave and they could pretend this had never happened. Well, maybe he could pretend. But she couldn’t. Last night had meant something.

“So, do you want to talk?”

Seth crossed the small kitchen, maintaining a safe distance between them. Propping his hands on the countertop behind him, he met her eyes. Marissa steeled herself for the onslaught of regret and guilt.

“I don’t think you realize what a huge ethical boundary I’ve just crossed. I can’t be objective about Brooke’s case if we’re involved.”

Marissa arched an eyebrow. “So this is about your objectivity? I hate to break it to you, Detective Crawford, but we’re already involved.”

Seth’s hands splayed wide in an exasperated palms-up gesture. “It’s an emotional case. It’s natural to mistake your feelings with the case with your feelings for me. It’s called transference.”

“First, I’m not confused. Second, you’re not my therapist. I know what I feel. I care about you. Do you?”



Seth dropped his gaze to the floor. His voice was quiet, almost inaudible, when at last he spoke. "You know this is impossible."

Marissa climbed off the stool and approached him slowly.

"I know this is hard and you're pushing me away. I know that whatever it is between us, you've felt it too. I also know that you're looking for a way to deny it. You say it's because of your duty, and maybe it is, but looking around here, I think there's more to it."

"Like losing my job's not enough?"

Marissa felt the sting of his words swell. He was right. Just by being here she was putting him in an awkward position.

"Has there been anyone else since your wife died?"

Seth glanced up sharply. The fierce look on his face confirmed her suspicions.

"You need to go."

"Don't you think she'd want you to be happy?"

"Go."

"I'm not leaving."

Seth smashed his fist into the countertop. The coffee pot tilted, and the pot slid from its base. Glass shattered on the cold tile floor. Marissa jumped back. An instinctive stab of fear shot through her. She remembered Rick's hand lashing out, connecting with her jaw. She remembered the blood.

She froze.

"Fuck," he growled, raking his hands through his hair. He blew out a long breath. The struggle to control his frustration showed on his face. "Look, Marissa. Cops make lousy partners."

"What about ex-strippers?"

"Not everything is about you."

Coffee dripped. It hissed against the hot plate, filling the silence between them. Seth flipped off the switch. Reaching out, he gripped Marissa's shoulder gently, steering her clear of the shattered glass.

Once they reached the living room, he dropped his hand. Her skin chilled where his hand fell away. She looked at the empty shell of a house. Everything around her screamed of a man who had survived his wife's death but had not moved on.

"Look, I'm scared too. I'm a three-time loser at marriage, but I'm right here willing to deal with my issues, while you're hell-bent on pushing me away. Why?"

"I'm not who you think I am."

"What does that even mean?"

He turned toward the fireplace. Shaking his head, he pressed his palms against his eyes. Her fingers itched with the need to touch him, but she held back. Waited. When he spoke, his voice was so low she strained to hear him.

"My wife was depressed. She'd just had a miscarriage. Instead of staying home with her, I went to work."

She looked around the house—unfurnished—and at his scars, and she knew.

"The fire wasn't your fault, Seth."

Seth's face contorted. The pain in his voice was as red and raw as the scars on his cheek.

"She swallowed a handful of pills before she set the fire."

Seth's admission sucked the breath from Marissa's lungs as she thought about how close she'd come to ending her own life. His gray eyes raged like a winter storm, and she wondered how many nights he'd lain awake in bed playing the what-if game.

What if they hadn't lost the baby? What if he'd stayed home that night? What if he'd handled things differently? There were more unanswerable questions than there were burning embers in a fire. And it was so like Seth to keep all his grief tightly bottled up inside, to internalize his guilt and punish himself.

He was wrong though. It hadn't been his fault. What happened had been terrible and tragic and no more his fault than that of an all-powerful God in the sky.

Silent tears leaked out onto her cheeks.

"Oh, Seth."

The jarring sound of Seth's cell phone shattered the silence. Marissa jumped. Seth crossed the living room and picked it up as Marissa wiped her cheeks.

"Crawford," he said, his back turned toward her. "Yeah, I'm on my way."

He pressed the end button and set the phone down.

"You've got to go?"

His smile was bitter.

"I told you. Cops make lousy partners."



Seth knew he should be racing to the office, but with a pounding hangover and a bellyful of regrets, he wasn't ready to face the day. The morning's phone call had notified him that the medical examiner's findings for the girl in Charles Sully's trunk were sitting on his desk. In all likelihood, after reading the report, he'd have to deliver more horrifying news to a set of grieving parents.

Instead of heading into the office, Seth pulled into a Tully's Coffee parking lot. Gravel crunched beneath his tires as he chose a spot close to the rear entrance. The sweet smell of pastries, combined with the Glenlivet in his gut, sent his stomach plunging into a sickening barrel roll.

He knew better than to let his demons take hold. Once they gained purchase, they were nearly impossible to shake off. He'd worked the twelve steps and managed to crawl out of the bottom of the bottle he'd wallowed in after Holly's death. Starting over was unthinkable.

It was just after eight o'clock on Sunday morning, and patrons swarmed Tully's counter like flies. Food was out of the question. All Seth could manage was a black Americano. Hands shaking slightly, he placed the steaming cup on a small table and waited.

"You look like shit."

Maxwell Singer clapped Seth's shoulder, folding his six-foot-two frame into an empty chair across from him. The years hadn't changed Max. Iron-gray hair brushed the collar of his black leather jacket. Sharp brown eyes assessed Seth with a frown.

"At least I look better than I feel," Seth said, and took a sip of coffee. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been ten hours since my last drink."

Beneath a handlebar moustache, Max's lips slid into a wry grin.

"I'm your AA sponsor, not your father confessor. Trust me, you wouldn't like my penance."

Max was more than Seth's AA sponsor; he was first lieutenant on his force and a mentor.

"Have you eaten anything?" Max asked.

Seth shook his head. His stomach still heaved at the thought of food.

"Water? Tylenol?"

"No."

Max shook his head in mock disapproval. "You're out of practice, son. What's going on?"

"I'm on a shit case."

Max stroked his thick moustache and eyed Seth with a thoughtful look.

"You've managed tough cases before. What's different about this one?"

"I've got two dead girls, one missing, a dead suspect, and a boatload of unanswered questions."

"So?"

Max listened patiently while Seth rattled off the details of the case, about Charles Sully's record, Brooke Parker meeting Charles Sully at the Chapel, the body and the dog tags found in Sully's trunk, and the standoff that had left their prime suspect dead.

"Sounds like all of the pieces fit. So what's bothering you?"

"It's all too neat. Why would Charles Sully leave a body in his trunk overnight? Why not just dump her?"

"Maybe he wanted to get caught."

"Then why not leave her in the open? Why transport her body at all? Why change your method? The kind of guy who strangles a woman to death in a crime of passion seems like a very different

perp than the psychopath who kills his victim and chops her up into pieces.”

“You think it’s two different killers?”

“I think it might be.”

“If you’ve got two killers, how do both deaths get pinned on Sully?”

“I think someone planted the duffel bag in Sully’s car.”

“A setup?” Max asked, his expression skeptical.

Seth nodded. “So on the one night Charles Sully has a body stashed in his trunk, there’s a dumpster fire in his neighborhood. Local cops respond. Then there’s a car prowler, and the only car that’s broken into is Charles Sully’s. What are the odds of that? What do you always say about coincidences?”

“There are no coincidences in police work.”

“Right.”

“Any facts to back up your theory?”

Staring down into his coffee, Seth shook his head. “Just my gut.”

“You mean the one still marinating in scotch?”

Seth glanced up sharply and Max raised a calming hand.

“Easy now. I’m just saying you need hard facts before you go to Alvarez or anyone else with this theory. The way it stands, you’ve got a solid case against Sully. You know as well as I do that in this kind of high-profile case there’s a ton of pressure to close it as quickly as possible. No one is going to be keen to have you picking away at it.”

Max was right. He could well imagine the backlash from Alvarez and Chief Abrams if he floated an unsubstantiated scenario. Still, in his gut he knew something wasn’t right. And Brooke Parker was still out there somewhere. He couldn’t stop looking.

Max’s speculative gaze locked on Seth’s face. “You know all of this already, son. What’s really bothering you?”

“Are you psychic?”

“All good cops are.”

Seth turned away from Max’s keen stare and looked at the faces all around him. The coffee shop was full of people, functioning members of society who were capable of having normal relationships, people whose lives weren’t irreparably fucked up. He sighed and swung his gaze back toward Max.

“I slept with one of the victims’ mothers.”

“Only one?” Max asked in a deadpan tone.

“Very funny. I’d just found another dead girl. I left her in harm’s way. I failed her.”

“You didn’t kill her, Seth.”

Knowing Max was right didn’t lift the thousand-pound weight of responsibility from his shoulders. He still had to find Brooke Parker. He still had to find the man or men who had murdered the girl they’d found in Sully’s trunk and Tess Turner. He owed it to them, to their families. And then what?

“When does it stop? No matter how well I do my job, there’s always going to be another monster out there. Always another victim. I’m tired of digging up dead bodies and telling parents their kids will never come home.”

Max reached across the table and patted Seth’s arm.

“You’ve let the job become your life, son. Have you ever thought that maybe it’s time to do something else?”

“Like what?” Seth asked, anger infusing his words.

As long as he could remember, he'd always wanted to be a cop. He didn't know how to be anything else. He didn't know where to start.

"Might be worth taking some time to figure that out." Max sipped his coffee. "What about the woman?"

"After I notified the parents, I had a couple of drinks, and then she showed up."

Max arched his eyebrows, waiting for more, while Seth sorted through his tangled knot of emotions. He'd wanted Marissa, and while the alcohol fogging his brain had been enough to lower his barriers, it wasn't the reason he'd done it. In truth he'd wanted her since that day in Kelly's room when he'd first held her. The touch of her body was electric and had awakened feelings in him he'd thought long dead.

"And," Max prompted.

"And I care about her. Okay? She's smart and tough and brave. And I know it's fucked up, but . . ."

Seth trailed off and pressed his fingers into his temples. A headache boomed inside his skull. Talking about this was hard. Max was still staring at him like he was expecting more.

"Your feelings for her have made this case personal," Max said. Seth couldn't deny the truth of his words. "So, you slept with her and now you feel guilty?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"We're not talking about me, son. We're talking about you."

The Americano in his cup was as cold and sobering as the truth spilling from Max's lips. He drained the last of the coffee from the mug.

"Right. We're talking about me. And yes, I feel guilty."

"Why? Because of the job, or because of Holly?"

The mention of her name sent a shock wave spiraling through Seth. He glanced up at Max with a tortured look.

"Both."

There was no judgment on Max's face. He gave a slow nod and leaned forward, elbows propped on the table, his gravelly voice uncharacteristically soft.

"How did you leave things?"

"Badly. I let my guilt take over and treated her like a total asshole."

"So what are you going to do?"

Seth raked a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. Everything was such a mess. He couldn't leave things that way. He had to deal with it piece by piece.

"I need to figure out if I'm right and Sully was set up before the case is officially closed."

"Okay, and what about the woman?"

There was no easy answer to Max's question. His actions from this point on would directly affect his career. In some ways that would make pushing her away easier, but was that what he wanted? His heart said something different. Either way he had to face the consequences of what he'd done last night.

"What will happen when they find out about Marissa?"

"If you're lucky you'll be taken off the case and suspended for a few days. If you're not . . ." Max finished his coffee. He set the mug back down on the table with a thump. "Look, you have to realize what a huge political shit-storm you stand to unleash. If you push back on closing the case while you explore an alternate theory, they could use your indiscretion as a lever to get rid of you. You're in a bad spot, son."

The reality of Max's words hit him hard.

"And if they don't find out?"

"It's possible they won't and everything will continue on the way it was. The case will close, and you'll move on to the next one. Is that something you can live with?"

Seth stared down into the empty coffee cup, weighing his options. Could he risk being thrown off the case? Could he live with the lie?

"You're right. They will close the case, and Marissa's daughter might never be found. I can't let that happen."

"Then you've got a tough decision to make, son. First I'm taking you to an AA meeting. You'll be no good to anyone if you don't get your own house in order."

• • • •

"ALVAREZ'S BEEN LOOKING for you," Linda Garcia said as Seth strode into the squad room.

Seth nodded. His head throbbed, and he pressed a palm to his temple.

"Was he pissed?"

"Well, he wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, if that's what you're asking."

Great. Max had insisted on AA, so now, instead of his being half an hour late, it was coming up on eleven o'clock. A thick folder sat in the middle of his desk. But before he could face it, he needed more coffee.

Five minutes later Seth thumbed through the medical examiner's report on the desk with a heavy heart. DNA evidence had confirmed his suspicions. The dead body in Charles Sully's trunk was Kim Covey. The extensive bruising on her back, and defensive wounds on her hands and arms all spoke to the gruesome beating Kim Covey had endured before her death.

If the killer had beaten the shit out of Kim before he killed and dismembered her, how much worse would Brooke endure?

The headache intensified, and he pressed his palms into his closed eyes, trying to relieve the pressure. In a fit of desperation, he wrenched the top drawer of his desk open and pawed through the layers of papers and other assorted crap in search of the bottle of Advil he kept stashed there for emergencies. Hand buried deep in the drawer, he froze as he caught sight of Holly's picture. Memories of last night with Marissa came rushing back.

What would Holly say if she knew what he'd done? Would she feel betrayed? Would she want him to move on? Seth shook his head at the unexpected anger welling up inside him as a new thought dawned.

She was the one who had abandoned him. She had swallowed a handful of pills to make her pain go away. How was he supposed to deal with that? How was *he* supposed to make the pain go away? He'd lived with the agony of losing her for two years now, always blaming himself. But maybe she deserved some of the blame too.

Seth yanked the picture out of the drawer and threw it into the trash bin under his desk. Glass and wood clattered noisily, and heads turned in his direction. He ignored everyone around him, still digging for the Advil.

He upended the bottle into his cupped hand, but nothing emerged. It was empty. Fucking perfect. Seth gritted his teeth and flung the vial in the garbage pail. It clattered noisily against the picture frame.

"Crawford," Alvarez barked from across the squad room.

Seth's chin snapped up. With a grimace he rose from his chair and threaded his way through the rows of desks. The lieutenant closed the office door. Seth frowned. A closed-door conversation was definitely not a good sign. Easing into the guest chair, Seth waited for the ass-chewing to begin. He didn't have to wait long.

"Nice of you to show up."

Seth stared across the desk without comment.

After a lengthy silence, the lieutenant continued. "What's the latest on the body?"

"According to the DNA evidence, it's Kim Covey."

Alvarez cringed. Seth knew it didn't come as a complete shock, but the brutal death of any girl came hard. Alvarez's gaze strayed to the framed photographs on his desk. From this angle Seth couldn't see them, but he knew they were pictures of the lieutenant's family—his pretty wife and their two young girls.

"Have her parents been informed?"

"Not yet," he said, dreading the inevitable task. Seth could still hear Teresa Turner's accusations in the back of his mind.

"Are they still in town?"

"The Coveys? Yes. I'll go see them this morning."

"Any new developments on the whereabouts of the Parker girl?"

"Not yet."

"The chief wants an update by noon."

*Of course he does.*

"Yes, sir."

"We need to find the Parker girl's body so we can close this case."

"She may be alive," Seth said.

"In her condition? You really believe that?"

Seth gritted his teeth, frustration building. Alvarez was probably right. But how could he tell Marissa he'd failed? How could he tell her Brooke was dead?

"I'm doing everything I can," he snapped.

"Then do it faster. Do your job. You can start by telling me where you were this morning."

"I was with Marissa Rooney," Seth blurted.

He hadn't meant to say it, but there it was.

Alvarez's mouth dropped open. He stared at Seth in slack-jawed amazement, and Seth knew he'd said too much. He was beyond caring though. And now that he'd said it, there was no taking it back.

"Tell me you're not serious."

Seth shrugged. "Look, I know what you want. You want a quick, clean ending to the case. I do too. But you know as well as I do it doesn't work that way. I don't give a flying fuck about the chief's report or any of the other political bullshit associated with this fucking case. I care about one thing—finding Brooke Parker. And my every instinct is telling me that Charles Sully may not be our guy."

"Based on what? Wishful thinking? The woody you have for her mother?"

Half a heartbeat of silence pulsed between them. Seth sprang to his feet, hands clenched. The chair clattered behind him. He desperately wanted to drill his fist into the lieutenant's perfect nose.

"Did you sleep with her, Crawford? I want the truth."

"Yes."

"Fuck." Alvarez's hands splayed wide in a frustrated arc. "Do you have any idea what a fucking mess this case is? The chief is riding my ass demanding results, and you're sleeping with the victim's



mother. Now you're questioning Sully as a viable suspect. Have you lost your fucking mind? Do you know what a shitty position this puts me in?"

"Afraid of losing your promotion, Lieutenant?"

Alvarez's face flushed a deep shade of scarlet.

"You're off the case, Crawford. Hand the files over to Garcia."

A thick vein bulged in the lieutenant's forehead. Anger pulsed in every syllable.

"Don't you breathe a fucking word of what happened until I figure out what I'm going to do with you, do you understand me, Crawford? Not a single fucking word. Not about your relationship with Ms. Rooney or your half-assed theory about Sully not being the killer. Nothing."

Seth leaned an inch closer, staring his boss in the eyes.

"Tell me, Brad, when did closing the case become more important than finding the truth?"

"Get your ass out of here before I fire you."

"Don't bother."

The solution was so absurdly simple, it almost hadn't occurred to him. Seth removed the badge from his pocket. He stared at it for a few seconds, reflecting back over the many cases he'd worked in his career—some good, some bad. Max was right. He'd miss it, he knew. But it was time. With an air of finality, he tossed it on the lieutenant's desk. He pulled his gun from its holster and placed it beside the badge.

Alvarez's jaw dropped.

"Think about this, Crawford. If you leave now, there's no coming back."

An absurd bubble of laughter rose in Seth's throat. He closed the door quietly on his way out of the office, feeling lighter than he had in years.



Marissa sat in the waiting room. She was early for her Monday morning appointment with Dr. Anita Frank, rated one of the top family psychologists in the city. Marissa knew that when they found Brooke, her daughter would need the best therapist she could find.

Classical music played over the speakers. The colors were calming—sedate gray walls, lavender furniture, plush gray carpet. Silvery air bubbles drifted through the tank filled with colorful tropical fish.

Marissa thought about the pills she had almost taken, about the constant state of panic she'd lived in since Brooke had disappeared, and the guilt and fear and hope she felt whenever she thought about Seth. A lifetime of therapy might not be enough to sort out her shit. But that wasn't why she was here.

The door at the far end of the office opened, and she recognized Dr. Anita Frank's face from the profile piece she'd read in *Seattle Magazine*.

Dr. Frank smiled. "Ms. Rooney?"

"Yes." Marissa stood quickly, squelching an attack of nerves.

"I have five minutes before my next appointment."

"Thanks for fitting me in. I'll be brief."

Marissa perched on the edge of the love seat in Dr. Frank's office.

"I'm here on behalf of the Holt Foundation. Our mission is to help victims of violence and their families."

"I've read the materials you sent and will gladly donate to the cause. Unfortunately I have another commitment tomorrow night, so I won't be able to attend the benefit in person."

"Thank you, Dr. Frank. That's very generous of you, but I was hoping for something more than money."

Dr. Frank's brows rose, and she eyed Marissa with curiosity. "Oh?"

"I was hoping you'd consider donating some of your time to counsel the victims and their families."

Dr. Frank uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in her chair. Her kind brown eyes met Marissa's, and she shook her head.

"I wish I could. I have every confidence the Holt Foundation will do great things, but I'm afraid I can't participate. I already donate time to Child Sanctuary and the Cancer Foundation. I also sit on the board for the Seattle's Children's Home. Between that, my practice, and my family, my schedule is stretched pretty thin. I'd love to help you, Ms. Rooney, but I can't."

"Dr. Frank, there are families out there, victims like my daughter who could never afford the type of treatment you offer. Having someone with your reputation would help us attract a number of other prominent specialists to help provide critical services for families in need. Please, Dr. Frank, we need you."

Compassion and regret mingled on the doctor's kind face.

"I appreciate what you're doing. I really do, but I can't commit enough of my time to make it worth your while."

Marissa's hopes plummeted. She'd pinned her hopes on securing Dr. Frank as the linchpin of her services strategy. Now she'd have to reconsider. If Dr. Frank had so many other commitments, what about the list of other potential candidates? Would they be willing to donate their time?

“I was so sorry to hear about your daughter’s disappearance, Ms. Rooney. I can’t imagine anything more tragic.”

Marissa nodded in acknowledgement and forced a smile.

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Frank,” she said, rising to her feet.

Dr. Frank stood and shook her hand warmly.

“I wish I could do something more to help,” she said. “I will send along my donation.”

“Thank you.”

• • • •

DEFLATED, MARISSA TRUDGED back to the Smith Tower. Hunched behind her desk, she stared at her e-mail in-box and picked at her cuticles. She should be doing research and finding other mental health professionals to approach, but she didn’t have the heart. Short on sleep and still reeling from Seth’s tortured admission, Marissa didn’t have much fight left in her.

Henry Cahill breezed into the office. Marissa looked up.

“Is Ms. Holt in?”

“She had a meeting this morning, but she should be back soon. Is there something I can help you with?”

Cahill shrugged. “Well, I’ve been trying to get hold of Detective Crawford. He sent me an image file Saturday night, and I’ve been working on it. I have something to show him, but he’s not answering his phone.”

Anxiety knotted Marissa’s stomach. She hoped he was okay. There were a dozen legitimate potential reasons for his not answering his phone, but she knew from personal experience he almost always answered. Saturday night had been the first time she hadn’t been able to reach him. Panic had brought her to his door in the middle of a rainstorm.

“I’ll see if I can reach him,” she said feebly. Cahill thanked her and left the office.

Minutes later Elizabeth Holt swept in. She settled in her chair and asked Evan to bring her some tea. Marissa wanted to tell her about her efforts to enlist Dr. Frank but decided against it. Efforts meant little. Holt was the type of woman who expected results. Instead Marissa left a message on Seth’s voice mail.

Holt glanced over.

“How are we looking for tomorrow night’s benefit?”

“Good. I’ve finalized the seating plan. The caterer is ready to go.”

“Can I see it?”

“What?”

“The seating plan.”

“Sure,” she said, and e-mailed the list to Holt, praying she wouldn’t insist on changes at this late date.

Marissa checked her phone. Still no call from Seth. She texted him.

No sooner had she set down her phone than the door burst open and Henry Cahill marched in with Seth close on his heels. Marissa closed her eyes for a brief second as relief washed over her. He was safe—dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, his hair windblown and damp from the rain.

“Ms. Holt, we have something to show you,” Cahill said.

“Detective Crawford,” Holt said, arching her brow in a curious look. “I’m surprised to see you.”

“I hope you don’t mind I’m here,” Seth said.

Mind? Why would Holt mind? There was a subtext to their conversation Marissa wasn't following, and as usual, Holt's expression gave nothing away.

"Not at all. So tell me, Henry, what did you find?"

All eyes turned toward Cahill.

"Detective Crawford sent me something last night."

Cahill set his tablet computer on Holt's desk, and Holt leaned forward. Marissa sprang from her chair and hovered behind the group, straining to see the small screen. Her heart lurched as she caught a glimpse of Brooke.

Marissa remembered Brooke's first date. Wearing a pale-pink dress, she had looked as pretty as a rose petal as she waited for Jesse Morgan to arrive, while Marissa had been a bundle of nerves. She'd paced the house for hours waiting for Brooke to come home that night, telling herself that Brooke was smart, that Brooke was a smart girl. She wouldn't make the same mistakes Marissa had. When Brooke had arrived home on time, just before ten o'clock, Marissa had known she'd been stupid to worry. Brooke was a responsible kid.

Marissa stared at Brooke's image on the screen, smiling at the dark-haired young man. Half of her hoped this would be the lead that would help bring Brooke home, and half of her feared they would never find her daughter.

She felt Seth's gaze on her and looked over. His gray eyes locked on her face. Her heart lurched and she forced a small smile. She thought about how they'd left things Sunday morning and wondered how he was coping. He looked better than he had when he'd left the house. Less troubled. More sure.

"The photograph was taken with a cell phone the night Brooke disappeared." Cahill's voice interrupted her thoughts, and she tore her gaze away from Seth, refocusing on the screen.

"Where did you get it?" Holt asked.

"Jesse Morgan," Seth answered. The unexpected name caused her heart to skip. "He's been asking his regulars at the bar for anything that might help find Brooke. One of them sent him this picture."

Surprise turned to gratitude. She'd written Jesse off years ago as a carefree, irresponsible kid who cared about no one other than himself. But now, faced with this new revelation, she realized maybe she'd been too quick to judge.

"It's surprisingly good quality," Holt said.

Cahill grinned like a kid who'd just won the science fair. "Yeah, well, it was taken in low light, blurry as shit, so I ran it through a few enhancement filters, and voilà."

"Do we know who he is?"

"Not yet. I'm running it through a facial recognition program. See how he's looking away from the camera?" Cahill pointed at the screen. "The program works by measuring and matching generalities of the subject's facial structure. Because he's looking away, we're less likely to get a definitive match, but we will get a list of probable matches. From there I can set up a query eliminating potential suspects based on other criteria—age, where they live, you know."

"Excellent work, Henry. Let me know when you have more."

"Will do," Cahill said, and left the room with a satisfied smile.

"Marissa, could you give me a moment alone with Detective Crawford?"

Surprised, Marissa cast a curious glance between the two before she left the office. She hovered outside the doors. While it wasn't exactly eavesdropping, it was skirting the line. With all the noise out in the great room, she caught only a word or two of the conversation. Minutes later Seth emerged.

He stopped when he saw Marissa.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“More or less.”

She wanted to touch him, to run her hand across his raspy cheek and see if the connection between them Saturday night was still there. He stepped back, as if reading her intent. An awkward pause stretched out between them. There was so much she wanted to say, but she was afraid of saying too much. He’d made it clear yesterday morning he felt last night had been a huge mistake.

She searched for some neutral ground.

“What did Ms. Holt want?”

“She offered me a job.”

“A job?” Marissa asked, confused.

“Yeah, it seems I’m in need of one.”

*Oh God.*

“This is my fault. You got fired because of me.”

“No, I quit.”

Marissa blinked, wondering if she’d heard right. “You what?”

“I think maybe it’s time to do something else.”

Seth’s lips cocked into a rare half grin. Marissa was too dumbfounded to respond. He glanced down and checked his watch.

“Sorry, I have a meeting to get to.”

He left before she could say another word.



Tonight was Elizabeth's night. Launching the Holt Foundation was the crowning achievement of her brilliant career, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, and Marissa wanted everything perfect. Elizabeth deserved as much.

Pausing at the top of the stairs, Marissa swept her anxious gaze across the ballroom. Something was wrong. As she scanned each of the tables, it took a moment to sink in. The tablecloths were the wrong color. She had specifically ordered white. These were cream.

"Everything looks lovely, Marissa."

Marissa nodded, shooting a worried glance Evan Holt's way.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"They're the wrong tablecloths."

Evan glanced at a nearby table and shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe so, but the tables look great. Stop worrying."

"Elizabeth will notice. I wonder if there's time to change them."

Marissa searched the room for the catering director. He was nowhere to be found. She started off toward the kitchen, but Evan's hand on her arm stalled her.

"Marissa, there's no time. The tables look lovely. Really. Let it go."

Evan was right. Guests would arrive at any minute. She'd been so careful to plan every detail. She'd wanted tonight to be perfect. Now this.

"You're still worrying. Can I get you a drink?"

"Me? Nothing. Thanks."

A drink might help calm her nerves, but she didn't dare. She was short on sleep and had an empty stomach—a glass of wine would hit her hard.

Elizabeth appeared at the far side of the room. Her black gown fluttered softly around her as she approached. Evan kissed his aunt's pale cheek. She smiled affectionately at him, patting his hand.

"Everything looks lovely, Marissa." Elizabeth smiled. "You've done well."

"But the tablecloths were supposed to be white."

"No matter. The cream ones work just fine."

Evan snatched two champagne flutes from the tray of a passing waiter. Handing one to Elizabeth, he raised the other in a toast.

"To the Holt Foundation. May we have an excellent night."

Elizabeth sipped champagne, her eyes drinking in every detail of Marissa's appearance, from the beaded bodice of the golden gown to the flowing gossamer skirt. She lowered her glass, looking pleased.

"You look like Cinderella dressed for the ball."

"Would that make you my fairy godmother?"

Elizabeth laughed. "I suppose so."

Marissa cast her gaze down the stairway toward the lobby, where guests pooled in the foyer. Her stomach gave a nervous flutter.

"Here we go," she said, heading for the stairway.

For the next half hour, Marissa greeted guests, directed traffic, and ensured everything went off without a hitch. The frantic pace kept her focused. And when the mayor and his wife arrived, she greeted them warmly and handed them off to Evan, who escorted them to the head table.



“I see you’ve landed on your feet, Ms. Rooney.”

Marissa silently groaned. The last thing she needed on top of the stress of making sure the benefit ran smoothly was Paige Benoit’s hateful remarks.

“Ms. Benoit, what a surprise. I don’t recall seeing your name on the guest list.”

“Mr. Regis encouraged the staff to attend. What a surprise to find you playing a central role in Ms. Holt’s benefit.”

“Thank you for coming,” Marissa said.

Benoit’s gaze slid slowly over her. Marissa knew that look. Benoit was trying to make her feel cheap. Unworthy. Like a whore dressed up in someone else’s clothes.

“That’s quite a dress, Ms. Rooney.”

Two weeks ago Benoit’s words might have made Marissa feel small, but now they glanced off her without leaving a scratch. Marissa almost felt sorry for the woman. She wondered where such bitterness stemmed from. Benoit looked like she was going to say more when Evan arrived at her side. He eyed her former boss with the same chilly professional air he’d shown Marissa the first time they’d met.

“Ah, Ms. Benoit. So glad you could make it. Allow me to show you to your table.”

With a broad sweep of his hand, Evan gestured toward the staircase. Tossing one last corrosive look Marissa’s way, she followed him into the ballroom.

“She’s right. That is quite a dress.”

Marissa spun on her heel at the sound of his voice. Her breath caught as she came face-to-face with Seth. He looked handsome dressed in a tuxedo, the black jacket emphasizing his broad shoulders and fit physique.

“Thank you. It’s Elizabeth Holt’s dress.”

“I’m sure it looks better on you.”

A twinkle of amusement flashed in his gray eyes, and she remembered he’d said something similar about the police T-shirt she’d worn the morning after. Did he remember it too? Looking up into his face, she thought maybe he did.

“You know what I mean. She sent it to me, along with the shoes.”

She lifted the hem of her skirt, revealing the delicate matching sandals for his inspection. Seth inclined his head toward her, his voice soft, his breath fanning her cheek.

“You really should get better at accepting compliments.”

Marissa blushed. A few blonde curls escaped the intricate knot at the back of her neck and tickled the side of her face. Seth’s hand reached toward her, like he might sweep the hairs away from her cheek, and her breath caught.

Marissa stared at the river of twisted scars running down the side of his face. *All warriors have scars*. When she looked at his, she saw something beautiful—the story of a husband willing to sacrifice himself to save his wife. *How many men have loved so much, lost so much, and still survived?* Pain could have destroyed him, but it hadn’t. No one had ever loved her that way.

His hand stalled inches from her face, and Marissa released her breath. He stepped back. All she had to do was reach out and take his hand. All she had to do was bridge the gap between them. Marissa looked into his gray eyes, as turbulent as a stormy sky, and knew he wasn’t ready yet. Maybe he never would be.

“I know we need to talk, but this isn’t the right time.”

“I know,” she said, more sad than bitter.

Tonight was about Elizabeth Holt and the foundation. So Marissa pushed back her need to resolve things between them. She would wait. Seth was worth that much. And more.

Marissa watched him dissolve into the crowd. Catching her breath, she turned as the next set of guests entered.

Loss was still an open wound for Mary and Kevin Covey. Every cell in Marissa's body felt their pain. She would never forget the horror of seeing their daughter's body laid out on a metal table. Tears welled in Marissa's eyes. She blinked them back, holding her hand out to Mary. Mary took it.

"Thank you for coming," Marissa said, her voice thick with sorrow.

Kevin took her other hand. She searched for something to say—some comfort she could offer—but there were no words for the hell the Coveys were going through.

"How are you holding up?"

The Coveys clung to each other, two victims adrift in a sea of agony and grief.

"It's been really hard," Kevin said, curving an arm around his wife's slumped shoulders. "Any news on Brooke?"

Marissa shook her head. Kevin studied her with sad, solemn eyes. He knew. He knew what she was going through, and for a moment, she felt less alone.

"We're praying for you," Mary said, sagging against her husband's frame.

Marissa said nothing. She'd stopped believing in God years ago. She hoped Mary found comfort in her faith, and the strength she needed to get through this nightmare.

Marissa squeezed Mary's damp hand and let go. Her heart ached with the weight of their loss. Her chest tight, she pulled in a shuddering breath. She needed a few minutes alone to regain her composure. She needed some fresh air. Turning, she crossed the lobby, heading for the entrance.

"Marissa," Elizabeth called. Her icy fingers wrapped around Marissa's elbow. "Come. There is someone I'd like to introduce you to."

Marissa gazed outside into the dark night. Two or three minutes alone were all she needed, but she had no choice. She followed Elizabeth across the crowded ballroom.

Elizabeth stopped next to a tall man in his midsixties. He had a thick gray head of hair and sharp, aristocratic features. Next to Elizabeth's gaunt frame, he looked the picture of health.

He reached for Elizabeth's hand and stepped toward her. His lips brushed her lined cheek.

"You look lovely tonight, Lizzie," he said in a voice so low Marissa almost missed it.

*Lizzie.* Marissa's ears pricked up at the casual use of the name. The only other person she knew who called Elizabeth that was Evan.

"Marissa, allow me to introduce Alistair Wright."

She knew the name. Alistair Wright. Lawyer. Philanthropist.

"Ah, Ms. Rooney, it's a pleasure to meet you in person."

"You too, sir."

His grip was firm and sure.

"You know each other?" Elizabeth asked, surprise evident in the arch of her brows.

"I had other plans this evening, but Ms. Rooney called me personally. I could hardly refuse. She can be quite persuasive."

"You mean persistent," Marissa said with a quick grin.

"Just so." He nodded.

"Alistair and I went to law school together. He was the editor of the law review. Graduated near the top of his class."

"Second only to Lizzie," he said.

Alistair's warm gaze lingered on Elizabeth's face, and Lizzie fingered the necklace around her throat. A look passed between them. Something private. Something she was not meant to see, and Marissa averted her gaze, catching Evan's eye.

Looking thoughtful, Evan sipped champagne from his glass.

"I was sorry to hear about your daughter," Alistair said, turning toward Marissa. "I hope for everyone's sake she is found soon."

"Thank you."

"As a parent, I can only imagine how you must feel." He stretched an arm around the shoulders of a pretty young woman at his side. "This is my daughter, Alicia."

"Hello," Marissa said, extending her hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Rooney."

The ring on Alicia's finger turned, catching the light.

"Good lord, what a beautiful ring," Elizabeth said, grasping Alicia's outstretched hand.

"Alicia just announced her engagement." Alistair smiled wide.

"Well, aren't you the proud papa?"

"Indeed I am."

"Congratulations," Marissa said.

Watching Alistair with his beautiful daughter, Marissa thought about her own daughters. She didn't know if they would find Brooke. Each day stretched into the next like some form of torture. She didn't know if her family would ever be whole again. As if sensing her thoughts, Evan placed his hand lightly on Marissa's shoulder. She looked up into his concerned gaze. A wave of gratitude washed through her as the conversation flowed around them.

"Wonderful news, Alistair. Where is the lucky young man?"

Alistair shot Alicia a questioning look.

"Oh, Drew? He's outside making a call. Something about work. He should be back soon."

Alicia threaded her arm through her father's, and Marissa's heart weighed like an anchor inside her chest. Excusing herself from the group, she made for the door, knowing this might be her last chance for some air before the speeches started.

The doors parted and she breathed in the night air. It felt cold and fresh in her lungs. Stepping outside, she accidentally brushed the arm of another woman who was on her way in.

"Excuse me," Marissa said.

"Ms. Rooney."

Marissa stopped. She searched the woman's face. It couldn't be.

"Dr. Frank?"

"I've been thinking about you ever since you left my office, and well, here I am."

"I'm so happy you came. Come, let me introduce you to Ms. Holt."

The doors closed behind Marissa, and she led Dr. Frank into the ballroom. Once she'd found Elizabeth in the crowd, she made the introductions.

The two women shook hands, and Marissa could tell by the shift in Elizabeth's expression that she recognized the name. Elizabeth gave Marissa an approving smile, and she realized that now she had fully accomplished the mission Elizabeth had set for her. Three influential donors were here at the benefit because of her.

"Ms. Rooney said you were pulling together a set of professional services as part of your foundation. She convinced me to donate some of my time. I've taken the liberty of speaking with some colleagues who also expressed an interest in helping out."

“Thank you, Dr. Frank. You’re too kind.”

“I will have my office contact Ms. Rooney, and we’ll work out the arrangements.”

“Excellent.”

Marissa left the two women talking animatedly about Elizabeth’s vision for the foundation. Leaving the crowd behind, she pushed open the door and walked outside into the dark night. A thick blanket of charcoal clouds hung low over the city. Shadows and light fell in a checkerboard pattern across the cracked asphalt. Marissa shivered.

She slipped between the buildings, her high heels clicking down the alleyway. Despite the cold, it felt wonderful to be out of the crowd. With all those people around, she could hardly breathe. Everyone was looking at her, pitying her.

The sight of Kim Covey’s parents had driven her thoughts down a very dark path. All this time she’d imagined Brooke out there somewhere, waiting to be found, waiting to come home. That day in the morgue had forced her to consider the unthinkable. Brooke might never come home again—they might not even find her body.

A strangled cry escaped Marissa’s lips. She pressed her palm against her lips, stifling the sound. Pain pulsed through her chest, and she slumped, her shoulder pressed up against the building beside her.

She’d always believed that knowing would be better than not knowing, and while part of her knew that was true, another part of her couldn’t stand the idea of losing hope. Without hope she was lost. Without hope she’d be forced to face a life without Brooke, without her baby. A chilling cold seeped into her bones. Inky blackness pooled around Marissa.

In the dark she heard a sound, like footsteps approaching behind her. She swung away from the wall and peered down the alley. All she could see was darkness and shadows.

“Hello?” she called, her voice echoing down the alley.

No one answered. Cars buzzed in the distance. She strained her ears to hear something else. But there was nothing.

Goose bumps prickled her arms. Fear tingled along her nerve endings. Something wasn’t right. She shouldn’t be out here. She should probably get back. Elizabeth would be looking for her.

She took one last look down the alley. A dark figure swung around the corner of the building, coming toward her. His footsteps rang on the concrete.

“Hello?” she said again.

He didn’t respond. With each long stride, he drew closer. He was tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed in black. His face was cloaked in shadow.

Marissa spun on her heel and hurried down the alley, away from the man. She heard him approaching, his pace faster now. Her heart raced. The sidewalk was still ten yards away. She slipped; her ankle twisted. She stumbled, then righted herself and kept going.

Five yards now. Four. She glanced behind her. He was still there. Closer. His chin was down; she couldn’t see his face.

“Marissa?”

Seth appeared on the sidewalk. She jumped. Craning her head around, she looked down the alley. It was empty.



After the chilly night air, the crowded ballroom felt like a sauna. Drew headed straight for the bar. He needed a drink if he was to have any prayer of making it through the speeches.

Marissa sat at the head table, surrounded by Seattle's elite. He was impressed by the transformation she'd undergone since leaving his father, her beauty refined over the years. It wasn't just the dress; she looked as if she belonged here. But then, that shouldn't surprise him.

When had Rick ever brought the best out in anyone? Sure as hell Drew wasn't the same boy who had lived in his father's house. And like Marissa's, his changes ran far deeper than the clothes on his back, the expensive car he drove, and the beautiful fiancée by his side.

The line moved and Drew glanced up at the ponytailed bartender.

"Glenlivet?" the bartender asked the suit in front of him.

"Tonic water."

"On duty tonight, Detective Crawford?"

Drew stiffened. Detective? He shifted his position to get a better look at the guy. And Christ, what a face. Not one you could easily forget, with those huge scars running from his eye down to his jawline.

"Jesse Morgan. You pop up more often than a character in a Stephen King Castle Rock novel. Surely you're not the only bartender in this city," the cop said.

"I get around," Jesse said, pouring tonic water over ice cubes and squeezing in a lime.

"I've heard that about you."

Jesse handed Crawford his drink and turned his gaze on Drew.

"Grey Goose martini, dry and dirty, right?"

Drew stared at the bartender. Sweat dampened his palms as he sized the guy up, trying to place him.

*Shit. The Chapel.* He remembered the bartender there flashing a photo of Brooke on his phone. The cop eyed Drew with a curious look.

"Damn, you're good," he said, making light of the moment.

"I never forget a drink. Did your girl say yes?"

"What?"

"Your girl. You were at Maximilien's the other night, right?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. She said yes."

"Congratulations. Drink's on the house."

"Aren't they all?" Drew joked feebly.

Heart pounding like a jackrabbit's, Drew saluted Jesse with his glass and beelined it to his table. It was time to leave. That last brush at the bar had unnerved him. Alicia would raise holy hell if he tried to leave before the speeches, though, so he had no choice. He'd sit through those and then he was out of here.

Shifting his chair, he positioned himself behind Alicia and gulped his martini.

Elizabeth Holt opened up the night by droning on about the foundation and its mission to help families whose lives had been torn apart by kidnapping, rape, blah, blah, blah.

The speech was as captivating as a calculus lecture, and Holt had all the sex appeal of one of the wizened tribal women with leathery tits on the cover of *National Geographic*. When was the last

time she'd gotten laid? Eighteen seventy? Fucking her would be almost as much fun as dry-humping a fence post.

Feigning polite interest, he sipped his drink. In the middle of her closing remarks, Holt started coughing. Hunched over a cocktail napkin, she waved off some douche who hovered close by and pointed a bony finger toward Marissa.

Marissa rose like Aphrodite reborn and intoned, "Thank you for coming tonight and showing your support for the Holt Foundation. As many of you know, my daughter Brooke went missing . . ."

Riveted by the pain he saw in Marissa's eyes, he couldn't tear his gaze away. Each day Brooke was missing, she died a little more. Suddenly he was glad he hadn't left before the speeches. He would have missed this.

Marissa's voice faded from his mind and a memory surfaced. He was seventeen, and Rick was drunk again. Marissa was arguing with him, pleading with him to stop drinking and take his pills. Idiot. Tears wouldn't convince the old man to do anything. He was too cold. Too hard. Too far gone to care about anything.

Drew had hung back in the shadows of the living room, watching. Waiting. He knew what would happen next. God knew he'd been on the receiving end long enough to recognize the old man's tells. He'd never seen it from this perspective before though.

Marissa shouted something, and Rick's shoulders tensed. That was it. That was the moment when you stepped out of range. She missed it. Rick's hand shot out, quick as lightning. The bloodstone ring flashed in the light, and he drilled Marissa square in the face. Her head snapped back. Blood ran down her swollen lips. Scarlet drops stained her white T-shirt.

Anger flashed in her eyes. She fled down the hall to the bedroom. Rick didn't follow. He wiped his fist off on his jeans and slumped back into the chair. He grabbed the bottle and poured himself another drink, like nothing had happened.

Silent as a ghost, Drew crept down the hall.

The bedroom door was slightly ajar. Just an inch or two. A crack. Just enough to catch a glimpse of Marissa stripping off her T-shirt. Her full, round breasts filled the lacy cups of her bra. She swiped the blood from her mouth with the T-shirt and tossed it on the bed.

Drew moved closer to the door. Aroused. Wanting to taste the salty blood on her lips. Wanting to savor the warm smell of her skin. Her hair. Explore the smooth curves of her body beneath his hands. Lick the tears from her face. She had never looked more beautiful to him than she did in that moment.

Drew heard his father's drunken footsteps staggering from the kitchen. Marissa slammed the door. Drew slipped into the shadows out of view just as his father reached the hallway.

He'd fantasized about her, about that night more times than he could count, reenacted part of this scene down in the cabins with Kim Covey and the other girls. After all, Marissa was the reason he chose blue-eyed, blonde beauties for his nocturnal games.

The memory still made him hard. Beneath the table Drew reached for Alicia's thigh. His fingers snaked beneath the hemline of her skirt and slid up her smooth, bare skin. She tensed. Her fingers closed around his wrist and gently eased his hand down her leg toward her knee like a proper little daddy's girl.

He looked up and his heart jolted. The cop with the scars was staring straight at him. Drew forced a benign smile and downed the last of his drink. Marissa was still talking. He'd tuned out long ago, but Alicia dabbed her eyes with the linen napkin. He could see the impact of Marissa's speech on the faces all around him. He clapped along with the others, willing the night to be over.

At last Drew stood. He gripped Alicia's hand and pulled her close. Bending down, he whispered into her ear, "Let's get out of here."

He swiped her hand across the front of his trousers, hard enough that she could feel his erection. Alicia laughed.

"You're so bad. I want you to meet her before we go."

"Who?"

Drew's heartbeat quickened. His gaze locked on Marissa. He hadn't seen her in years, but if Brooke had recognized him after all this time, she might too.

"Come on. Let's go."

"Easy, tiger. You'll get what you want, but first indulge me."

*Fuck.*

He'd made a huge mistake coming here. First the bartender from the Chapel had recognized him. Now Marissa loomed dead ahead. He needed to get the fuck out of here before everything came crashing down around him.

Alicia clutched his hand tight, dragging him through the crowd. They closed in on Marissa. Sweat dampened his palms and he yanked Alicia back.

"Let's go. Now."

Alicia shivered as his lips brushed her ear.

"Drew, it will only take a minute."

Her grip on his hand tightened and she marched ahead. Five yards. Four. They were close enough now to hear Marissa's voice.

*Fuck.*

He couldn't risk her seeing him. Alicia was going to force his hand, and he was going to make a scene. All because she wanted to show him off.

Marissa turned. Drew's breath caught. Their eyes met for a brief second before Drew averted his gaze. Alicia kept walking.

"Ms. Holt," she called.

Holt's curious gaze swung toward them. She spied Alicia, and her expression softened into a welcoming smile.

"This must be your young man," she said, extending her hand toward Drew.

He cleared his throat, his mouth bone-dry. "Drew Matthews. It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Holt."

Her grip was surprisingly firm, and he squeezed her swollen joints just hard enough to make her wince.

"I hear you'll be joining the Wright clan."

"That's right," he said, grinning at the pun.

Glancing over Holt's shoulder, he saw the cop moving through the crowd toward them. Drew tensed, knowing it was time to get out of here, with or without Alicia.

Holt coughed. After excusing herself, she continued. "Well, I've got a story or two about Alistair you might want to hear if . . ."

She held up her hand and coughed harder this time. The color drained from Holt's face. Alicia's smile faded, and she leaned forward, gripping the old woman's elbow.

"Are you all right, Ms. Holt?" she asked, her voice sharp with worry.

Holt's mouth opened. Her knees buckled, and she crumpled to the floor like a rag doll.

The crowd gasped and closed ranks, forming a tight circle around Holt's prone form.



“Lizzie,” a tall young man in a black suit shouted above the din, pushing his way to Holt’s side.

“Call 911,” Drew shouted to no one in particular as he jostled his way through the crowd, toward the exit.



Marissa paced the waiting room of Harborview Medical Center, her bare feet aching. The golden sandals she'd been wearing hours before were stuffed into her purse. Seth's tuxedo jacket was wrapped around her shoulders like a warm cloak.

The antiseptic smell of ammonia turned her stomach. She touched her fingers to her lips and ran her tongue across her scarred gums. Seth's right knee vibrated like that of a teenager on Red Bull, and she knew he didn't like hospitals any more than she did.

Marissa left the window and sank into the chair beside him.

"You don't have to stay, you know."

"I know," he said.

"Hospitals always remind me of the night I left Rick."

"He beat you."

It wasn't a question. She knew he'd read the police report. Marissa shivered and pulled the tuxedo jacket closer around her.

"I let him do it. I stayed. I thought if I could get him back on his meds, everything would work out. I was young and stupid."

Seth placed his hand on hers. She twined her fingers tight in his, not wanting to let go.

"I'm sorry."

"I wanted a family for the girls, and Rick seemed like a solid guy. I had no idea about his mental health issues and drinking until later. I dragged the girls through hell for nothing."

"You were young. You're not that woman anymore," Seth said. He squeezed her hand gently before pulling away. "I spent weeks in the hospital after the fire."

It was the first time he'd talked about his past without her dragging it out of him.

"It must have been painful."

"They had me on some pretty powerful pain-killers when I was hospitalized. After that I self-medicated. I'm an alcoholic, Marissa. Up until a few nights ago, I'd been sober for over a year."

"God, this is all my fault."

"You?"

"If I hadn't gone to your place . . ."

"I was already drunk by the time you showed up, and for the record, I don't regret what happened between us. I was confused, and I'm sorry. I handled things badly."

Their eyes locked.

"And now you're not?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

After all he'd been through, the last thing she wanted was to cause him more pain. He'd lost his job and his sobriety because of her. She was toxic. He'd be smart to get as far away from her as fast as he could before she completely destroyed him.

"I'm just another mistake waiting to happen, Seth."

He pressed a finger to her lips.

"Maybe it's time we both stop blaming ourselves for things we can't change."

It sounded easy when he said it like that, but she knew it was much harder to do. Still, he was right. There was no changing the past. Maybe all they could do was accept their mistakes and move on. Make better choices.

Marissa leaned her head against Seth's shoulder. She didn't remember drifting off, but she awoke to someone gently shaking her shoulder. She blinked. Seth's face hovered inches from hers.

"What time is it?" she asked, straightening in her chair. Her back was sore from sleeping in such an awkward position. She stretched her arms up high in the air and shifted, lengthening her spine.

"Late. I'm going to grab some coffee. Do you want some?"

She nodded and watched him leave the waiting room. His defenses were crumbling, but he wasn't defenseless. She would protect him.

Evan trudged into the waiting room and slumped into the chair beside her, looking wasted. His dark hair was mussed, and she noticed his bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. He'd been crying, she realized. Dread pooled at the pit of her stomach.

"How's Elizabeth?"

"Not good."

He propped his elbows on his knees and dropped his face in his hands.

"Lizzie has lung cancer. It's spread to both of her lungs and her lymph nodes. There's not much they can do at this stage except make her comfortable."

Elizabeth was dying. The news was so shocking it was hard to absorb. It was unfair. The foundation Elizabeth had worked so hard to build would have to carry on without her. She wouldn't be around to see all the comfort and help it would bring to those who needed it most. And just when Marissa was starting to find her footing, she would lose her mentor.

"How long does she have?"

"Not long. She's been working too hard and not resting like she should. I've been nagging her, but . . ." His voice trailed off and he shook his head.

"And now she can rest," Marissa said.

Evan stared down at the dirty blue carpet. Marissa squeezed his arm.

"She means a lot to you."

"When everyone else in the family had written me off as a junkie loser, Lizzie refused to give up. God knows why. I went through rehab three times before kicking the habit. Lizzie helped me get straight."

"And now look at you."

He half smiled. "A lawyer who doesn't practice."

"You've been helping her launch the foundation."

"I owe her so much."

Marissa smiled gently. "We both do," she said.

"She wants to see you."

"I thought only family could visit."

He shrugged, flipping his hands palms-up. "So you're family."

Marissa rose. On bare feet she left the waiting room and padded along the deserted corridor until she found the right room.

Elizabeth looked fragile. Blue and purple veins were visible beneath her parchment-white skin. A monitor beeped like a metronome counting off time. Marissa checked the digital displays. Pulse rate, oxygen, and half a dozen more readouts she didn't understand. Elizabeth's heartbeat arced across the screen in a jagged green line.

Turning back to the bed, Marissa saw Elizabeth's cobalt eyes open. She inched closer to the bed, fingers curling around the plastic bed rail, and forced a weak smile.

"You gave us all quite a scare."

“I always did like to make a grand exit,” Elizabeth croaked.

Talking triggered a violent coughing spasm, and Marissa grasped the cup of ice water beside the bed. Elizabeth locked her thin lips around the straw and sipped. Once she was satisfied, Marissa set the glass down.

Elizabeth grimaced and shifted on the bed. Marissa reached to help but was quickly shooed away.

“It was a good night.”

“A very good night,” Marissa agreed.

“Getting Dr. Frank to sign on was quite a coup, Marissa. You surprised me.”

“Money’s good, but I figure the foundation needs more than just donations.”

“Very true. The foundation needs you.”

Marissa shook her head. “I’m just an admin. You need smart people to help you run the foundation.”

“I could have hired an army of smart lawyers and entrepreneurs to fill your position, but I chose you. You are a fighter, Marissa. You are a single mother who defied all of the odds to build a better life for you and your daughters. You did this without an education, without money or resources to help you. Imagine how much more you could do with the foundation behind you. No one else I could have hired would understand what a family goes through when something like this happens. You do. You know what they’re going to need. I can hire people with specific expertise. What I cannot find is someone else like you.”

Elizabeth’s admission overwhelmed her. It was an awesome responsibility, and while she wasn’t sure she could live up to it, she knew she would do everything in her power to ensure the right things got done. She wanted to help other families. She wanted to make Elizabeth proud.

“Evan told me about your condition. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard. You need to rest and let us do some of the work for you while you focus on getting better.”

Elizabeth’s smile faded, and her eyes grew dim. Marissa wondered if she felt time running out. Behind her the monitors beeped in the silent room, like the ticking of a clock.

“I want you to have something.”

“Elizabeth, please. Just rest. We can talk more later.”

She didn’t want to hear another word. This sounded too much like a goodbye, but as usual Elizabeth ignored her. She held out her fisted hand. Confused, Marissa frowned. Elizabeth gripped Marissa’s hand and tipped it over. A warm weight filled Marissa’s palm. Stretching her fingers wide, Marissa found Elizabeth’s golden necklace winking in the cold light above the hospital bed.

“That necklace has been my touchstone, my talisman. It gave me strength through some of the darkest moments of my life. I want you to have it. Maybe it will give you strength as you find Brooke and bring her home.”

Tears brimmed over Marissa’s eyelids, scalding her cheeks. Before she could say anything, Elizabeth waved a hand.

“Go home, Marissa. It has been a long night. I need to sleep.”

Marissa squeezed the old woman’s cold hand, feeling the brittle bones beneath her flesh, the necklace gripped tight in her other hand.

“Thank you,” she said.

Elizabeth nodded. Then her blue eyes closed.



SETH PARKED OUTSIDE Marissa's house. She fingered the amulet hanging from the long chain around her neck. The size of a silver dollar, it was thin and round, engraved with what looked to be Egyptian symbols. She wondered what they meant.

Clenching it tight, she glanced over at Seth, his scarred profile half illuminated in the dashboard lights. The air between them hummed like a live current.

"I don't suppose you want to come in?" she asked.

She expected a litany of excuses. *I'm tired. It's late. We shouldn't.* And while all of those things might be true, that didn't make her want him any less.

Instead he pulled the keys from the ignition. The tightness in Marissa's chest eased. Their eyes met, and she felt a jolt, like an electric shock, shiver through her.

Hands shaking, Marissa fumbled with the lock. Seth took the keys and unlocked the door.

Inside the darkened kitchen, she could hear the loud hum of the refrigerator. Now that he was here, she was suddenly a bundle of nerves.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea?"

Seth shook his head. He turned her slowly around to face him. Looking up, she saw the soft light burning in his eyes. Her hands gripped his waist. The heat of his skin radiated through the thin fabric of the tuxedo shirt. He ran his hands up her bare arms, and she shuddered. Finally his mouth lowered to hers. The kiss was soft, tender.

"Stay?" she asked, when he eased away.

"You sure?"

"Please."

Seth nodded. Marissa pressed up onto her toes, and she kissed him like it was the most natural thing in the world.



Seth woke with a start. This dream was different; he didn't feel the typical panic of trying to rescue Holly from a burning house. While the particulars submerged into the murky recesses of his mind, one indelible image remained—a young man's face.

Who was he, and where had Seth seen him? He struggled to remember. With everything that had happened—Elizabeth's collapse, rushing to the hospital, coming home with Marissa—his mind was a jumble.

As the fuzzy edges of sleep cleared, it came to him. The benefit. Last night. This guy had been staring at Marissa. What had made him stand out? Eyes closed, Seth pictured the man's face.

He'd seen the guy earlier in the night at the bar, where he'd traded banter with Jesse Morgan. But that wasn't it. There was something else. Seth remembered the expression that had been on the guy's face while he stared at Marissa. There had been something inappropriate about his look.

Compassion. Empathy. Sorrow. Even boredom. These were normal, predictable emotions congruent with the occasion, and Seth had seen them in spades when he looked out across the sea of assembled patrons. But the look on this man's face had been wholly different—so much so, it had lodged in Seth's subconscious.

Desire? Yes. And something else, something more insidious. Seth's eyes snapped wide as he locked on the answer.

Contempt. Yes.

Experience had taught Seth never to ignore contempt. When suspects lied and proclaimed their indifference to the bad things that happened to their estranged partners—beatings, robberies, deaths—he watched closely for the slightest telltale flash of contempt on their faces. Part anger, part disgust, contempt was often a precursor to violence.

It was the same expression he'd seen on the face of the young man watching Marissa. Seth was certain of it. But why?

A heavy rain pattered on the tin roof above. Rolling onto his side, he saw Marissa in the dim light. The curve of her bare shoulder jutted above the blankets.

In the dark he listened to the sound of her soft, even breathing. Guilt and hope warred within him. Part of him still felt married to Holly, melded to her by the horrible memory of how she'd died. Part of him wanted to stay right here in this moment. Not worry about what would come next. He didn't know what was right or wrong anymore.

Watching the rise and fall of Marissa's breath, Seth knew there was no way he was getting back to sleep. Rather than wake her, he eased out of bed. He'd get an early start, dig into the young man's identity, and figure out what grudge he held against Marissa, if any.

He dressed quietly in the dark and tiptoed out of the bedroom. Leaving before she woke felt wrong, like she was a one-night stand, but waiting was pointless. Sleep would do Marissa a world of good, and he needed to dig into his hunch.

Seth put a fresh pot of coffee on to brew. He scrawled a quick note on the back of an envelope and propped it against the coffee maker where she was sure to see it. Then, as quietly as he could, he closed the front door.



SETH ARRIVED AT THE Holt Foundation just after 5:00 a.m. Looking like he'd just rolled out of bed, Henry Cahill sat slumped behind his computer, bundled in a black North Face fleece. Cahill thrust his arms up over his head and stretched. Long fingers ruffled the disheveled mop of red hair before coming to rest back on the keyboard.

"Tell me, Detective, do you always get hunches in the middle of the night?"

"Not always, but when I do, I go to work. Sleep is for pussies."

"Is that what they teach you in the police academy?" Cahill smiled dryly. "To roust your colleagues in the middle of the night? We mere mortals cling to the notion of business hours."

"I need you to access the footage from last night's benefit."

"Okay," he said, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "What are we looking for?"

"Just get the video loaded. I'll know him when I see him."

"Him?" Cahill grunted. His eyebrows quirked as he stared at his screen.

Side by side they sifted through the footage. Seth found it hard to concentrate. He couldn't keep his eyes off Marissa, golden and beautiful in her borrowed gown. He watched her greet each guest, making sure everyone's needs were met.

*What kind of a guy falls for a woman whose daughter has been kidnapped anyway?*

He didn't know. He had no idea what would come next, and for a man used to avoiding the unknown, it was a terrifying place to be. But as Seth watched Marissa on-screen, he felt something shift inside him. Right or wrong, there was no way he could walk away from her now. He cared about her too much.

Deep in thought, Seth almost missed the face he was looking for in the crowd.

"There," he said, pointing at the screen. "That's him."

Cahill stopped the video and zoomed in on the young man's face. It was the same guy Seth had seen at the bar, the same guy Jesse Morgan had recognized from one of the other places he worked.

"That's him all right."

Seth eyed Cahill with a quizzical look and Cahill grinned.

"No, Crawford, you don't get it. It's *him*."

Cahill pulled up the enhanced photograph of Brooke with the mystery man at the bar and placed it beside the video feed. Crawford slapped the desk with his open palm. Dammit. How had he missed the connection?

"It's the same guy," Seth said.

"Exactly. Looks like your gut was right."

Jesse Morgan had seen the guy before too, at the Chapel the night Brooke disappeared.

"I'll run my facial recognition program to see if I can figure out who he is," Cahill said.

"What database are you using for comparison?"

"You sure you want to know?"

Seth mulled the question over. If Cahill was going to cross an ethical boundary, how much did he want to know? Now that he was no longer a cop, he didn't have to worry about the chain of evidence or fruit of the poisonous tree. All he cared about now was finding Brooke Parker. Still, old habits died hard.

"Tell me."

"I'm going to use the DMV database as my baseline."

"You don't have access."

Cahill's grin widened, and Seth waved a dismissive hand, regretting the question. It disturbed him how easily accessible so-called secure systems were to the clever and the motivated.

Seth clapped Cahill on the shoulder and plucked his coat off the back of the rolling desk chair. "I'm glad you're on our side."

"Where are you going?"

"I have my own low-tech ways of finding information."

• • • •

THE FLORESCENT LIGHTS buzzed above the nurse's station. The cold bluish light underscored the stern look on the nurse's face. Visitors' hours hadn't officially begun, and the ICU had strict visitation rules.

"I need five minutes of Ms. Holt's time. That's all."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Detective Crawford, SPD."

Her gaze narrowed, and she eyed him suspiciously. Impersonating a police officer was a felony. Seth knew if he got caught he'd find himself in a whole heap of shit. Still, he maintained eye contact. The nurse looked unimpressed.

"May I see your identification, Detective?"

She'd just called his bluff. A lame excuse wasn't going to convince her. He couldn't very well say he'd left his badge in his other pants without looking like a complete, utter asshole.

"I can't impress upon you enough how critical it is I see Ms. Holt. Two minutes. No more. I promise."

"Family only. I'm sorry. You need to go."

The phone rang and she picked it up. She kept her gaze pinned on him, dashing any hopes he might have had about drifting down the hall while she was distracted. If she had kids, Seth was sure none of them put anything over on her. She was sharp.

Frustrated by his lack of authority and disappointed his ruse hadn't worked, Seth stalked away from the nurse's station. With a simple wave of his badge, he'd be striding into Elizabeth's room right now, but without official status, he had to find another way to get what he wanted. He'd wait until shift change—maybe then he could slip past the nurse's station and find Elizabeth.

With time to kill, he ambled down the hallway toward the cafeteria. The squeak of rubber-soled shoes and the steady stream of hospital staff dressed in scrubs assured him he was heading in the right direction. Soon the antiseptic hospital scent gave way to familiar breakfast smells—sausage on the grill and fried potatoes.

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number by heart.

"Good morning," Marissa said coolly.

She was pissed. He couldn't blame her. No one liked waking up alone, especially when you didn't go to bed that way.

"How did you sleep?"

"Better than you, obviously."

"Sorry, I'm a restless sleeper. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Where are you?"

"At the hospital."

"What? Is everything okay?"

She sounded worried and Seth grinned into the phone.

"You kept me up pretty late. I'm not as young as I used to be . . ."

She laughed. The unfamiliar sound warmed his heart.

“Seriously, Seth.”

“Seriously, I had a hunch and wanted to run it by Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth? Why?”

“Last night at the benefit there was a guy staring at you.”

“Jealous?”

The unexpected comment knocked him temporarily off stride. A beat of silence passed before he recovered.

“Funny. No. I saw Elizabeth talking to him. I figured she might know who he is.”

Seth was holding back. Withholding information from the victim’s family was a routine part of the job, but Marissa was more than the victim’s mother, and being intentionally vague didn’t sit well with him. His sense of guilt deepened and he wanted off the phone.

He searched for an excuse. Evan Holt saved him the trouble.

“Detective Crawford?”

“Look, Marissa, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later.”

Seth hung up. Evan Holt still wore the black pants and creased tuxedo shirt from last night. Bloodshot eyes spoke of the sleepless night Evan had spent at his aunt’s bedside.

“You’re up awfully early, Detective. What brings you here?”

“How’s Elizabeth?”

“A little better this morning, thanks.”

“Good to hear. I was hoping to speak with her.”

Seth waited for a barrage of questions that didn’t come.

“Of course.”

The nurse glared at Seth as they approached the desk. Thick lips pursed, she raised her hand like a traffic cop halting their progress.

“You have a short memory,” she said. “Family only. Remember?”

“He is family. My cousin,” Evan said.

“Your cousin?”

Her eyebrows arched. Undeterred, Evan slung an arm around Seth’s shoulders.

“Second cousin, actually. You don’t see the resemblance?”

“No.”

“Well, you’ll just have to take my word for it.”

The scowl on the nurse’s face deepened, but she didn’t stop him.

Elizabeth dozed in the hospital bed. Asleep, she looked so frail. Seth gripped the footrail and glanced up at the chirping monitors. Her vital signs looked all right. Her blood pressure was a little high, but then, his probably was too. Hospitals had that effect on him.

Underneath the clinical smell of ammonia and medicine, he detected something else. Something sweeter. Darker. Sickness. Elizabeth Holt’s time was running out. The drops of medication slowly falling into the tube in her arm counted down like grains of sand in an hourglass. The thought depressed him.

Underneath the ball-busting demeanor, Elizabeth was a good woman. Strong. He hoped she had enough time left to see the foundation flourish. She deserved that much.

Elizabeth stirred. Her eyes slowly opened, and she squinted at him.

“Crawford,” she said in a voice as thick and grainy as sandpaper.

She didn’t look surprised to see him, and Seth smiled reassuringly.

“It’s good to see you, Ms. Holt.”

“Alive, you mean? Ha. Yes. They say only the good die young.”

Seth’s lips twitched in amusement. “Then I’ll live to a ripe old age,” he said.

A chuckle rattled at the back of her throat. “Up until recently, I would have said the same.”

Knowing that comforting platitudes would just piss Elizabeth off, he got right to the point.

“Last night, before you collapsed, you were talking to this young man. Do you remember?”

Seth showed Elizabeth the photo of Brooke at the bar with the man he’d seen at the benefit.

Elizabeth blinked and squinted as she tried to recall. Finally she shook her head.

“I was talking to him?” she asked, her expression confused. “No. I was talking to Alistair’s daughter. Maybe he was with her.”

It wasn’t what he’d hoped for, but it was a lead. Seth pocketed the phone.

“Thank you, Ms. Holt. I’ll let you get some rest.”

When he was halfway to the door, Elizabeth’s voice stopped him.

“I doubt idle curiosity brought you here this early, Detective. What is it about this young man that piques your interest?”

*Always the lawyer*, Seth thought, admiring her quick mind. He turned.

“It’s just a hunch.”

“You think he might be involved in Brooke’s case?”

“I’ll give you an update as soon as I have more. Thanks for your help.”

“One more thing, Crawford,” she said. “Did Marissa make it home safely last night?”

Seth’s cheeks warmed at the question. Did she know, or had she guessed? Either way, his poker face failed him, and he felt like a teenage boy caught out after curfew.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“Good. Off you go then.”

Dismissed by Elizabeth, Seth strode toward the exit, pulling the cell phone from his pocket.

“Any luck?” he asked Henry Cahill.

“Not yet. The search is still running. You?”

“Elizabeth Holt doesn’t remember talking to our guy before she collapsed. Do you have an address for Alistair Wright?”

“Give me a sec,” Cahill said.

The cold rain pelted Seth’s head as he crossed the street. He unlocked the car door and climbed inside.

“He owns a corporate law firm in Bellevue.”

“Text me the address.”

“Sure thing.”

• • • •

THE RECEPTIONIST, AN older woman in her midfifties, raised her head and smiled in greeting. Her smile faltered as she caught sight of Seth’s scars. Used to this type of reaction, he barely noticed the shift in her expression. She recovered her composure quickly.

“Good morning. May I help you?”

“Seth Crawford here to see Alistair Wright.”

The woman glanced at her screen through the thick lenses of her square-rimmed glasses. A deep, vertical frown line appeared between her eyebrows.

“Do you have an appointment, Mr. Crawford?”

“No, but it’s critical I speak with him.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m afraid it’s not possible.”

“I’m investigating an abduction case and I need Mr. Wright’s help.”

“Oh, are you a police officer?”

Seth scowled and shook his head. *Not anymore.*

“I’m an investigator for the Holt Foundation. It really is important I speak with him right away.”

“The Holt Foundation?”

Recognition registered in her eyes. Her gaze softened.

“He’s in court today,” she said. “I suppose you could try and catch up with him there.”

Seth knew he could wait hours before a recess. Even then, Wright’s first priority would be his client. Trying to get his attention might well be futile.

The cell phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. Glancing at the display, he saw it was Cahill.

“Got something?” he asked, skipping the preamble.

“I got a match. Dude we’re looking for is Andrew Matthews. He lives two blocks away from the coffee shop where someone uploaded the picture of Charles Sully on Brooke’s phone.”

A rush of adrenaline shot through Seth, sweeping away all remnants of fatigue. It was the best news he’d had all day.

“Andrew Matthews,” he repeated, committing the name to memory. “I’ll head back to the office. Pull up anything you can find on him.”

“Already on it.”

Seth ended the call and swung back to the receptionist, a sudden thought occurring to him. She glanced up through the thick lenses of her glasses.

“Is Andrew Matthews one of Mr. Wright’s clients?”

“Andrew Matthews? No. He’s engaged to Mr. Wright’s daughter.”



Alicia Wright strode into the lobby of Elliot Jones Investments, the heels of her Gucci shoes clicking on the marble floor. She was tired. Drew had kept her up way too late. Now it was 8:00 a.m., and with a triple-shot venti mocaccino in hand, she was ready to face another day.

She loved the way the lobby smelled of leather and chrome and wealth—all the trappings of old money disguised by a modern facade.

The mousy little receptionist drenched in Chanel No. 5 glanced up and offered a timid smile.

“Uh, Ms. Wright. There’s someone here to see you.”

*What?* Alicia tossed her long hair over her shoulders and glanced around the lobby. She never took meetings before nine. Besides, it was Wednesday. She wasn’t scheduled to see any clients this morning. Clearly there was some kind of screw-up.

The sight of the man sitting hunched on the sleek leather couch stopped her cold. Anger flared hot in her cheeks.

“Liam.”

Damn him for showing up here. At Gretchen’s memorial service, she’d told him she never wanted to lay eyes on him again, and she’d meant it.

Liam stood. He looked tired. Disheveled. Like he’d barely slept. Alicia fixed her furious gaze on him, death rays shooting from her eyes. He thrust his hands out toward her, pleading for her to go slowly.

“Wait. Just wait,” he said, sheepishly. “At least hear me out.”

“What gives you the right to show up here of all places?” she hissed in a muted tone, pitched low so only Liam would hear.

“This.”

Liam thrust the envelope into her hands with such force she stumbled back a step to steady herself. She had no choice but to take the damned thing—either that or let it fall to the floor.

“What the hell is this? Your psych evaluation? Your apology for ruining Gretchen’s life? Let me save you some time . . .”

Her control slipping, her voice rose, capturing the notice of the two other clients who were waiting patiently in their seats, thumbing through copies of *Architectural Digest* and *Seattle Magazine*. She stopped herself. Pursing her lips, she glowered at him.

“Get out.”

“Think what you want about me, Alicia, but I’m begging you, just read it.”

Alicia glared at the envelope in her hand with a look of disgust, like she was holding a dead rat.

“Why would I do anything you ask?”

Clasping his hands together in front of him, he leaned toward her. “Please. I’m doing this for you.”  
*The fucking nerve of the guy.*

“Since when have you ever done anything for anyone other than yourself?”

Liam hung his head. Lank blond hair fell into his eyes.

“Look, you hate me.”

“Hate you?” she yelled, fury bursting from a place deep in her chest. “You’re goddamned right I hate you.”

With all eyes on her now, she whirled on the receptionist.

“Claire,” she snapped. “Call security and get this man escorted from the building.”

“Right away,” Claire squeaked, picking up the phone.

“Fine. I’ll go. But I’m telling you, your boyfriend isn’t who he says he is . . .”

“Are you high?” she interrupted him. “What makes you think I’d believe a single word that comes out of your lying mouth? Especially about the man I’m going to marry.”

“Marry? You’re engaged?”

Alicia flashed the ring in his face and Liam blanched. With the look of a beaten man, he ran a hand across his eyes.

“I hired a private investigator. His card is in there. If you don’t believe me, call him. Please, Alicia. He’ll tell you everything.”

The door opened behind her and a security guard entered the lobby. Well over six feet tall, he was 220 pounds of pure muscle with a don’t-fuck-with-me expression that left little room for doubt.

“Sir, you’ll have to come with me.”

His hard voice matched his steely expression. Liam nodded.

“I’ll go. Just promise me you’ll read it.”

Alicia rolled her eyes.

“Whatever.”

After badging through security, Alicia strode through the maze of cubicles until she reached her desk. Irritation buzzed like bees inside her head. She pitched the envelope so hard into the recycling bin under her desk that it rattled against the cubicle wall.

Heaving out a frustrated sigh, Alicia stripped off her coat and dropped down into her chair.

Wait until she told Drew about this. He’d be even more pissed than she was.

She picked up her mocaccino and took a sip. It tasted cold. Bitter.

Damn Liam for ruining her day. Showing up here with these wild accusations! As if she’d believe a single word he said ever again.

Alicia slammed her cup down on the desk. Coffee spurted out and splattered her keyboard. *Dammit*. Rolling her chair back, she plucked a tissue from a box and swabbed up the mess.

She pitched the wadded tissue into the trash and glanced at the recycling bin. A corner of the envelope crested above the lip of the box.

She could only imagine the kind of dirt Liam’s investigator had dug up on Drew. Unpaid parking tickets, stealing a doughnut from a grocery, a DUI? How low would Liam sink to discredit her fiancé? Had Drew lied on his résumé? Cheated on his SATs? God knew Liam was no choirboy. If not for his über-rich father, Liam would have ended up in hot water more than once.

Alicia shook her head and turned back. She stared blankly at her monitor. A few seconds passed. Then she looked back down into the recycling bin.





A horn blasted. Drew craned his neck around, hoping to glimpse the impatient bastard in the car behind him. Light reflected off the windshield, obscuring the driver from view. Good thing too. Otherwise he might have hunted the fucker down and beat the shit out of him, just for fun.

Parked beside the card reader, Drew rummaged through the pockets of his messenger bag for the third time before pitching it onto the seat beside him. *Fuck*. He'd forgotten his access key. Now he'd have to waste half an hour heading back to his condo to get the fucking thing.

Gritting his teeth, he jammed the gearshift into reverse and stomped on the gas pedal. The horn blared again—not angry this time, panicked, as Drew drilled back toward the bumper of the BMW. At the last second, he cut the wheel, narrowly avoiding slamming into the asshole behind him. Screeching out of the parking lot, he got a small measure of satisfaction in knowing the Beamer boy's ass was still puckered tight after the near miss.

After inserting the key into the condo's dead bolt, he found it unlocked. Drew frowned and stepped back, eyeing the doorframe. He never forgot to lock his door. Although nothing looked damaged, something didn't feel right.

Drew eased silently into the apartment.

Nothing looked out of place, nothing that he could see anyway. He removed his shoes and moved quietly across the floor.

A clanging noise came from the bedroom. Drew reached for the first thing he could use as a weapon. He plucked a bronze statue of the Space Needle off a nearby shelf and kept moving. It weighed heavy in his hand.

Alicia had bought the gaudy thing for him on their first date, dinner at the Space Needle. He remembered coming home that night, still buzzing from the date, and running into the old lady down the hall. She'd yammered his ear off for half an hour—something about the garbage disposal. All the while he'd pictured beating her senseless with the statue just to shut her up.

Since then he'd threatened to throw it out half a dozen times, used it as a hammer to drive nails into the wall, grouted tile with the pointy end, used it as a measuring stick, and flattened chicken with it, much to Alicia's chagrin. But somewhere along the line, it had grown on him, and the cold, hefty weight of it felt good in his hand as he pushed open the bedroom door.

Yellow light spilled from the closet onto the hardwood floors. Drew heard a hiss, like the sound of shuffling paper. Someone was definitely in there. Looking for what? Raising the statue above his head, he stepped through the doorway.

Alicia knelt on the closet floor. She looked up. In the harsh overhead lights, her eyes looked puffy and red, as if she'd been crying. Drew lowered the statue, still gripping it tight in his hand. His heart raced like a deer caught in the crosshairs.

"Christ, Alicia. You scared me half to death. What are you doing here?" Scanning the scene, he took in the mass of papers around her in a single glance. Tax returns, utility bills, pay stubs. What in God's name was she looking for?

Alicia set the papers fisted tight in her grip down on the floor. She glared up at him, her stony expression, defiant.

"Who is Andrew Bowman?"

The breath rushed from Drew's lungs in a huff. A live current of fear convulsed through his chest, and he stared at her in shock and amazement.

*Where did she hear that name?*

“Who?”

Alicia studied him, her cold eyes a frosty blue. This was no random question, and the bloody specter of his secret past rose between them like a ghost. His gaze dropped to the nest of papers strewn around her on the closet floor, and he realized that Alicia, desperate for answers, was searching for evidence, some piece of documentation that tied Drew to his past life.

Fear coiled tight around his gut. He wasn't stupid. She wouldn't find anything here, but that might not stop her. All she had to do was pull on the Andrew Bowman thread hard enough and she would unravel the whole deadly truth.

He wasn't ever going back to that life.

“You heard me, Drew,” Alicia said, springing to her feet.

The contempt in her voice unleashed a cyclone of rage inside Drew. He fought against the rising pillar of anger building inside him.

“Look, I have no idea what you're talking about. You're going to have to spell it out for me.”

Alicia's face flushed. She jabbed an accusing finger into his chest. The large diamond ring flashed in the light.

“Tell me the truth! Are you Andrew Bowman?”

“Are you crazy?”

Angry tears glittered in her hard blue eyes, and she shook her head. She drilled her fist into his chest.

“You're lying.”

His hand gripped the statue tight. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She wrenched the engagement ring off her finger and hurled it at him. It ricocheted off his shoulder and skittered across the hardwood floor.

“I trusted you. I believed you, and you've been lying to me all along. Gretchen said there was something off about you and I ignored her. I thought she was crazy. Jealous. But she was right. I was too stupid to listen to her.”

“Stop. Stop,” he said, gripping her shoulder with his free hand. There had to be some way to reach her, some way to convince her that there was no Andrew Bowman, that this was all one huge mistake. “Calm down. You're not making any sense.”

Alicia shook him off and rushed past him, out the bedroom door.

He grabbed her wrist and spun her around. She yanked her arm back, but he was too strong. His fingers burrowed deep into the flesh of her arm. She winced. Anger blazed in her eyes.

“Take your fucking hands off of me.”

“What did you hear, Alicia?”

“Let go.”

He pulled her closer. She jerked back.

“Who filled your head with these lies?”

“Lies?” she bellowed. “You're the liar. You. Drew, or Andrew, or whatever the fuck your name is.”

She was so sure, so goddamned sure. But how?

Then he knew.

“Liam,” he said, spitting the word out between clenched teeth like acid.

“Where I heard it doesn't matter. You're still a liar.”

Drew gripped the statue.

“That fucking prick couldn’t leave well enough alone. Gretchen told me he’d keep digging.”

Her eyes flicked away from him, and he could see her replaying his words. One by one he saw the pieces click together in her addled little brain. A terrible truth dawned in her eyes.

“Gretchen.” She pressed a hand against her trembling lips. “Gretchen. Oh God. What did you do?”

Drew smiled. It was a mean smile. Terror filled Alicia’s eyes. He yanked on her wrist. She jerked to a stop, their faces inches apart.

“I did what I had to do,” he said.

“Let go of me, you fucking freak.”

*Freak?* The word sent another shock wave of rage blasting through him. *Freak. Bastard. Pussy.* He heard his father’s voice screaming inside his head. He felt the blow of hard knuckles crushing into his face, the bloodstone ring gashing his skin. *Are you going to cry now, you little pussy? Faggot. Get up. On your feet. Be a man. Be a man.*

Drew’s eyes burned hot as coals.

He swung the statue. It cracked against Alicia’s forehead and she lurched back. A cut opened up above her brow. Blood sluiced down the side of her face. Thrown off balance, Drew loosened his grip and Alicia broke free.

Like a spooked deer, she sprinted toward the door. He lunged after her. His hand snaked out and seized a fistful of hair. He yanked back. She shrieked. Her arms flailed wide and she crashed to the floor.

Drew pounced. He pinned her in place, knees burrowing into her heaving chest. His father’s hateful face glared up at him. His father’s lips speckled with dried spit and blood. A river of hate coursed through Drew’s veins.

*Be a man.*

He raised the statue above his head.

“This is your fault,” he spit between clenched teeth.

Drew brought the blunt end of the bronze statue crashing down.

Blood spurted from the wound in her head, spraying his face in a fine red mist. Alicia’s body jerked. She convulsed on the floor beneath him. Drew kept hammering until she stopped squirming, until her body went slack.

His breath came in ragged gasps. Warm drops of blood dripped down his face like thick red tears.

Minutes ticked by and his breathing finally slowed. As he released his grip, the Space Needle statue clattered to the floor. Drew opened his eyes and saw Alicia pinned under his knees.

Even now, with her fixed stare, her dark hair matted with blood and studded with gray matter, she was beautiful. He remembered the first time they’d met, how her smile had stopped his heart. He’d known in that instant they belonged together. Always.

But no matter how hard he tried, the clawing past kept dragging him back. Andrew Bowman refused to die.

This was Liam’s fault. Liam had killed her. Not him. Never him.

He knew that as long as Andrew Bowman’s family still lived, he would never be free.

Drew stretched out long trembling fingers and brushed the matted hair away from Alicia’s forehead. His blood-soaked fingertips left thick snail trails across her alabaster skin.

On shaky legs Drew rose to his feet. He turned toward the bathroom. Two feet away from Alicia’s prone body, he froze.

Someone was knocking at the door.



Seth knocked a second time. Leaning in, he listened, straining to hear any sound from the condo.  
Nothing.

He thought about knocking again but figured it was pointless. Matthews was likely at work. He'd give Cahill a call and get the address.

Just then the elevator doors slid open and a man shuffled out. Lugging a grocery bag in one arm, he limped slowly down the hall. He cast Seth a curious look before turning away. Unlocking the door to the condo across the hall, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"You looking for Drew?"

"Have you seen him?"

He shifted his weight onto his good leg and propped the paper grocery bag against the doorframe.

"He left about an hour ago with a suitcase. Said he was heading out on a business trip."

A chill raced down Seth's spine. Was he running?

"Do you know where he was going?"

The neighbor scratched the scruffy brown beard covering his fleshy chin and shook his head.

"He didn't say, but I'm not surprised he's leaving town."

"Why?"

"Dude had a hell of a fight with his girl this morning."

Seth's stomach dropped.

"You heard them?"

"Hell, yeah. Impossible not to. I work from home. Drew's usually all right, sometimes plays his music too loud, but today, Christ."

"What were they fighting about?"

The neighbor hitched his thick shoulders.

"Dunno. I put my headphones on, cranked the tunes to drown them out. They were really going at it though."

"Do they fight a lot?"

The neighbor shook his head. "Naw."

"You said he left about an hour ago?"

"Something like that. I was on my way to Whole Foods."

"How did he seem?"

"Pissed. Who wouldn't be? I told him he was loud enough to wake the dead and he apologized for the noise. Said the old lady down the hall had already knocked on the door, giving him shit. Said his girlfriend found another girl's number on his phone and went bat-shit."

"Did you believe him?"

A crooked smile stretched the man's lips and his thick shoulders shrugged.

"Why not? It didn't take that much to set off my ex."

"Thanks. If he comes back, give me a call, Mr. . . ."

"Mortimer. Ross."

Seth pulled a business card from his jacket pocket. He saw the SPD logo and frowned. The cell number was still the same, so he handed it over. It wasn't like he was trying to pass himself off as a police officer. Besides, what were the chances Mortimer would call?

Mortimer tucked the card into his coat pocket, turned, and pushed the door to his apartment open. The door clanged shut, the noise echoing down the empty hallway. Seth stood alone, his mind racing. He thought about the duffel bag in Charles Sully's trunk, about the argument, about the look on Luke Turner's face. He turned back toward Drew's door.

Exigent circumstances. Every cop knew exigent circumstances provided the only legal justification for entering a private residence without a warrant. Was Alicia Wright in the condo? Was she in trouble? Could the argument provide enough justification for exigent circumstances to apply?

No way. If they were still yelling or she was calling for help, maybe. Maybe.

*Aw, fuck it.*

He wasn't a cop anymore. Worst case, he'd get nailed with breaking and entering. Seth pulled his key chain from his pocket. He glanced down the hall. He was alone. That was good.

He pinched a square-headed key between his fingers and thumb. It was a bump key, the type he'd used before to get into locked places. Never without a warrant though. Never illegally. He frowned. He was off the grid now, wading into uncharted territory. But he'd already gone this far.

The thief who'd taught him to use a bump key had used a plastic hairbrush to prime the lock. Seth didn't have anything like that on him. He needed something solid. Heavy. Pulling his gun from its holster, he checked the safety. It was on.

He tapped the butt of the gun against the key, praying it wouldn't accidentally go off. The sound reverberated down the narrow hallway and Seth cringed. The key shifted in the lock. He glanced over his shoulder before smacking the key again, harder this time. Wiggling the key, he grunted.

"Come on. Come on."

A hollow thump echoed down the empty corridor as he hit the key a third time. A door opened. Not Mortimer's, the one next to Matthews's. An old woman's lined face poked out. She glared at him through narrowed eyes.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Seth stiffened. He shifted his stance to shield the gun from her view.

"Knocking. Do you know if Mr. Matthews is home?"

She pursed her thin lips.

"He's at work."

"Thanks."

Mortimer was right. She was a busybody. Instead of disappearing inside her door, she stepped farther out into the hallway. Seth stifled a curse.

"Are you supposed to be here?" she asked, planting a gnarled hand on her lumpy hip.

Seth forced a smile and said, "He's heading out of town on a business trip and asked me to house-sit."

Seth jiggled the key in the lock and heard a click.

"Bullshit," the old woman said.

Seth turned the key. The lock popped open. He slid the gun behind his back.

"He needs someone to water his plants."

Loose skin pouched around her suspicious eyes. She crossed her arms.

"What do you have behind your back? Is that a gun?"

"Look, Ms. . . ."

She leveled a bony finger at him. "I don't know who you are or how you got in here, but I'm calling the cops. If I were you, I'd get out of here. Now."

The door opened behind him, and Mortimer stuck his head out.

“What the fuck is going on?”

They both stared at Seth.

*Shit.* Seth’s heart slammed against his rib cage. He had two choices. He could leave now, or he could do what he’d come here to do. *Goddamn it.* He set his jaw. He swung back toward the condo. Ignoring the old woman’s protests, he pushed the door open and looked inside.

Red.

The smell inside the condo was a dark, coppery red. The breath caught in Seth’s throat. Broad streaks of dark blood smeared across the hardwood floor.

He ran his hands through his hair. *Christ.* He was too late.

“I’m calling the cops,” the old woman crowed.

Seth scowled. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed 911.

“Don’t bother, lady. I’m already on it.”

• • • •

LINDA GARCIA ARRIVED on scene, a forensics crew close on her heels. Seth had been careful not to do anything to contaminate the crime scene. Word traveled fast around the precinct, and while she didn’t look surprised to see him, she wasn’t pleased either.

“Do you want to explain exactly what you’re doing here, Crawford?” she asked, snapping on a pair of latex gloves.

Seth burrowed his hands in his pants pockets and met Linda’s glare directly.

“I’m working as an investigator for the Holt Foundation. I was following up on a lead.”

“And you broke into an apartment? Really? Care to explain yourself?”

“Exigent circumstances.”

Garcia’s eyebrows pinched together low on her forehead, and she shot him a cynical look.

“You expect me to buy that? Did you hear yelling? Did you hear anything or see anything that made you think someone’s life was in imminent danger? Make it good, Crawford, otherwise I’ll have to bust you for breaking and entering.”

“You mean other than the blood on the floor?”

Garcia glared at Seth and listened while he relayed the chain of events that had led him to this point. Her face remained a stern mask. She waited until he was finished before she spoke.

“Are you still on the job, Crawford?”

“I’m still trying to find Brooke Parker, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“And did you think she was in here?”

Seth shrugged. “I think Andrew Matthews knows something about Brooke’s disappearance.”

“We found Parker’s MedicAlert dog tags in the trunk of Sully’s car. You got some reason to believe Sully and Matthews were working together?”

“I think Matthews set Sully up.”

Garcia shook her head slowly, looking grave. “Alvarez isn’t going to like this.”

“Probably not, but the way I see it, I’ve done you a huge favor.”

“A favor?”

“How long would it have taken you to find this if I hadn’t called you?” Seth gestured toward the blood on the floor and Garcia grunted. “You can charge me if you want, but right now I think you’ve got bigger problems. You have no body. You need to figure out whose blood is on the floor.”

Garcia frowned. “You think it belongs to the girlfriend?”

“That would be my guess.”



“Fucking great.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Pulling his hands from his pockets, Seth strolled to the door.

“Wait. Where do you think you’re going?” Garcia asked.

“You don’t want me mucking up your crime scene, do you?”

She swore under her breath.

“Don’t screw with my case, Crawford.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Seth said.



**F**ucking morons. Drew clenched the steering wheel hard and glared at the sluggish line of red taillights heading south on I-5. He didn't have time for this shit. Alicia finding out about Andrew Bowman had forced his hand, and now he was scrambling to tie up any more loose ends before his whole life fell apart.

How long before someone came looking for her? Days? Hours? *Fuck.*

With no time to waste, he crawled along in traffic, wishing he had a Hummer or a tank or some other means of rolling over the cars blocking his way.

Gnawing on his thumbnail, Drew flicked his restless gaze toward the Tacoma Dome. The bulbous structure reminded him of a bleached WWI German Army helmet, complete with a spike. Ugly. All the towns sprawling south of Seattle were dirty, ugly places. The only redeeming part of making this trip was knowing it would be the very last time he would ever come this way. Soon he'd leave this shithole behind and never look back. He would bury Andrew Bowman and his checkered past so deep, no one would ever find him.

Like every other shitty driver in the Pacific Northwest, the asshole in front of him slammed on his brakes for no reason at all. Drew swore and cranked on the wheel, narrowly avoiding plowing into the truck. He scowled at the pickup driver as he sped past.

Shaggy hair, worn ball cap, flannel shirt, and canvas jacket. A construction worker or truck driver or whatever. No doubt he worked some shitty blue-collar job, lived in an even shittier bungalow down in Lakewood. He probably spent his nights beating his wife and drinking beer. *Just like his dear old dad*, Drew thought. Just like he might have turned out too, if he hadn't clawed his way out of this hellhole and built himself a better life.

A good job, a nice car, a downtown condo, and a beautiful fiancée—all a testament to his hard work. But now, thanks to Liam fucking Burke, that life was gone. After all he'd done to get where he was. After all the work, the planning, the sacrifice—he'd lost everything because Liam wanted Alicia back.

The coppery smell of blood wafted from the suitcase in the back of the jeep. Drew's lips twisted into an ugly sneer. He should pitch the suitcase into the Green River and be rid of Alicia for good. But that would be sloppy. That could get him caught.

No, this time he had to do everything right. No more mistakes. No more crazy father or snot-nosed stepsisters. No more Marissa. He would eliminate everyone close to Andrew Bowman. This time he'd emerge from the ashes clean. New. Stronger than ever. This time no one would touch him.

Drew pulled off the Interstate south of Tacoma. Fat raindrops pattered against the windshield. Alicia's cell phone rang. He picked it up and checked the call display.

The great and powerful Alistair Wright was calling, and if Alistair was already looking for Alicia, it was only a matter of hours until the cops started breathing down his neck.

He needed a plan. Fast.

Up ahead he saw a Starbucks sign and pulled into the parking lot. Cupping Alicia's phone in his sweaty palm, he sent a text.

*Battery's low. Powering down. Call you later, Daddy. XO*

ACRES OF MANICURED lawns and tall evergreen trees surrounded the sprawling gold-brick structure on top of the hill. The aging, dirty facade was a stark contrast to the perfectly manicured grounds. He supposed the green hills offered some solace to the troubled minds residing within the walls of Valley Mental Health Institution.

Drew pushed through the doors, fingering the loose pills in his pocket. He knew the drill. He set a Starbucks coffee cup on the desk and signed in for the last time. The nurse manning the desk had thick chestnut hair and a smattering of freckles across her cheeks.

“Mind if I take it through?” he asked with a friendly smile. “I know it’s against the rules, so if you need me to dump it, I’ll totally understand.”

She tucked a stray strand of hair back behind her ear and returned his smile. “Need your coffee fix?”

Drew propped his elbows on the countertop. He rolled his eyes theatrically and made a face. “Big project. I was up all night working. Seriously, if I could mainline this stuff . . .”

She laughed. She had a pretty laugh. Folding her hand under her chin, she looked up at him with wide brown eyes.

“Strictly speaking, it is against policy, but I guess I could bend the rules just this once. I’d feel responsible if you passed out, or worse.”

Drew winked at her.

“You’re an angel,” he said.

“Don’t make me regret it. He’s in the solarium,” she called after him.

Drew saluted her with the raised Starbucks cup and kept going.

A vase of long-stemmed red roses caught his eye. The lush crimson petals reminded him of the fat drops of blood on Alicia’s alabaster skin. Drew veered away from the roses, hating what he’d done—hating what he’d *had* to do. But what other choice did he have? Together Alicia and Liam had ruined his life.

Anger gnawed at the pit of his stomach like a hungry rat. He should have killed Liam when he’d had the chance. He’d ignored Gretchen’s warnings, and now Alicia was dead and his lethal three-act play was coming to a close, faster and more bloodily than he had planned. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

Drew turned down a long hallway. Beneath the sharp hospital smells of ammonia and bleach lay a darker stench of dirt and grime, gore and sweat. Desperation. All the chemicals in the world couldn’t mask the rank odor of the rotting bodies and rotting minds housed within the institution’s crumbling walls.

The solarium was painted a sunny yellow. Large banks of windows faced south, admitting vast quantities of gray light. Heavy couches and chairs were placed in intimate groupings around the room. His father sat propped in a wheelchair near the windows.

This time of day, there were at least a dozen patients watching television or playing games. There were others drooling on their chins and dreaming the pink-cloud dreams of the violently medicated. Drew made his way through the room, fingering the pills in his pocket, anticipation building.

“Hey, is that coffee? You’re not supposed to bring that in here.”

Drew looked up, catching sight of a skeletal young man blocking his path. With green-marble eyes, a cap of greasy black hair, and rapid-fire talk, he reminded Drew of a junkie in need of a fix.

“I cleared it with the desk,” Drew said, and stepped around the patient.

“They don’t let me drink coffee because of the medication, you know.” He smacked his lips. “They say it makes me fidgety. But come on, man, that’s total bullshit.”

Drew flashed a benign smile and tried to move past the patient, but the man grabbed his coat.

“Do you know what makes me fidgety? You know what makes me really crazy? Caffeine withdrawal. You know what I’m saying?”

Drew’s fingers curled into fists. A rising tide of anger filled his chest. He craved the release he’d always gotten from laying a violent beating on another human being. Laying a hand on the kid would be stupid. The last thing he needed was an orderly taking notice of the situation and tossing out Drew’s coffee. Or worse—escorting Drew from the building for violating protocol. So, as much as he wanted to snap the kid’s fingers like dry twigs, he forced a smile.

“Look, I know what you mean. There are days I’d kill for coffee too. But I brought this for my old man. It’s decaf, brother. It would be like going to a hooker for a hug.”

The skinny dude shot Drew a horrified look and Drew strode past him toward the windows.

His father did not look up as he approached. He pulled up a chair and straddled it, taking stock of the old man’s ruined face.

At least six months had passed since his last visit. Pink patches of scalp showed through Rick’s thinning brown hair. The stubble on his father’s cheeks was flecked with a prickly gray. His once hard build had gone soft around the middle, and he looked puffy and bloated, like Jabba the Hutt. Pathetic.

Drew set the coffee cup down on the floor between his feet, hiding it from view. Rick never looked up. His vacant stare stretched past Drew out the bank of windows and toward the distant green hills. If Drew’s father had ever had a soul, it had clearly vacated the shell of his body years ago.

“Hi, Dad.”

Drew searched for some sign, some flicker of recognition from his father, but Rick’s expression never changed. While part of him was pleased that his father had all the mental acuity of a turnip, another part, a deeper part, wished Rick were still there. He wanted the bastard to suffer the way he’d suffered through all those beatings.

“You’ll never guess who I saw the other day,” Drew said, speaking so quietly only Rick could hear. “Marissa.”

A fat fly landed on Rick’s face and slowly crawled across his red, blotchy cheek. Drew didn’t move a muscle to shoo the thing away; he just watched as it marched toward his father’s ear. Finally Rick flinched and the fly took flight.

Drew eased back in his chair and smiled.

“Marissa looks great, Dad. You remember how hot she looked before you smashed her mouth in, don’t you? She wasn’t so pretty then. Spitting out teeth. Blood all over the place. No doubt about it, you were one suave motherfucker. Now look at you.”

A chair squealed behind Drew. Irritated, he glanced over his shoulder. The junkie was back. Flopping into the chair beside Drew, he scratched his arm. Rick’s eyes flicked to the patient. Just a second. Just long enough to make Drew wonder if there were lights still on behind his father’s dead eyes.

“Come on, man. Just a sip. Your old man won’t mind. Just look at him.”

Drew leaned close to the dude, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“If you don’t fuck off, I’ll call an orderly and they’ll shoot you so full of Thorazine, by the time you wake up we’ll have a new president. Got it?”

The young man flung himself from the chair and Drew turned his gaze back to his father. Rick blinked.

“Where were we?” Drew snapped his fingers. “That’s right. Marissa. I ran into her daughter a few weeks back. Sweet little piece of ass, that one. Great rack, tight little ass, blonde curls just like

her mommy. I've got her locked up in the cabin. Did you know she's diabetic? Anyway, she's low on insulin. I'm afraid she won't last much longer. I think it's time I reunite the family."

Drew stared deep into his father's eyes.

"It's too bad you won't be able to join us."

Seconds later a fist slammed into Drew's shoulder. He leaped to his feet. The chair clattered behind him.

"Get out of here, bitch," Drew growled.

"Or what? What are you gonna do? What are you gonna do, man? Hit me? You want to hit me?"

The patient slapped an open palm against his chest. Heads turned at the hollow sound. He jittered on his toes like a boxer. Drew shook his head and balled his fingers into a tight fist.

He didn't hear the orderly approach. The heavyset man shot Drew an apologetic smile.

"Come on, Billy, let's get you out of here."

The patient squealed and winced away from the thick hand gripping his skinny arm.

"No. He's got coffee . . ."

"Now, Billy."

The orderly half dragged the patient from the solarium, and Drew resumed his seat. He picked the Starbucks cup up off the floor.

"Never too early in the day for one of these, I trust," he said, and placed the coffee cup on the table next to Rick. It was coffee with a shot of cheap whiskey, just the way dear old Dad liked it. Drew removed the lid and crushed the two tablets into dust, then sprinkled it in a fine layer across the black brew. It sank, dissolving quickly.

For most people Tylenol was an easy way to wipe away pain.

For Rick it was death—instant anaphylaxis.

Drew waved the cup underneath the old man's nose. Rick licked his lips like a salivating hound.

"You *are* in there. Or at least part of you is."

Drew set the cup down on the table beside Rick and watched. The old man's hand trembled and inched toward the cup. Rick's hands, which had once lashed out with blinding speed and meted out pain with the curl of a fist, moved at a snail's pace now. Drew fixed his stare on the old man's greedy eyes.

After all this time, his father still wanted, still needed, to drink.

*Prick. Pathetic, old, hateful prick*, Drew thought, eyeing his father with all the compassion of a boy frying ants with a magnifying glass.

"You know, I never did understand whether it was the booze that made you crazy or you were just born that way."

Rick's hand inched toward the cup.

"I used to wonder what it was that made you destroy everyone you touched."

Rick's fingers shook and stretched, reaching. Drew smirked and moved the cup beyond his father's grasp. The old man's lips trembled.

"Then I realized it didn't matter. You ruined everything, you malignant old fuck."

Rick's tongue flicked out between bloodless lips like a rain-fat worm. Contempt flared Drew's nostrils wide, and he bent forward, leaning close enough to catch of whiff of his father's stinking breath.

"I was looking forward to watching you slowly rot away in this damnable place, but sadly, I'm out of time."

Stealing a glance over his shoulder, Drew lifted the coffee cup to his father's greedy lips. Rick sucked the coffee down. Drew smacked a hand over the old man's mouth and watched Rick's Adam's apple bob once. Twice. Satisfied, Drew downed the rest of the coffee. He crushed the empty cup and tossed it in a trash can.

Thirty seconds later, choking, gurgling sounds erupted from his father's swelling lips. Rick's fat fingers scratched desperately at his throat, trembling, shaking, clawing as he struggled to draw in a breath. Drew stared into his panicked, desperate eyes. The old man was pleading, begging for help.

Drew stood transfixed. A slow grin spread across his face. His whole childhood, Rick had been the source of pain and punishment—the monster in his nightmares. Now here he was, helpless. Desperate. Dying.

How many times had he lain in bed, bleeding, fantasizing about this moment—about how he would kill his father? He'd thought about stabbing him, shooting him, strangling the life out of the old man with his bare hands. But he'd never imagined this. Never dreamed the sight of his father's slow decay would be so wholly and deeply satisfying.

Finally Drew turned his back on his father's writhing form.

"Help," he called, stepping away from the wheelchair. "Help."

Orderlies converged in a rush. Rick's face was swelling, turning blue. He thrashed violently in the wheelchair. One of the orderlies turned back toward Drew.

"What happened?"

Drew shook his head, eyes wide. "I don't know. He just started choking."

The orderly's badge dangled inches from Drew's hand. He snatched it. In all the chaos, no one noticed him slip from the room.

An alarm sounded, and more staff scurried down the hall, ran for the solarium, where Rick was in full anaphylactic shock.

Drew turned away from the desk and hurried toward the medication closet. Every second fat fuck in this sorry place had to be a diabetic. How hard would it be to find some insulin?

Drew swiped the card across the smooth surface of the access reader. The reader beeped, but the light remained yellow. Drew frowned. He rattled the door. It refused to open. He tried again. Same result. He yanked harder.

Cursing under his breath, Drew swiped the card again. Denied. It wasn't working.

"Can I help you?" a woman called.

He swiveled. The nurse from the desk was looking his way. Confusion wiped the half smile from her face.

"You can't go in there."

Drew wondered if her card would grant him access to the medication closet. All he wanted was some insulin. If he could get her card, maybe he could get inside.

"Did you hear me?" she called again, louder this time.

A security guard rounded the corner. Eyeing him, the guard tilted his head toward the walkie-talkie perched on his shoulder.

Drew made a split-second decision. He sprinted down the hall at full speed. His feet pounded the hard tile floor. The shouting voices behind him closed in.

The exit was a few feet away. He raised the access badge and swiped it across the reader. His heart stuttered. The green light flashed and he bolted out of the building, through the trees, to where he'd parked the Jeep only half an hour before.





“Tell me everything you’ve got on Andrew Matthews,” Seth said as he burst through the office door.

Henry Cahill’s fingers flew over the keyboard. He swung the monitor toward Seth. The *Seattle Times* news site showed a photograph of a Drew Matthews and Alicia Wright smiling into the camera. They looked like any young couple in love. Seth’s gut twisted as he recalled the dark blood smeared across Matthews’s floor.

Was it Alicia’s blood? Was he already too late?

“Henry, I need you to pull out all the stops to try and find Alicia Wright. Credit cards, cell phone—whatever kind of hacker black magic you have, use it. We need to locate her. Now.”

Cahill’s brow wrinkled. Confused, he stared back at Seth.

“Her? Why her? Why not Matthews?”

“We need to find him too. Right now, though, I’m more worried about what he might have done to Alicia.”

“You mean Alistair Wright’s daughter?” Marissa asked, entering the room with a coffee cup in her hand.

She looked tired. They all did.

“You know her?” Seth asked.

“I met her at the benefit. She was there with her father.”

“Was she with anyone else?”

“Well, I think her fiancé was there too, but I didn’t actually see him. He was outside when I . . .”

Marissa stopped in midsentence. Seth looked up. The coffee cup slipped from her fingers and smashed on the floor, raining shards of glass and hot coffee everywhere. Cahill jumped back, avoiding the spray. The color drained from her cheeks.

Seth shifted his gaze from Marissa back to Cahill’s monitor, trying to figure out what he was missing.

“That’s . . .”

“Andrew Matthews, we know . . .”

Marissa shook her head.

“No, that’s Andrew Bowman.”

*Andrew Bowman?* Why did that name sound so familiar?

“Your stepson?”

“Rick’s son. Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“He looks older, of course, but that’s him.”

Seth reached for her. Trembling, Marissa tipped her forehead against his shoulder, and he tightened his hold.

“What does this mean?” she whispered.

*Nothing good*, he didn’t say.

Marissa pulled back, her wide eyes brimming with fear. “Why would he do this? Why Brooke?”

“I don’t know, Marissa. I need you to write down everything you can remember about him. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

“Just find him,” she said.

“Henry . . .”

“I’m on it.”

Seth pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed Garcia’s number.

“Jesus, Crawford. What now?”

“Andrew Matthews may not actually be Andrew Matthews.”

Garcia sighed. “If this is some kind of riddle, I don’t have time. Out with it.”

“Andrew Matthews may not be his real name. He might actually be Andrew Bowman.”

Garcia fell silent. Seth pictured her standing with the cell phone pressed against her ear, pinching the bridge of her nose. Finally she spoke.

“How do you know this?”

“Marissa Rooney. Andrew Bowman was her ex-husband’s son. Brooke is his stepsister.”

“Oh, man.”

“I thought you should know.”

The irritation disappeared from her voice. “Call me if you get anything else.”

“You’ve got it.”

Seth hung up the phone.

Marissa sat beside Cahill, furiously scribbling in her notebook. Cahill stared intensely at his computer screen.

“Wait . . .” Cahill muttered.

“What is it?”

“The last ping from Alicia’s cell phone was earlier this morning near Tacoma.”

“Tacoma?” Seth circled the desk, trying to piece together the story in his head. “What would she be doing there? Where does she work?”

Cahill frowned. “At a financial firm downtown.”

“So midmorning on a work day she takes off to Tacoma?”

“Do you suppose she has a client there?”

Seth clicked on the investment firm’s web page.

“Does this look like the kind of place that has clients in Tacoma?”

“Now you’re profiling,” Cahill said with a wry grin.

“Keep looking.”

Seth paced the floor. According to his neighbor, Andy had had a fight with his girlfriend. Not long afterward he’d left town on a business trip. Was he heading out of state? Was Alicia with him? He assumed it was Alicia’s blood on the floor. But what if he was wrong?

He should call Garcia back and get state patrol looking for Andy’s car. Traffic cameras. Whatever. They needed to find him now.

“Hang on,” Cahill said.

“You’ve got something?”

“It may be nothing, but it appears that Bowman’s father lives in a mental institution south of Tacoma.”

Why would Andy go to see his father today of all days? Seth stopped pacing and turned toward Marissa.

“Do you think Rick beat his son?”

“I know he did.”

“Henry, call the mental institution. See if Rick Bowman has had any visitors today.”

“You’re heading down there?” Marissa asked.

“I hope I’m not too late.”



Kelly stood in the middle of Logan's spacious living room playing her flute. *Trying* to play her flute, she amended. The familiar piece was one of her favorites, and usually playing it was as easy as singing the alphabet song, but today she stumbled over the keys like she was wearing oven mitts.

Kelly's gaze strayed away from the music and locked onto the stormy sky outside. All she could think about was her missing sister and the fear lodged deep inside her heart that Brooke might never come home.

She missed the next few notes and cursed. It had been weeks since she'd really practiced and she was rusty. Logan said she had to keep doing everyday things, and while she knew he was right, it was actually much harder than it sounded. Everything about living with Logan was comfortable and familiar, but she couldn't stop thinking about her mother, alone in the Renton house.

She couldn't stop thinking about her sister either. Every day she watched the news. Every day she called her mother, hoping there would be some break in the case. Day after day, though, it was more of the same, and Kelly wondered if Brooke would ever come home, if life would ever go back to normal.

Normal. She'd almost forgotten what that felt like. Normal was playing second fiddle to Brooke, the family star. Though Marissa would deny it, Kelly knew Brooke was her mother's favorite. When Brooke had skipped school to hang out with her boyfriend, she was grounded for a few days. When Kelly had skipped school to hang out with her friends, she was grounded for a month and had to do all the household chores. It was hard not to resent the inequality.

It wasn't Brooke's fault. Her sister had always looked out for her—tucked her into bed when Mom worked late, comforted her when Rick went off on one of his binges. Brooke was always there. So when her sister decided to live on campus, she'd been angry. It felt like another person in her life was abandoning her.

Now, Kelly missed Brooke with an ache that seemed bottomless.

She missed another note. *Crap*. Frustrated, Kelly lowered the flute from her lips. Outside, the rain beat against the window like fingernails pounding a bongo drum. The dark sky reflected her crap mood. She rearranged the sheets of music in front of her and huffed out a deep breath. Positioning the flute, she started again, slower this time.

Music filled the room, drowning out the rain. She forced herself to focus on the notes in front of her and not the fear she felt spiraling around in her brain. Halfway through the phrase, the doorbell rang.

Kelly frowned and lowered the flute. Placing it on the coffee table, she stole a quick glance at the clock. It was one thirty in the afternoon. Who would come looking for Logan at this time of day?

Maybe it was a delivery, she thought, though Logan hadn't mentioned anything when he'd left the house after lunch. He had a two o'clock meeting with the principal of Redmond High. Afterward they were planning to go to the dojo. The upside of getting kicked out of school for fighting was that Logan had started teaching her some self-defense techniques. They spent time every afternoon practicing at the dojo.

The doorbell chimed again, and Kelly crossed into the front hall. The dead bolt was locked, and she pressed her eye to the peephole in the center of the cold steel door. The guy on the doorstep was

beautiful. His dark hair was perfectly groomed. Almond-shaped eyes glinted with a smile. In his hands he held a huge bouquet of flowers. Roses, lilies, and greens—eucalyptus maybe.

Kelly grinned and unlocked the door. Parked beside the curb was an old black Jeep. There was no delivery truck in sight. Not surprising though. The guy standing on the doorstep didn't look like any delivery guy she'd ever seen. He was scorching hot in an Abercrombie & Fitch kind of way.

"Hi," he said.

His killer smile revealed a straight line of perfect white teeth. A flurry of butterflies took flight in her stomach, and she could feel her cheeks burn red. She was suddenly embarrassed by her appearance.

Her hair was tied back in pigtails. She was wearing tight black jeggings and a Sid and Nancy T-shirt. She felt awkward and gawky compared to the Adonis standing in front of her, but he didn't seem to notice. He smiled at her just the same.

"You must be here for Logan," she said.

"And you must be Kelly."

"I am," she said, pleased Logan had mentioned her.

"Logan said to meet him here. I'm a little early. Mind if I come in? It's pretty nasty out here."

A gust of wind drove another sheet of rain against the windows, and her face flushed a deeper shade of red. He handed her the bouquet of flowers, and she hesitated, wondering why Logan hadn't mentioned this guy was stopping by. Maybe he'd forgotten. Kelly bit her lower lip, trying to decide what to do. Her paranoia made her feel like a foolish little kid. He was probably Logan's boyfriend.

"Do you want me to give him a quick call?" Adonis asked.

Feeling stupid, Kelly shook her head and stepped back, allowing him to enter, and buried her nose in the gorgeous petals. The sweet smell of roses filled her head.

Though Kelly was tall, he was a head taller, and she looked up into his chocolate-brown eyes. *Oh wow*. This was the kind of guy who would come to their house to pick up Brooke, not the kind of guy who would ever notice her.

Painfully aware of the new rash of pimples on her chin, she shied away, switching her focus back to the flowers.

And she remembered a scene from her mother's favorite eighties movie, *Sixteen Candles*. The scene takes place at the church, after the ceremony, where Samantha looks for her family and realizes she's been forgotten. Again. Then the crowd parts, and Samantha catches sight of the gorgeous guy she's been chasing the whole movie, Jake, standing by a fire-engine-red Porsche 944 with flowers in his hand. Cheesy. But romantic too.

Finding her voice, she said, "Logan's not here. He won't be back for a while."

He smiled then, that flawless beautiful smile, and looked deep into her eyes.

"That's okay, Kelly. I'm here for you."

She didn't see the Taser until it was too late.



Drew cut his gaze to the rearview mirror, half expecting a sea of red and blue lights speeding toward him. Instead silver headlights reflected off the rain-slick surface of Interstate 90, and he drew in a breath. East, toward the towering foothills of the Cascade Range, his exit lay dead ahead. Five minutes and he'd leave the interstate behind, burying himself in the anonymity of the winding back roads between him and the cabin.

He couldn't feel safe until he dumped the Jeep and his cargo. He wouldn't feel safe until he left Drew Matthews and Andy Bowman behind for good.

*Safe.*

Drew's hands clutched the steering wheel as he remembered the last time he'd really felt safe. Long ago. Before his mother was sick.

The sweet smell of chocolate chip cookies had wafted from the kitchen, drawing him up the creaky back porch of the white clapboard house. The screen door squealed open. Flinging his backpack to the floor, he bolted down the hall toward the kitchen.

Country music boomed through the tinny radio speakers. His mother's back was turned, and she shuffled across the floor in her bare feet, dancing to Shania Twain's throaty voice singing, "Man, I feel like a woman." The horns blasted and she spun. Laughter spilled from her lips as she caught sight of him. Cheeks pink, dark eyes sparkling, she smiled.

She dialed the volume down and reached into the fridge. Cold milk filled a glass on the countertop.

"One cookie or two?" she'd asked.

"Two."

He'd clambered onto a stool at the counter. She lifted two cookies off the cooling rack and set them on a plate beside a glass of milk. He bit into the first. The sweet taste of brown sugar and gooey chocolate chips filled his mouth.

Drew's hands relaxed on the wheel. How old was he back then? Nine? Ten? Rick was on his medication and life was normal. School came easy. He had friends. A family. The cancer changed everything. Flesh melted off his mother's bones and the sparkle disappeared from her eyes. A season in hell, then she died. Rick went off his meds, and his life turned to shit. His mother died and he was robbed of the life he should have had.

The asshole in the Chevrolet up ahead slammed on his brakes. It was too late to slow down, so Drew cranked the wheel and changed lanes. He flipped the driver off. The old guy behind the wheel glared as he sailed by. Catching sight of the Chevrolet growing smaller in the rearview mirror triggered his memory.

He was in middle school when he and his best friend, Drew Matthews, decided to burn down the neighbor's garage, but once they started talking about it, it seemed like nothing else mattered. Old Man Rutherford was a real pain in the ass, always yelling at the neighborhood kids. If anyone deserved trouble, it was him.

Rutherford spent every Saturday afternoon listening to oldies rock and roll and working on the piece of shit Chevrolet in his garage. They figured that without the car, the old man would spend more time inside his house and less time harassing them.

The garage lit up like a Roman candle, sending sparks shooting high into the night sky. Watching the flames undulate up into the heavens, he felt elated, like all the anger smoldering deep inside him



was being released in the white-hot fury of the blaze.

He thought they'd gotten away with it too. Winter came, and each gray day blended into the next, until one afternoon he heard a knock at the door. A police officer arrived on his doorstep with a notebook full of questions. They parked him in an empty interrogation room for hours. Waiting. Bands of fear ratcheted tight around his chest, squeezing until he could barely breathe. With each passing minute the walls closed in. He felt small. Alone. Despite his fear he refused to talk, refused to say a word about his buddy Drew. He kept his mouth shut when they came back waving fingerprint evidence and shoe impressions in his face.

In the end, though, the cops pinned everything on him. Drew Matthews's father hired a fancy lawyer to protect his son while his own father sat in court, watching the proceedings through bloodshot eyes, and did nothing. He was convicted. Sent away.

And his life was fucked.

Rick never came to visit. Not once. No one came. When he was released eighteen months later, his juvenile record was sealed. But there was no going back to his life before. High school. College. All gone. He got a job working construction and moved back in with Marissa and the old man.

Then, one summer night at a downtown bar, the door swung open and opportunity strolled in. His old buddy, Drew Matthews, a newly minted university graduate. He looked as shiny and bright as a brand-new car. They caught up, shooting the shit like nothing had happened, like they were old friends. After last call they took off in Andy's pickup truck and drove to Discovery Park. It was deserted this time of night. Jumping the fence, they disappeared into the woods with a six-pack, headed toward the bluff overlooking Puget Sound.

Andy drank while Drew bragged about his life abroad. His degree. His brand-new condo. His triumphant return to Seattle.

And Andy Bowman seized his chance. With the blow of a rock, everything changed. He shed his former self and started over again. Fresh. New.

The whine of a siren snapped Drew back into the moment. Flashing lights filled his rearview mirror. Cold fingers of fear clamped around his throat. He swallowed. The siren wailed. The cop signaled him to pull over.

*Son of a fucking bitch.*

A split-second urge to hammer down on the gas shot through him.

Running would be pointless though. No way he'd win a car chase in the Jeep. He was screwed.

Wait a minute. There was only one cop. One cop. If they knew about Rick, about Alicia, there would be more. There would be a blockade. Police helicopters. The whole goddamned freak show of Charles Sully's untimely end would play out right here on I-90.

Ignoring the frantic hammering of his heart, Drew slowed the vehicle and pulled over onto the shoulder. Never taking his eyes off the mirror, he caught sight of the burly cop emerging from the cruiser. He thought about the gun stuffed under the seat.

He could do this.

"Kelly," he called, his tone tentative. Testing.

No answer. She was still out, or at least she was pretending. Sweat beaded at his hairline like drops of dew. Seconds ticked by. The cop skirted the edge of the vehicle, glancing through the windows as he approached. Drew held his breath. No way the cop could see through the dark tint, but still . . .

Gray rain poured off the wide brim of the state trooper's hat. Drew stiffened. His pulse rate spiked, and he lowered the window. The rain smelled like melted crayons through the open window.

“License and registration.”

“What’s the problem, Officer?” Drew asked, tacking a friendly smile to his face.

“Is this your vehicle?”

A knot of dread coiled at the pit of Drew’s stomach.

“Yes, sir.” He fumbled in his coat for his wallet. Fingers freezing, he realized what he was about to do. He’d almost handed Andy Bowman’s license to the cop. *Fucking stupid. Get a grip.*

“Do you know how fast you were going?” the cop barked.

“No, sir.”

Drew opened the console between the seats and fished around for his other wallet. He pulled the license from its sheath and handed it through the open window. The cop stared at him, then his eyes flicked back to the driver’s license in his hand. Without another word, he retreated.

Drew brushed the sweaty hair off his forehead. He heard a grunt from the Jeep’s cargo hold and froze. He had to get out of here before she woke up. What was taking so goddamned long?

He stared into the side mirror. His heart thundered like a jackhammer. The cop slouched behind the cruiser’s wheel, head down, so Drew couldn’t read his expression. Cars blasted past on the interstate, rocking the Jeep, and he swiped his damp palms down the length of his jeans.

How far could he get if he lit out of here now? To the next exit? If he could make it that far, he could lose the cop on the back roads. But then what? Another cover blown. And they’d be looking for him. For the Jeep. He’d have to ditch it and . . .

More flashing red lights approached in the distance, and Drew’s heart thundered.

He was going to get caught with Kelly tied up in the back next to a suitcase containing Alicia’s body—or what was left of it.

The cop lumbered toward the Jeep. Jittery, barely able to breathe, Drew watched. Was he reaching for his gun?

A second set of flashing lights sped past.

“Eighty-five in a seventy zone’s a pretty hefty fine.”

The cop handed the ticket through the open window, and Drew dropped it on the seat. He tucked the license back into his wallet.

“Yes, sir.”

A soft moan came from the back.

*Fuck.*

Drew’s pulse rate spiked.

“What’s that?” the cop asked, craning his head toward the cargo hold.

Drew thought about the gun. He pictured a bullet hole between the cop’s eyes. His gaze flicked to the back of the Jeep.

“It’s my sister’s dog.”

“Dog?”

“Yeah. She just moved to Pullman. Somehow I got roped into bringing the dog.”

The cop’s eyes narrowed. His gaze hardened.

“Didn’t sound like a dog.”

Drew snorted.

“Yeah, if you can call it that. Some kind of pug mix. Hates the car. Shits like a baby on ex-lax, so I drugged it. Antianxiety meds from the vet.”

At least the drugging part was true. The cop grunted.

“Well, thanks, Officer,” Drew said, and pressed the button, hoping to Christ Kelly stayed quiet a few more seconds.

The window hummed as the glass rose. Suddenly the cop’s meaty hand reached out, clamping down hard on the edge of the window. Sweat trickled down the back of Drew’s neck.

“Mind if I take a look?” the cop asked, nodding toward the cargo hold.

Drew’s hand dropped from view, fingers groping underneath the seat until they grazed the butt of the gun.

The radio on the cop’s shoulder squawked. A disembodied voice said, “We have an eleven-eighty near Exit 31. Ambulances dispatched. All available units respond.”

The state trooper grimaced.

“Slow down, Mr. Pearson,” he said, stealing one last glance toward the back of the Jeep before turning away.

Drew watched the cop climb back into his cruiser. His heart pounded in his chest. Drew pulled back out into traffic, driving just below the speed limit until the police cruiser disappeared from view.



Marissa searched her memory for what little she recalled about Andy. Rick had described him as a troubled kid who'd had some kind of run-in with the law.

Robbery? Arson? God, it had been so long, she couldn't remember the details. She'd purged as much of those years from her mind as she could. *Possible record*, she noted for Cahill before moving on.

At first Rick had sounded like a concerned father and she'd fallen for it. As a struggling single parent herself, he'd totally played on her sympathies. In fact, he was such a convincing liar, she'd had no idea what she had been getting herself into until it was too late.

Andy had been a surprise from the first day she met him. She'd greeted him at the door fully expecting a smart-mouthed kid with a bad attitude and a huge chip on his shoulder. But he was nothing like that. He was polite. Charming, even, and Marissa frowned as the irony hit her with full force. Rick had been charming too. She hadn't seen the monster that lay beneath his handsome face until after they were married. Maybe Andy was just like his father after all. A sociopath?

*Mental illness*, she jotted down on the sheet of paper, and racked her brain for anything else.

Andy had volunteered at a youth camp for troubled kids out in Snoqualmie Valley, some kind of scared-straight program. It was probably nothing, just another dead end, but she wrote it down anyway.

Cahill had one of those voices. Loud. Penetrating. Marissa pressed a finger to her ear, trying to focus in on her own thoughts, but it was no use. She couldn't hear herself think.

"Yes, I'm calling about Rick Bowman," Cahill said, doodling on the notepad beside his keyboard. "No, I'm not family. I'm with the Holt Foundation. Is there a problem?"

The change in Cahill's tone instantly registered with Marissa. She glanced up. Cahill was on his feet now, spinning toward her. His large hand clamped down over the receiver.

"Call Seth," he said.

"What?"

"Call Seth. Now."

Confused, Marissa reached under her desk and grabbed her purse. She rummaged through the jumbled contents until she found her cell phone and dialed. The phone rang. Cahill held out his hand. She slapped the phone into his palm.

The purse yawned open on the desk, and Marissa caught sight of Brooke's insulin pen. How could something this small hold the power of life and death? Here she sat scribbling down notes while somewhere out there Brooke's body was seizing up like a car's engine without oil. If she wasn't already in a coma. If she was still alive.

Cahill slammed down the receiver to the landline and pressed the cell phone to his ear.

"Come on, answer," he growled.

"What now?" Marissa asked.

Cahill held up a finger and she fell silent.

"Seth? I called the mental institution. There's something going on there." He paused, listening. "I don't know what, but as soon as I asked about Bowman, things got tense."

Cahill's landline rang. He wrapped up his conversation with Seth and handed the phone back to Marissa. She set it on the desk beside her purse and turned back to her list.

There had to be something else.

Her cell phone rang and she picked it up. With Cahill barking on the other line, she walked out into the hallway.

“Hello.”

“Marissa?”

Her heart plummeted. It wasn't Seth. It was Logan.

“How did it go with the principal today?” she asked.

With any luck Logan's silver tongue had charmed the school's administration into welcoming Kelly back with open arms.

“Uh, fine,” he said.

But it wasn't fine. The electric edge in his voice sent fear rippling through Marissa.

“What's wrong, Logan?”

He hesitated. In that silent second, a host of horrific thoughts filled Marissa's mind until, finally, he spoke.

“Have you seen Kelly?”

Dread lodged like a tumor in her throat, making it hard to speak, hard to breathe.

“What do you mean? She's with you.”

“I just got home from the high school, and Kelly's not here.”

“You've called her?”

“Her cell phone is going directly to voice mail.”

“Oh God.”

“Did you send flowers?” Logan asked.

“Flowers? What flowers?”

“There are flowers on the floor,” he said, sounding every bit as shaky as she felt.

“No.”

Panic set Marissa in motion. This couldn't be happening. She burst through the office door. Cahill was still on the phone. She blurted out Kelly's name, but before she could say more, he raised his palm. Marissa didn't wait. She shoved the insulin pen in her pocket and bolted out the door.

“Is there a card, a logo, anything that tells you where the flowers came from?”

“Nothing. They're wrapped in plain brown butcher's wrap tied with a white ribbon.”

“She can't be gone.”

The elevator doors slid shut. Marissa sagged against the back wall with the phone pressed against her ear, praying to God she didn't lose signal.

“Logan. Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“What time did you leave?”

“Just after lunch.”

“Dammit, that was two hours ago.”

Logan fell silent. Marissa drew a tremulous breath. She shouldn't have snapped at him. This wasn't his fault.

“Look, I'm sorry.”

“I'm worried too, Marissa.”

“Call the police. I'm on my way.”

Wind blasted through the high-rise buildings and howled through the downtown core. Sheets of rain slashed against her windshield. Squealing out into traffic, she could barely see a block ahead.

Marissa punched down on the accelerator and slalomed her way through a pack of slow-moving vehicles.

She merged onto the interstate heading north. The road was slick as she shot past cars at a blistering pace. If just one person pulled out in front of her, she was done. There would be no time to stop. Still, she didn't slow her pace as she swerved onto the exit for the 520 Bridge.

Marissa's cell phone rang. Hoping it was Seth, she picked up the call.

"Marissa?"

"Yes," she snapped, not recognizing the voice on the other end.

"Where are you?" the man asked.

"Who is this? Evan?"

The floating bridge lay dead ahead. Eastbound lanes were choked with traffic as nervous drivers crawled along the narrow span across Lake Washington. Gray waters churned on either side of the bridge as the fierce winds pounded an endless series of white-capped waves into the barrier.

"Are you on your way to Logan's place?"

Besides Logan, no one knew where she was going. She hadn't even told Cahill. Who on earth could this be?

A wave jumped the barrier and smashed against her car. She jerked the wheel, veering out of her lane. A car horn blared behind her, and she corrected her course, narrowly missing the car beside her.

"Who are you?"

His laugh sent chills racing through her.

"Check the caller ID."

Tearing her gaze away from the slick bridge deck, Marissa glanced at the call display. Fear sucked the air from her lungs.

"Kelly," she gasped. The line went dead.

The phone rang again. This time she checked the call display. Brooke. Marissa's eyes swam with tears. She blinked them away. She knew who this was.

"Andy."

"Well done, Mommy Dearest. Just under the bell."

"What have you done with my girls?"

"They're waiting for you," he said.

Waiting? Waiting where? What was he doing to her girls?

"I thought I'd host a family reunion. Would love it if you could join us."

He was crazy, a monster—ten times worse than his father.

"If you hurt them . . ."

"You'll what? Ground me?" he laughed. "Come on, Mom. Surely you can do better than that."

"We never did anything to hurt you, Andy. I'm not like your father . . ."

"Dad? Don't worry. I've already taken care of him. He won't be joining us."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing I'm sure you didn't consider a hundred times yourself. No thanks necessary," he said. "Where are you?"

"On Highway 520, heading toward Redmond."

"Go east on Route 202. I'll call you with more directions."

Andy hung up. Marissa screamed. She pounded the horn with her fist, willing the line of cars to move aside and let her pass, but they didn't. The phone slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor. She swore. She needed to call Seth.

Crouching low in her seat, she brushed her fingers along the floor of the car, searching for the cell. Shoving her hand into the deep crevice between the seat and the armrest, she felt a slick corner of plastic.

Her fingers scrabbled for the phone. She felt it. The car shifted and the phone slid away. Gritting her teeth, she pushed deeper, managing to pin it in place with her finger. She held her breath, easing it toward the armrest one centimeter at a time. Finally she curled her fingers around the phone and pulled it out.

She hit redial.





Chahill had been right. There was trouble ahead. Police cruisers formed a barrier around the entrance to Valley Mental Health Institution. Seth's every instinct told him they had something to do with Rick Bowman and his son's secret life. Although he was curious to learn the specifics, he knew there was no point asking the cops. He was no longer part of the inner circle. Finding Alicia Wright would be a better use of his time.

Seth headed back toward his car. He heard someone call his name. Stopping under the glass covering of the walkway, he turned to face his former boss.

Alvarez shot him a thunderous glare. "What are you doing here?"

Seth forced a crooked smile and scratched the back of his neck. "I thought I'd check myself in."

"Not the worst idea you've ever had." A small smile tugged at the corners of Alvarez's lips. "Now, why don't you tell me why you're really here?"

Seth paused. The sound of the rain striking the glass and the rustling of the thick pines overhead filled the silence as he considered his answer. Knowing Alvarez wouldn't be easily brushed off, he opted for the truth.

"I'm here to see Rick Bowman."

"Why?"

"Because Drew Matthews is Andrew Bowman, Marissa's stepson."

"You're telling me he's Rick Bowman's son? You're sure?"

"Marissa identified him."

"Son of a bitch," Alvarez said, kneading his lined forehead like a headache raged inside his brain.

"Is Rick dead?"

Alvarez didn't answer. He didn't have to. The grim expression on the lieutenant's face was confirmation enough.

"First Alicia Wright. Now his father. Andrew Bowman is escalating."

"You don't know for sure Wright is dead," Alvarez said.

"If you mean we haven't found her body yet, you're right." Seth shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the bitter wind.

"How is it you're two steps ahead of us?"

"It's a whole hell of a lot easier to go with your gut when you don't need evidence to build your case." He shrugged. "For what it's worth, I'd have every state patrol from here to the Oregon border looking for his car. If Andy killed his girlfriend and his father, he's not coming back."

Seth waited for Alvarez to reprimand him, to warn him to stay away from the case, but the speech never came.

"Listen, Seth. The way things ended . . ."

Seth raised a hand, forestalling the lieutenant's words. Replaying the past was pointless. They had both said things they wished they hadn't. Funny thing was, now that it was all over, Seth wasn't sorry he'd quit.

"I made a decision. It's all for the best."

Alvarez's phone chirped. He read the text message and sighed.

"That's my cue." Alvarez stuck out his hand and Seth shook it. "Call me if you have any more breakthroughs."

"Sure," Seth said, surprised to find he meant it.

Seth paced back down the covered walkway. His thoughts were filled with Andrew Bowman and where he might flee. Maybe Cahill had some ideas. Reaching into his coat pocket, he grasped his phone. It vibrated in his hand.

“Marissa,” he said.

He knew he should tell her about Rick. Better she hear it from him than from someone else, or worse, the news. Before he could say another thing, Marissa barreled ahead.

“It’s Kelly. He has her too.”

Marissa’s voice shook. Fear was transmitted in her every syllable. Bowman? It had to be Bowman. Seth started jogging toward his car.

“How do you know?”

“He called me from Kelly’s phone.”

“Fuck.” Here he was down in Tacoma, hours away from where he needed to be, when Marissa needed him most. “Where are you?”

“I’m on 520 just past 405. He told me to take 202 East.”

The words poured out of her in a panicked rush.

Seth knew the Snoqualmie Valley. Farmland, trees, dozens of little twisty roads winding up into the foothills of the Cascade Range, tiny lakes, the river—millions of hiding places. Abandoned barns, mountain cabins, bunkers built by end-of-days nut bags. Unnamed roads that went nowhere.

Bowman could be anywhere. Anywhere. And Marissa was heading straight for him.

“Pull over. Wait for me,” Seth commanded, praying she would listen.

“He said he’d call with more directions.”

“For fuck’s sake, Marissa, pull over. You’re walking into a trap.”

“He’s got my girls, Seth.”

The raw burst of pain in her voice drove splinters of dread deep into his heart.

“Marissa,” he roared, but the phone beeped. “Marissa.”

But she was gone. The call dropped, and he lost her.

Seth sprinted down the slick walkway, grappling in his pocket for the keys. He grasped them in his fist. Skidding to a halt in the parking lot, he dropped the phone. It splashed into a deep puddle at his feet.

He swooped down and scooped it up. The screen was shattered and the display black. He thumbed the power button. Nothing. It was dead.

“Fuck. Goddamn it to fucking hell!”

Seth pounded his fist against the roof of the car.

Marissa was headed east, directly into Andrew Bowman’s trap, and he had no way of getting in touch with her.

Seth pitched the phone onto the passenger’s seat and jumped behind the wheel. Laying on his horn, he pulled a highly illegal, highly dangerous U-turn and raced back toward the interstate.



Cold settled over Kelly like a blanket of dew. She drew in a quick breath and expelled it from her lungs in a steamy cloud of vapor. Her nose dripped. She sniffed. It smelled like rotting wood and dank earth and something else. Water. Her eyes snapped open.

Where the hell was she?

Stretched out flat on her stomach, Kelly was pressed face-first against a damp wooden floor. It was pitch-black. She blinked. At least she thought she blinked. Eyes wide, she couldn't see a thing. No shapes. No light. Nothing.

She shifted. Her shoulders ached. Her hands were tightly bound behind her back. She tugged. Rough, fibrous ropes bit into her bare wrists. She yanked on her bonds until a burst of pain blasted through her head, ten times worse than the worst headache she'd ever had.

"Hello," she said, her creaky voice fading into the hollow darkness.

Nothing. No response. Kelly closed her eyes and listened.

At first all she could hear was the frantic beat of her own heart. Then she heard other sounds. Water. Water coming from everywhere. Rain on a tin roof. And something else, something bigger. A nearby river moving fast.

And breathing.

*Breathing?* She wasn't alone in here. Fear blew through her at gale force.

Kelly curled her knees toward her chest. Twisting her shoulders, she shifted her weight. Pain burst through her brain. She gritted her teeth and ignored it, rocking harder until she rolled onto her knees.

"Hello."

No one answered. She heard something though. Head cocked, she closed her eyes, straining to hear. It was a soft sound, barely discernible over her pounding pulse. It sounded like someone coughing. Coming from where?

Kelly lurched upright, staggering to her feet. Her head swam. She stood stock-still, waiting for the wave of dizziness to pass.

"Who's there?"

She heard a grunt. Human. Definitely human.

"I can hear you."

Kelly's voice trembled. She staggered ahead, one step at a time. God, she hated stumbling blind. The suffocating dark made her feel more vulnerable, more freaked out than she already was.

"Kel . . ."

The frail voice cracked and faded. Kelly froze. A half sob escaped her lips.

"Brooke?"

"Yes," the response came, half a sigh, half a whisper.

Kelly lurched ahead, feet scraping the floor. She tripped on something hard. Sparks of pain lit up her ankle. Without her hands to steady her, she almost went down, but at the last second she shifted her weight and regained her balance.

Tears flooded her eyes.

"Brooke, where are you?"

"Here." Another raspy whisper.

Her knee smashed into a rail. She pitched forward. Sharp metal ripped through her jeans, tearing her skin. She landed face-first on the wall. White-hot bolts of pain shot through Kelly's forehead and cheekbone. Her neck snapped back. The coppery tang of blood filled her mouth.

"You . . . okay?" Each word came slowly, haltingly for Brooke, like each syllable caused her pain.

Kelly grunted. Ignoring the pain, she rolled onto her knees again, wishing she could wipe the blood from her face. She jerked to her feet, moving more slowly this time toward the voice.

"Yeah." She slid a foot along the floor, testing, back in the direction from which she'd come. She felt something press into her leg and stopped.

Brooke lay stretched out on the bed. Kelly hunkered down over her sister's body and struggled against the ropes that bound her hands. She wanted to throw her arms around Brooke, feel her sister's beating heart beneath her palms. After so much worry, so much fear that she would never lay eyes on Brooke again, it seemed unreal that they were both here at this moment. She bowed her head onto Brooke's chest and felt the thin breathing, the rapid rise and fall of her sister's rib cage.

"God, Brooke, I thought you were . . ."

"Dead?" A sound escaped Brooke—half laugh, half sob. Kelly's heart sank. "Not yet."

There was something wrong with the rhythm of her sister's breath. She could feel it. It was too shallow, too frantic.

"Are you okay?" she asked, knowing it was a stupid question.

Of course Brooke wasn't okay. Neither of them was. They were trapped God knew where by some crazy fuck. She couldn't see shit, and Brooke . . .

"Need . . . insulin," Brooke croaked.

Tears clogged Kelly's throat and she swallowed them back. *Insulin.*

"Where is it? Where's your insulin?"

Maybe she could find it. If she could give Brooke a shot, then maybe, between the two of them, they could find a way out of here. Wherever *here* was.

"I'm out."

Kelly didn't know the medical term for what would happen to a diabetic without insulin, but she knew it was bad.

It seemed hopeless. What little hope survived in this evil place was weighted down by her overwhelming fear that they would die here. Then she thought about Brooke. Her sister needed her. A spark of anger ignited in her chest, fear evaporating in its bright glow, giving her purpose.

There was no way she was going to let her sister die. She wouldn't let that happen. Kelly raised her head.

"Who is he?"

"You . . . don't . . . remember?"

*Remember? Why would I remember? Why . . .*

She closed her eyes and recalled his face. Dark hair, dark eyes, high cheekbones. There was something familiar about it. Something. But what?

"Bowman."

Kelly gasped. The boy's face came rushing back in a flash. The last time she'd seen him had been the night her mother left Rick.

"Andy?" It made no sense. She waited for Brooke to correct her, but when she didn't, she knew she was right. "Why? Why would he do this to you?"

"Not the only . . . girl . . ."

Kelly's stomach heaved. She understood what Brooke was saying. She knew the police had found another missing blonde girl chopped into pieces.

"Kim Covey."

"Dead," Brooke said.

The finality of the word struck Kelly like a slap across the face. She staggered to her feet and struggled against the ropes chewing at her skin until she felt warm blood trickle down her wrists.

"We have to get out of here, Brooke, before the crazy fuck comes back."

"Can't."

Kelly's gaze ricocheted uselessly around the cabin. She couldn't see a damn thing in here.

"Tell me everything you know about this place, Brooke."

"Cabin . . . river . . . can't scream . . ." Brooke swallowed. "No one . . . hears."

The fierce wind buffeted the cabin, like a frantic, wild thing clawing to get inside. Kelly's heart jumped.

"There has to be something. Think."

Kelly sounded frantic. Desperate.

"Can't."

She heard Brooke's labored breath. Suddenly she regretted any mean thought she'd ever had about her sister and the special treatment granted Brooke because of her diabetes.

"Sorry . . . he found . . . you. Would die . . ."

Kelly swallowed the knot in her throat. She knew what Brooke was trying to say, and every fiber of her being rejected the thought.

"Enough talk about dying. We need to get out of here."

She closed her eyes and listened to the rain. There was a tapping. Like rain on glass. A window.

"Is there a window?"

"End of the cabin. Up . . . seven feet . . . more . . . too high . . ."

*Maybe for Brooke,* Kelly thought. But she was taller. She could jump. Maybe, if her hands were free, she could climb. Logan had taken her rock climbing two summers ago. She'd liked it. What's more, she'd been good at it. All she needed were a few footholds, a few handholds, and she could make it.

First she needed to get out of these ropes. She paused. Thinking. The knife. She'd carried the knife with her since the day she was attacked at the school. It made her feel safe. But it wasn't there now. Had he taken it? Or had it fallen out?

"I had a knife with me. It must have fallen out of my pocket. Are your hands free?"

Another breath.

"Yes."

"If I can find it, you can cut the ropes."

"No."

"What do you mean, no? I'm not going to let you die here."

Kelly pivoted in the dark, trying to figure out where she'd woken up. She closed her eyes. Tried to retrace the steps in her head.

"Kel . . ."

She heard the denial in Brooke's voice, and anger flared hot inside Kelly.

"Maybe you're ready to give up, Brooke, but I'm not. I'm going to find that knife. We're going to get out of here."

"Can't." Brooke's voice caught. "Can't . . . feel . . . my legs."





Black water pooled on the main road leading into the small town of Carnation. The wind rippled across the oily surface. There was no telling how deep it was—a few inches or a few feet. Or worse. It could be a sinkhole. There was no driving around it. Drew frowned.

*Fucking great.* The farmland stretched across the valley floor was no stranger to floods, but if the rain kept up at this rate, the road would close. Marissa would be unable to pass, and that would ruin everything.

Time was running out. After his stunt at the mental hospital, every cop north of Tacoma would be searching for Andrew Bowman. Maybe Alistair believed the text he'd sent from Alicia's phone, and maybe he didn't. Sometime soon her father would try to contact her again, and when he couldn't find her, everyone, *everyone* would come looking for Drew.

All he needed was a few more hours. Enough time to finish what he'd come here to do—eliminate the last of Andrew Bowman's pathetic family ties. Then he could just leave. He had a fake ID and enough money to start over again somewhere else.

But how could he ever feel safe? How could he live without looking over his shoulder, without thinking that another chance encounter like the one at the Chapel could bring his whole life crashing down around him?

That was no life. All the loose threads tying him to his former self had to be severed. Liam had tugged on one of those threads and his secret life had unraveled faster than a cheating wife's lie.

Gritting his teeth, Drew punched down on the gas, and the Jeep plunged into the rising tide. Water hissed over his wheels. The exhaust system coughed. Drew held his breath, foot pressed down harder on the gas. The Jeep chugged and sputtered but kept moving. Finally he emerged from the water onto the bridge deck, and Drew drove into town.

Neon beer lights burned brightly in the windows of Sliders Café. He parked half a block down on the other side of the street, a safe distance away. Pulling a Seahawks cap down low on his brow, Drew stepped out into a cold shower of rain and stuffed the gun into the waistband of his jeans.

Wet wind blew down the empty street. Sweat soaked through his T-shirt. In an hour it would all be finished and he'd be free to disappear again. Start over.

He glanced at the café. There were no cars out front. He didn't expect a crowd. With a storm blowing in and the road flooding out, anybody with half a brain would stay the fuck home. With any luck he'd be in, out, and on his way.

The café smelled like fried food and meatballs. The locals loved this place. Live music. Good food. From where Drew was standing, though, it sure looked like a shithole to him.

Over in the corner of the dining room, a teenage girl wiped down tabletops with a grimy rag. Drew set the metal gas tank down at his feet. It clanged on the tile floor. The girl looked up. For a split second his heart jolted and he thought he saw Alicia's face. He blinked and the moment passed. It wasn't Alicia. It was just some stupid girl, dressed in a short skirt and combat boots. She sauntered in slow motion toward the cash register, taking her sweet-ass fucking time.

*That's right, bitch. Slow down, we've got all night.*

"The restaurant is closing down for the night. I can't seat you, but if you wanted something for takeout . . ." Red lipstick. White teeth. She flashed a flirty smile.

He knew her type. She thought she was every teenage boy's wet dream, right down to the God-awful perfume wafting off her—Red Bull and cum.

“Just some gas,” he said, antsy to be on his way before anyone else came along.

Lights flashed in the plate glass window. Seconds later the door chimed. Drew groaned. Frustration bloomed like a mushroom cloud inside his chest. The grin faded from the girl’s face.

A skinny kid in ripped jeans and a black motorcycle jacket walked in. Light glinted off the barbell stud stabbed through the kid’s thick eyebrow. He swaggered up to the counter. Ignoring Drew, he stared straight at the girl.

“What time you off?” he asked.

She tossed her ponytail, staring down her nose at the kid like he was white trash.

“My shift ends in an hour. I don’t need a ride home.”

“Tell Cecil to close down early. The cops are blocking off the road. No way you’re going to make it through in that piece of shit you drive.”

The girl batted her eyelashes in an exaggerated, damsel-in-distress sort of way.

“And you’re here to, what, save me? How sweet.”

Drew didn’t have time for teenage drama right now. The road had barely been passable when he’d driven through ten minutes ago, and if the cops closed it, he was screwed. He just needed some gas. For a split second he thought about the gun, and then he changed his mind.

It wasn’t time yet.

Drew let out a low whistle.

“Listen, Romeo, let me clue you in to a few things about your little Juliet here. Any girl who dresses like that only wants one thing—you tied up in knots and desperate to get into her pants. She has no intention letting you anywhere near her. Have you asked her out?”

The kid didn’t answer. His gaze dropped to the floor and Drew grinned.

“She shot you down, didn’t she?”

The kid’s head bobbed in a grudging nod.

“So you stopped in to offer her a ride home and what does she do? She shits all over you. You can keep up the good-guy routine, fully transform into the doormat she thinks you are, and hope she’ll change her mind. It’s your choice. I don’t want to tell you how to live or anything, but if I were in your shoes, I’d let her drown. She’s not worth the trouble.”

The kid looked at the girl as if seeing her for the first time for the manipulative bitch she was. He spun and left the café without another word. Drew smiled.

“Give me ten on pump two,” he said, slapping a bill down on the countertop.

She took it with a smile.

“Wow, you sure got rid of him in a hurry.”

He hated everything about this girl. He’d be doing the world a favor by shooting her right now, but he still didn’t have the one thing he’d come here for.

“I really don’t give a shit about your love life, sweetheart. I just need some gas. Now, can you do that, or do I need to call Cecil out of the back to do it for you?”

The smile dissolved from her face. Well, hallelujah. She finally got it.

“You’re set on pump two.”

Drew grunted and picked up the gas can. He marched out the door into the rainy night and filled the gas can first. Placing the cap on the can, he dropped the nozzle to the ground. The slack hose dangled beside the pump like the empty sleeve of an amputee’s jacket.

Part one of his plan complete, he jogged back to the Jeep and stowed the gas can safely in the cargo hold. Then Drew marched back to the gas pumps.

The door chime rang and he saw the girl framed in the doorway. He stopped beside the pumps and snatched the nozzle off the ground. Squeezing it tight in his fist, he pumped the last few dollars' worth of gasoline onto the concrete pad.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, stepping out of the café and into the wet night.

Dropping the nozzle, Drew yanked the gun from his waistband. Her eyes swelled in their sockets. A slow, dawning horror replaced the confusion on her face. Drew raised the barrel.

One eye closed, he took aim at the girl.

"This isn't about you," he said.

Her mouth yawned open, and he pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into her shoulder. She reeled back. A wide swath of blood smeared down the glass door as she slid to the ground.

Drew pulled his father's Zippo from his pocket, along with a book of matches. Shielding the Zippo's flame from the wind, he lit the matches and flung them into the pool of gasoline.

Gasoline fumes ignited in a whoosh. Drew sprinted toward the Jeep. A wave of heat slammed against his back. He jumped inside the cab and pulled the door shut.

Orange flames soared into the night sky. By the time Drew heard the sirens, he'd reached the outskirts of town. Still vibrating from the rush, he picked up the phone. Marissa answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?" Drew asked.

"Coming up on Ames Lake Road."

"The next turn is Tolt Hill. Take it."

"Brooke and Kelly, are they okay? Have you hurt them?"

The exquisite note of fear in her voice aroused him. He laughed.

"Ticktock, Mama Bear. Your girls are waiting."

Drew tossed the phone out the window on his way to the bridge. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Flames soared above the roofs of the surrounding houses. Between the fire and the girl, the first responders in all these shit-assed little towns would be too busy to take a leak, let alone come looking for him.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Drew blew past the town limits. Police lights flashed on the road leading south. Drew pulled his Jeep to a stop. The kid had been right. White barricades blocked the road and cops diverted traffic away from the bridge.

Drew slammed his fist into the dash.

A uniformed cop started toward him. Drew waved him off, throwing the Jeep into reverse and backing away. His clothes smelled like gasoline. He had a full gas tank in his truck. He didn't need another cop on his ass.

He'd have to find another way to the cabin.



Seth raced along Route 202, following the same path Marissa had taken. He was an hour behind her, and without a phone, he had no way of knowing where to go next. He was driving blind, like the days before cell phones and GPS.

Dark-gray clouds spit torrents of rain onto the highway. The black foothills of the Cascade Range hulked like giants in the distance. Miles below lay the small towns of Fall City, Carnation, and Duvall. Off the main routes, back roads splintered off into a web of forestry roads and dead ends.

He saw the turnoff for Tolt Hill Road. Desperate, he took it. Searching the foothills for Bowman without some guidance would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Considering his options, he had no choice but to stop in Carnation. He needed to call Marissa and Cahill.

Flashing lights throbbed in the darkness, and his chest tightened. Trouble up ahead.

Was he too late?

Traffic slowed to a stop. Seth eased down the hill toward the bridge spanning the river. Two squad cars blocked the road. Uniformed officers in rain gear turned cars around at the base of the bridge, and Seth groaned. What the hell was going on? Why were they stopped?

Angling out of his lane onto the shoulder, he saw the problem. The road was flooded out. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* There were no connector roads, no easy way to bypass the flooding and head into Carnation. Turning around would cost him half an hour, maybe longer, and he still didn't know where Marissa was, if she was safe, if she was . . .

The car in front of him pulled ahead. The driver executed a sloppy three-point turn and headed west, back up Tolt Hill Road. Seth stared out the window, gaze stretched out beyond the yellow beam of the police officer's flashlight. He was next.

"Hey . . .," he heard the officer yell through the closed window.

Ignoring the call, he plunged headlong into the water. All around him the river gushed. The car gurgled and chugged, slowly wading through. The water level steadily climbed past the wheels, halfway up the doors.

Breathing shallowly through a mouth as dry as cotton, Seth steered toward the other side, two hundred yards away. Maybe less. He reached the halfway point.

The floodwaters roiled up over the hood like a living, breathing thing intent on swallowing him whole. His headlights flickered. Water seeped in through the bottom of the door. He was going to make it. He was going to . . .

The engine coughed. Died.

Seth's fingers scrabbled for the controls. He lowered the window while the car still had power. The smell of pine trees and the muddy river blew through the open window. The car stalled.

Icy water filled his shoes and flowed over his ankles. The fast-moving current surrounded the car, shifting it sideways, and Seth unlatched his seat belt. Water gushed through the open window. He shifted in his seat, getting ready to climb out.

Blinding lights filled his rearview mirror. He squinted, lifted a hand. A truck engine roared behind him. Glancing back, he saw the enormous wheels of a monster truck cut through the water. The bumper nudged against the trunk of his car and shifted him forward. Another bump. Seth's car moved a foot. Two. The frigid water inched up Seth's legs, but he ignored it. At least he was moving in the right direction. He'd reach the other side soon.

He heard a crunch through the open window. The car trunk collapsed. It was pinned under the weight of the monster truck's bumper, and all forward movement ceased. Now he was really screwed.

With his bumper pinned underneath the truck, there was no way to push him out of the river. He was stuck. And with the water level rising higher with each passing second, his choices had just gotten harder.

Seth stuck his head out the window and looked behind him. The truck driver waved an arm, beckoning him back.

Short on options, Seth figured he could either swim for it or climb back to the truck. In these conditions there were no good options.

Deciding he'd rather climb than swim, Seth crawled out the window.

Exhaust fumes belched from the truck's exhaust pipe. Spotlights rippled across the water, directing all eyes to him.

Seth crawled out onto the rain-slick roof. Rising to his feet, he edged back toward the truck. Suddenly the sinking car shifted underneath his feet, and Seth lost his footing. Stumbling sideways, he felt the roof of the car slide out from beneath him, and he landed in the water.

Seth gasped. Cold. It was so cold it felt like daggers of ice stabbing into his flesh. The current clawed at him like a hungry beast, pulling him downstream. He kicked, fingers grasping, reaching for the car like it was his only lifeline. Closer. And closer. Finally he grasped the window ledge. Underwater now, he used it to pull himself back to the car.

He scrambled onto the roof as fast as he could. He shook, the cold wind tearing through him. Slowly he rose to his feet. Extending his hands wide for balance, Seth inched toward the truck.

The car was almost fully submerged in the rising flood. Standing thigh-deep, he felt the heat radiating off the truck's grille and knew scaling it would be easy. There were lots of places to grab on to, lots of places to push off from. But there was no way to grip the metal without burning his hands.

Gritting his teeth, Seth plunged his fists into the water, holding them there until the cold numbed them. He'd still burn himself, but with any luck, he'd be able to ignore the pain long enough.

Seth grabbed hold of the grille, scaling it as fast as he could. The heat seared his palms. He clenched his teeth and scrabbled onto the hood of the truck. The rumbling engine shuddered beneath him. On hands and knees, he crawled toward the passenger's window.

Seth collapsed in a wet heap into the deep bucket seat. Heat blasted through the open vents. Shuddering, he leaned into it.

The truck driver had a thick, compact build and a garden gnome's pointy beard.

"Dude, you must have balls the size of coconuts to try driving through that shit," he said.

Seth shrugged. "More balls than brains."

The driver chuckled. He shifted the truck into reverse. Easing back, he turned the wheel and drove around the car, angling for the far shore. The monster truck sliced through the floodwaters with the ease of a Coast Guard Cutter through calm seas.

"I'm Seth Crawford."

"Darryl Saintil."

"Good to meet you, Darryl. Sorry to drag you out in the middle of this shit-storm to rescue me."

"Hey, no worries. I was looking for a way to get across. The cop had me stopped, but when you got in over your head, he sent me out. Works better for me this way."

Outside, Seth spied a spotlight reflecting off the thick blanket of cloud cover. He leaned forward, craning his neck toward the light.

“Medical chopper,” Darryl said. “They land over by the middle school.”

Seth’s stomach sank.

“Accident?”

The guy made a smacking sound with his lips and shrugged his shoulders. “Likely. On a night like this, there’s bound to be trouble.”

The truck lurched up the steep embankment, out of the water. Something slid across the seat and bumped against his thigh.

Darryl’s cell phone glimmered in the lights from the dash. Stealing went against everything he believed in, but he needed a phone. He’d give it back, he reasoned, and would even give Darryl a few extra bucks for his trouble. Right now he had to find Marissa.

“I’m going to toss your cell phone in the glove compartment,” Seth said.

“Thanks, man.”

Seth opened the glove compartment and closed it again. Instead of placing the phone inside, he slid it into his coat pocket.

Darryl steered around the barricade on the far side of the water.

“Where do you want me to drop you?”

“Here’s fine.”

Seth stuck out his hand and Darryl shook it.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime. Stay out of the water, you lunatic.”

Seth grinned. He propped the door open and hopped out of the truck. His feet thumped against the pavement. The door slammed and Darryl took off down the main drag.

A lone police officer diverted traffic away from the barrier. Overhead he heard the *whump whump whump* of the chopper blades as they sliced through rain-choked sky, and Seth looked back at the cop.

“What’s with the medevac?”

“Haven’t you caused enough trouble for one night?”

Raising his hands, Seth kept walking. He pulled Darryl’s phone from his pocket and dialed Henry Cahill’s number.

“Hello,” Cahill barked into the phone.

“It’s me. Have you heard from Marissa?”

“Marissa? No. Where have you been? I’ve left you a dozen messages.”

“My phone’s dead.”

“Where are you?”

“Carnation,” Seth said. “Kelly’s gone. Bowman has her. Last I heard from Marissa, she was heading out Route 202. She’s walking right into a trap. We’ve got to find her, Henry, before Bowman does.”

Rounding the next corner, he smelled something, like cedar burning in a hearth. He frowned. On a night like this, the air heavy with rain, he shouldn’t be able to smell someone’s fireplace. He looked up.

Two blocks away a bright column of flames shot up past the rooftops into the inky sky. Thick, noxious plumes of gray smoke collided with the low ceiling of clouds. Seth’s stomach constricted. He quickened his pace.

“You heard what happened there? In Carnation?” Cahill asked.

Seth stopped, his gaze riveted on the blaze. “Uh, yeah. Something about a fire.”

He started at the hurtling flames, horrified. Transfixed. His hands shook and he remembered the green door, the flames, and the agony of his burning flesh. How nothing had dulled the pain. He remembered how the fire had devoured everything in his life that mattered and left him a burned-out shell of a man.

He stared at the blaze. His scars itched.

The only thing that mattered now was Marissa, and short of a miracle, he was going to lose her too.

“Crawford!”

Seth heard Cahill shouting on the other end of the phone.

“I’m here,” he said, unable to tear his gaze away from the flames. “Have you tried pinging their phones?”

“Yeah. Nothing.”

“You’ve tried them all?”

“Marissa, Kelly, Brooke, and Alicia—he’s probably dumped them all.”

“Shit. Shit.”

“I started looking out Route 202 for something that might mean something to Bowman. Marissa wrote a lot of things down, and, well . . .” Cahill’s voice trailed off.

Seth covered an ear, trying to blunt the noise.

“Louder, Henry.”

“There’s a youth camp located two miles downriver from where you’re standing. Andrew Bowman spent a summer there.”

“I need the location. Text it to me.”

“Yeah.” Cahill hesitated. “It may be a dead end.”

Finally Seth turned away from the fire.

“It’s the only lead we’ve got.”





“Can’t . . . feel . . . my legs.”

Brooke’s words hit Kelly like a shock wave. She rocked back on her heels. Kelly squinted into the darkness as she tried to see something. Anything. But the dark closed around her like a thick black hood. She swallowed.

“You can’t feel your legs? You mean like they’ve fallen asleep?”

“Worse.”

“Can you move at all?”

“Some,” Brooke croaked.

“Then you have to do it. We have to find the knife.”

“How?”

Kelly turned toward her sister’s small, scared voice.

“Are you tied up?”

“Foot . . . chained . . .”

A chain? Panic flailed like a trapped bird inside Kelly’s chest.

“Are your hands free?”

“Yes.”

“Then you need to move.”

“Can’t.” Anger sparked in her sister’s voice.

“You have to,” Kelly yelled back. “My hands are tied. I can’t see anything. You have to climb off the bed.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. If you don’t, we’re both going to die here. Is that what you want?”

“I . . . hurt.”

Finding the knife was their only hope. With her hands tied behind her back, she was useless. Kelly needed Brooke to move. It was the only way.

“Stop telling me what you *can’t* do.”

“Bitch,” Brooke spit.

Kelly heard soft hiccupping sobs. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back.

“Look, I know it hurts. I know you don’t want to move, but if we stay here, we’re going to die. Please, Brooke, do it for me.”

For a long time Brooke said nothing. Then Kelly heard a thump. Loud. Sharp.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

A grunt. *Yes.*

Kelly swept her foot in a wide arc, feeling for the knife, praying she didn’t accidentally kick it farther away. She heard Brooke crawling along the floor.

The stale stench of sweat and urine wafted off her sister’s body. Sorrow and revulsion clogged Kelly’s throat. What had Bowman done to her sister? What was he planning to do to her? She had no idea how long ago he’d been here, but she knew he’d be back.

“Got . . . it,” Brooke said.

Kelly’s breath rushed out in a dewy cloud of steam. She turned toward the sound of Brooke’s voice.

“Okay, I’m coming to you.”

Kelly heard Brooke's breathing—shallow and rapid. Sorrow squeezed her heart. She eased forward until she saw Brooke—a dark shape hunched on the floor. Blinking back tears, Kelly knelt beside her.

“It's a switchblade. You'll have to open it.”

“Don't . . . want . . . to cut . . . you.”

“Don't worry about that. If you do, I'll deal with it.”

Kelly bowed her head and waited. Seconds passed like hours. The sound of the howling wind and pounding rain filled the cabin. Finally Brooke's spidery hands found hers. Slowly, haltingly, Brooke placed the blade and began to saw with slow, jerky movements.

“It's . . . hard.”

“I know. I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean those things I said. I just . . . I just had to get you moving.”

Brooke said nothing. She continued sawing the ropes.

“I'm scared, Brooke.”

It wasn't the first time she'd been scared. She remembered Rick's violent outbursts and how she'd huddled on the narrow twin bed, waiting for the screaming to stop. Brooke had sat beside her, holding her hand and telling her everything would be all right. They'd both known it was a lie.

“Me . . . too,” Brooke said.

Kelly wanted to comfort her sister, but no words came. They were stuck in this awful place, together.

In the distance Kelly heard a crash and a rumble, like falling trees. Or something worse. The ground shook. The cabin's floor heaved beneath her knees. Wood cracked and splintered as if the floor had given way. She heard breaking glass. Then it stopped.

“What the hell was that?” she said. No answer. “Brooke?”

A terrible silence filled the cabin. Kelly swung around, searching the dark for her sister.

“Brooke,” Kelly screamed.



In the headlights' narrow beam, the muddy road looked like a goat path, little more than a narrow gravel track leading into the woods. A thick black wall of evergreen trees rose up from the earth like an unbroken line of sentinels. Gravel growled and popped beneath her wheels. Tension pounded into the base of her brain with the force of a sledgehammer.

It was nearly impossible to see out here. Even with the wipers slashing at a blistering pace, sheets of rain swept across the windshield, obscuring her view.

The phone rang, splitting the silence like a shrieking child. She picked up the call, fully expecting to hear Andy's hateful voice.

"Marissa?"

"Oh, Seth. Thank God."

"Where are you?"

"On a forestry road, east of Carnation."

"Pull over and wait for me."

As much as she wanted Seth beside her, she couldn't stop. Thirty minutes had passed since the last time Andy had called. She couldn't afford to waste another second.

"I can't. My girls need me."

"Don't be so fucking stupid. You're doing exactly what he wants."

She heard the panic, the desperation in his voice. She hated herself for hurting him, but what choice did she have? She had to find her girls.

"I have to go, Seth. You know I do."

"He's going to kill you."

His words rocked her to the core. She knew he was right. But it didn't matter.

"I can't leave them."

"Goddammit, Marissa." The phone beeped. Seth's voice cut out. After a second of static, he was back. "I'm not going to lose you. I can't lose you."

His words tore Marissa's heart. Finally she had found a man worth loving—someone strong and kind and good—and she had no choice but leave him behind by doing the one thing sure to tear them apart. He had already lost so much. A wife. A baby. All he wanted was to save her, but Andy Bowman had left her no choice. Kelly and Brooke came first.

"Even if you're right and the worst happens, I have to be with my girls. Even if all we get is three more seconds together . . ." Her voice broke. Tears slid down her cheeks, and she kept her eyes trained on the narrow road ahead.

"Whatever happens . . ." Static on the phone line. "You have to know this isn't your fault. You couldn't have done more than you already have. Remember that."

The phone beeped.

"Seth?" No response. "Seth?"

The call dropped and she lost him. *Dammit.*

She wished she could see him one last time and tell him everything that was in her heart. Say goodbye. But it was too late for that. Hands trembling, she swiped the tears from her face and kept going.

The car rumbled along the single-lane road hugging the hillside. To her right she spied a pile of jagged boulders at the base of the rise. To her left the road fell away into darkness. Silently she

recited the directions Andy had given her, replaying them like a tape over and over again inside her head. Somewhere far below lay the valley floor, the camp, and the swollen Tolt River.

Marissa heard a noise. Deafening. Like a rumbling freight train roaring down the hillside, a deluge of water rushed down the hill.

What the hell was happening?

Something hard and heavy crashed into the passenger's door, knocking the car sideways. Metal groaned. The car careened off the road and lurched down the hill.

Marissa screamed.

The car pitched and rolled. Then nothing. Her stomach plummeted in a sickening drop, like the violent plunge of a roller coaster. Only there was no track below to save her.

The car tumbled down the hillside before jerking to an abrupt halt. Marissa's head smashed into the side window.

Several minutes of nothingness passed. Marissa awoke to a roar, like white water racing through a jagged canyon. Her head throbbed. The sharp edge of the seat belt dug into her neck. She opened her eyes.

It was dark. The air smelled of mud and dirt and . . .

Water, freezing cold, poured into the car from the cracked windshield. With a start she realized where she was. A wave of panic crashed over her.

The river.

All around her the river raged. The current surged swift and strong around the edges of the car, shifting it like prey in its grasp, nudging it deeper, toward the center. Black waves struck the windshield halfway up and rising.

Ice-cold water sluiced through the cracked glass, washing over her knees, filling the car. Panic seized her.

Everything hurt. Sharp pain sizzled down her neck into her lower back. Her breath hissed through clenched teeth. She jammed her thumb against the seat belt button. Nothing happened.

It was hopeless. She was trapped.

The car shifted sideways, nose pointing downriver. The water climbed up the windshield, past the midway mark, a few inches from the top. Fear spiked through her. She tried not to think about the growing pressure and how the cracked windshield might give way altogether and flood the car's interior in one final rush, but she couldn't tear her eyes off the glass and the clawing water pouring in.

She had to get out. She was Brooke and Kelly's last hope.

Desperately she worked the button. She heard a crack. The windshield splintered out into a spider web before her eyes.

She jammed her thumb against the button. She heard a click, and the seatbelt released.

Marissa drove her shoulder into the door, pushing as hard as she could. Pain lit up the left side of her body. It was no use. The pressure of the water outside the car made opening the door impossible.

*Think.* She had to think. Water rose up past her chest. A fresh wave of panic shivered through her. Marissa forced it back and focused on a single thought.

*The window.*

Marissa swiveled in her seat. Pain shrieked through her head. She braced herself against the console. Clenching her teeth, she pulled her legs back and drove her heels into the glass. A muffled scream escaped her lips. She kicked two, three more times, and the window gave way.

Water gushed into the car. It ran over her shoulders and up her neck, shocking her skin like a thousand stinging bees. She gasped.

Dirty water filled her mouth. She coughed and spit it out. Drawing in a last desperate breath, she ducked beneath the water. The shoes slid from her feet as she launched herself through the broken window.

Marissa scrambled to the surface. The cold night air filled her burning lungs while all around her the river roared like an angry monster. Catching her up in the clawing current, it dragged her downriver. She kicked her feet, fighting to stay above the surface. The shore seemed impossibly far. Her limbs felt like lead weights.

Marissa flung her arms wide, searching, grasping for anything to hold on to. Up ahead she saw it. Thick. Dark. A fallen tree.

“Please . . . ,” she sputtered.

Marissa thrashed against the current, but it was no use. The river was too strong. It took everything she had just to keep from drowning.

The shoreline rocketed past. She was going to miss the tree. She was going to . . .

Pain lit up her leg. A black boulder jutted above the surface, tossing her sidelong toward the tree. Marissa reached for the nearest branch. Her hands were too stiff to grab on. Instead she hooked an arm around the branch, clinging to it like a lifeline.

Water raged all around her, flowed over her head. She coughed and sputtered, pulling herself along the branch, gasping for air. Branches tore at her sweater, gouging her hands and arms. Shivering violently, she inched herself along the tree until finally her feet touched the rocky bottom.

Marissa anchored her toes among the smooth stones and fought her way toward shore. She stumbled from the water and collapsed on the sodden earth.

The rain pounded relentlessly down. Safe from the river’s grasp, Marissa threw her arms across her face and let the tears come. All the pain, the fear, the exhaustion poured out of her in huge, racking sobs.

A bone-chilling blast of wind swept off the water, and Marissa shuddered. Wiping her face, she sat up. The girls were here at the bottom of the valley. But where?

Struggling to her feet, she wrung the water from her clothes as best she could and looked around. The camp couldn’t be far. Before the mudslide hit, she’d been close. She had to keep going. But which way?

A perilous mound of trees and debris from the mudslide hulked behind her, like half of the mountain had come down. There was no way she could climb it. It was too high and too dangerous. Marissa turned the other way and started walking.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she trudged toward a dense line of trees. Shivering, she stumbled across the rocks and branches strewn across the forest floor. Sharp edges bit into her bare feet. She ignored the pain and pushed on.

Lost among the trees, she felt doubt swirl around her like the howling wind. She didn’t know where she was going. She should have waited for Seth. What if she didn’t find the camp? What if she died out here, alone in the cold? Who would find her girls?

Teeth chattering, she hunched her shoulders and kept walking through the woods. Rain pattered against the rustling tree branches. The smell of the dank earth closed in like a freshly dug grave.

Too tired to go on, Marissa fell to her knees. Through the thinning line of trees, she saw it. A cabin.

Hope flared in her chest, bright and fleeting. Even if this wasn’t the camp, maybe she could find help. Marissa climbed to her feet and limped across the sodden earth.

The cabin was small, a single-story A-frame, the kind of place Brooke's Girl Scout troop might have stayed.

Marissa stumbled into the clearing. Bare feet sinking into the muddy valley floor, she loped into a run.

The cabin was completely dark. She scaled the stairs, pounding on the door with her closed fist.

"Hello. Is there anyone in there? Hello."

No answer. She twisted the knob. It was locked. If she could find a way in, maybe she could find a phone. The window was too high, beyond reach.

Marissa turned and trudged down the stairs. She rounded the other side of the cabin and stopped. A second cabin. Her heart quickened. A fallen tree had caved in half the roof.

She started toward it. Shuffling along in the wet grass, she stubbed her toes on something hard. She yelped. The long handle looked black in the wet grass. It lay a few feet from a haphazardly stacked pile of wood. An ax. An old, rusty ax, dull as shit.

Wrapping both hands around the handle, she heaved it off the ground, swaying under its weight. Steadying herself, she approached the second cabin.

The door flapped open. It cracked against the wall. Marissa gripped the ax handle tight. Senses fully tuned to her surroundings, she crept inside. The smell hit her hard. Bad. Urine. Mold. Death.

A small cry escaped her lips. She thought about Kim Covey and Brooke. This was the place. She could feel it.

"Hello. Hello," she called.

Nothing.

She took another step into the inky darkness. Listening. Praying.

"Hello?"

"Help."

The shrill, thin cry carried on the wind. Marissa's heart jolted. She turned and sprinted through the door.

"Kelly. Brooke," she screamed.

"Help."

Marissa spun toward the sound. On the edge of the clearing, she saw it. A third cabin loomed ahead, dipping into the water's edge.

She ran.





“Marissa,” Seth yelled. “Marissa.”  
Static on the phone line. She was gone.

*Fuck. Fuck.*

Damned thing. Seth wanted to smash the phone against the ground, shatter it into a million pieces. He hit redial, but the call refused to connect. The camp. He had to find the camp before Marissa walked straight into Bowman’s trap.

Seth launched the map application on the phone. He stared at the tiny screen, waiting for it to load. Slow. The signal was weak. Useless piece of fucking shit. He shoved the phone back in his pocket.

A blast of wind tore off the river, driving the yellow-and-orange flames high into the night sky like an angry serpent. Seth headed toward the fire.

Twenty yards away he spied a fireman hunkered down, crouched over a map. Seth jogged toward him. The raw wind cut straight through his wet clothes and he shivered. Cahill had said the youth camp was only a few miles from here, downriver. Remote, it was just the kind of place where Bowman could do his dirty work.

“I need your map.”

The fireman glanced up. Surprise registered in his bright-blue eyes. Seth’s greedy gaze found the bridge, not far from where he was standing. He traced the blue line east, following the winding path of the Tolt River.

All around him emergency personnel were shouting orders. Acrid-smelling smoke carried on the wind.

“You’re wet,” the fireman said.

“Yeah, I had a little car trouble. The map?”

Standing, the fireman reached behind him. He grabbed a thin blanket out of the fire engine.

“Here,” he said, handing it to Seth. “Now get back behind the perimeter.”

He hooked a thumb to where a ragged line of onlookers gathered.

“I’m a cop. SPD.”

The fireman arched an eyebrow.

“I’m impressed,” he said, looking anything but. “You still need to get back. With this wind, I can’t predict which way the fire will turn.”

Seth wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. The fire roared. Bright columns of flames devoured the building. Seth heard a groan . . . deep, inhuman. The structure heaved.

He heard a shout. “Get back. Get back.”

The line of firemen broke. A crack, louder than a shotgun blast, rang out. Fear coiled inside Seth. Another groan. The roof collapsed. Cinders, ashes, and sparks billowed out into the night sky.

Freeze-frame images flashed through his mind. The green door. The flames. And Holly. How he couldn’t save her. How he would never save her.

“Did everyone get out of the building before it went up?” Seth asked.

“According to the cook, yes. We won’t know for sure until we investigate.” The fireman stared up at Seth. His eyes narrowed. “What did you say your name was?”

“Look, I just need to get across the river.”

The fireman snorted. “Tonight? Good luck.”

“You must have police boats.”

The man cocked an eyebrow and shrugged a burly shoulder. “That’s more your department than mine. You can try to track down the police chief, but on a night like this, with the storm, the flood, and the shooting, all available vessels will be used for search and rescue, not a pleasure cruise down the Tolt.”

“A shooting?”

*Oh shit.*

“If you’re a cop, you would have heard it on your scanner.”

“I’m off duty.” It was a clumsy lie, and from the look on the man’s face, Seth knew he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Uh-huh.”

“Have you identified the victim?”

The fireman stood up and folded the map. “You’re asking a lot of questions . . .”

And he wasn’t going to get answers here. Seth snatched the map and took off at a run.

The roads were choked with traffic—people trying to leave town, cut off by the flood. He ran his finger along the blue line of the river and searched for a symbol, a triangle, a green patch, any indication of where the camp might be. Nothing.

If Cahill was right, he had to head east.

Seth raced across the street, heading toward the river. Neighborhoods flew past. Densely packed rows of houses thinned out as he neared the water.

Seth pulled out the phone and dialed a number he knew as well as his own.

“Alvarez,” the lieutenant growled into the phone.

“Brad, I know where they are. I need backup . . .”

Seth relayed the facts as quickly as he could. Alvarez had questions, but there was no time.

He slipped behind a beat-up old bungalow. The soupy grass squelched beneath his feet as he headed toward the water’s edge. A few feet away from an outbuilding, he spied a bulky shape.

A boat. Covered with a tarp.

Light spilled from the windows of the bungalow. He heard music. Laughter. A party in full swing. With his luck the fucking boat would be riddled with holes or rusted through. He crouched down beside the hull and removed the tarp. It flapped and rattled in the wind.

It wasn’t much, just a small aluminum boat. Light. With an outboard motor. He ran his hand along the bottom. No holes. It would do.

He started toward the water. The hull clanged hollowly against a boulder like a gong. Seth cringed. He glanced back at the house.

Over the roaring river, he heard it. A dog . . . barking. Not a high-pitched yip or whine, but the deep, throaty barks of a big dog.

The bungalow’s door sprang open. Seth caught a whiff of skunky smoke on the wind. Pot. As quick as a shot, a dark shape burst from the house and raced toward him, barking and snarling.

*Christ.*

He grabbed hold of the boat’s bow and broke for the river. The blanket billowed around his shoulders and sailed off, flailing up into the night sky like the wings of a crow. The hull of the boat clanged and thumped in his wake.

He was still fifteen yards from the water’s edge, and the dog—some kind of tank with legs—was closing fast.

“Kage,” a man shouted. The dog slowed. His ears pricked back at the sound of his master’s voice. “Shut the hell up. It’s just a squirrel. Stupid fucking dog.”

Ignoring his master now, Kage surged forward. Powerful shoulders rippled beneath a slick black coat. He sniffed the air. Snorted. Seth kept running.

“Hey, bro,” a voice in the distance called. “Dude’s jacking yer boat.”

“What the fuck?”

Three skinny men stepped out of the bungalow. The dog lunged at Seth. White fangs snapped the air, so close he could smell the dog’s fishy breath. He tripped. Fell back. His hands flailed wide and he landed in the river. The dog charged in, snarling and barking, drool dripping from his powerful jaws.

The fast-moving current grabbed hold of the boat, pulling it downriver.

Seth lunged deeper into the frigid water, grabbing hold of the aluminum side. The boat dipped. Kage barked. Chest-deep in the river, the dog gave up the chase.

Water surged around Seth, clawing at his legs, threatening to throw him off balance. Then a shotgun blast filled the air with a deafening crack. Seth crouched behind the hull. Another shotgun blast sounded, carrying across the river. Praying he didn’t overturn the boat, Seth climbed over the side and collapsed on the bottom, chest heaving.

The roaring water drowned out everything as the bungalow receded in the distance.

Seth started the motor.



“Kelly? Brooke?”

It was her mother’s voice. Kelly was sure of it. Hope surged through her. She jumped to her feet. Stumbling through the dark, she tripped twice before reaching the door.

“We’re in here. Hurry.”

The ropes bit into her wrists. Winding up, she drove her boot into the door as hard as she could. Pain flared in her toes, but she kept on kicking it, wishing it were Andy’s head, trying to make as much noise as she possibly could.

“Stand back,” her mother called.

Kelly did as she was told. *Thwack*. The wooden door split. *Thwack. Thwack*. The axhead hurtled through, snagging on the splintered wood. Kelly bounced on the balls of her feet, wanting to rush forward and help. But with her hands tied behind her back, she was useless.

Marissa wrenched the axhead free. She heaved it into the door with all the force she could muster. Kelly heard her mother panting from the effort. Each blow came slower. Harder. Finally she broke through.

“Oh God, Kelly,” she called, her voice quaking with fear. “Where are you?”

“Over here,” Kelly called, moving closer.

Marissa let out a cry—half sigh, half sob—and dropped the ax. Rushing forward, she threw her arms around Kelly’s shoulders.

Her mother smelled like sweat and mud and rain. Surrendering to the awkward hug, Kelly dropped her head to her mother’s shoulder, wishing she were small again. Wanting to crawl into the safe circle of her mother’s arms, like she had when she was little.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m all right. You?”

“A little banged up, but I’m fine. Brooke’s not.”

Marissa swung her gaze wildly around the cabin, but Kelly knew it was hard to see much in here. The darkness was like a heavy black veil, blanketing their surroundings. She could barely see her mother, and Marissa was less than two feet away.

“Where is she?”

“Over here.”

Kelly crossed the cabin floor. She stopped a foot away from her sister’s prone form. Marissa dropped to her knees. Kelly heard the uneven rhythm of her mother’s shuddering breaths, and she knew Marissa was either crying or trying not to.

“Oh God. Brooke.”

Her mother knelt over Brooke, her hands running over the narrow length of her sister’s body, as if trying to convince herself that Brooke was real. Kelly knew exactly how she felt. A choked sob escaped Marissa’s lips, and Kelly’s heart constricted.

“She’s so . . .” Marissa’s voice broke off. “What did he do to her?”

“She says she’s out of insulin,” Kelly blurted. “Mom, she can’t feel her feet.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. Is she going to be all right?”

Marissa didn’t answer. Kelly heard a slow clicking like the second hand of a clock ticking and she knew what it was.

“You’ve got insulin. You think it will help?” Kelly asked, afraid to hope.

Marissa didn’t answer right away. When she did, sadness thickened her words.

“It will do some good. I don’t know how much though. We need to get her out of here.”

The wind caught the ragged remnants of the door. It slammed hard against the wall. Kelly spun, expecting to see him there. Watching them. All she saw was the charcoal sky.

“Where is he?” Marissa asked.

“When I woke up, he wasn’t here. I don’t know where he is.”

“He’ll be back.”

A chill raced through Kelly, and she knew her mother was right. He would be back, and by then they’d better be long gone.

“I had a knife. Brooke dropped it when she passed out. If we can find it . . .”

“Okay.”

Marissa crouched on the floor. Everything was slower, clumsier, scarier in the dark.

“Any luck?”

“Not yet.”

“Shit, Mom. Hurry.”

“I’m trying, Kelly.”

Kelly bounced her weight from one foot to another in a nervous dance, like a boxer waiting for the next round. She thought about the dojo and all the things Logan had taught her, hoping she’d remember them if Andy came back.

Kelly’s eyes flicked to the doorway. Nothing.

“Got it,” Marissa said, clutching the knife.

Kelly turned. The ropes dug painfully into Kelly’s raw wrists. She bit the inside of her cheek and forced herself to stand as still as a statue while her mother continued to saw.

“Come on, come on,” Kelly muttered under her breath.

“I’ve almost got it.”

The pressure on the ropes increased and Kelly hissed. She heard a noise out on the porch, like boots scraping against raw wood. A narrow beam of light pierced the dark, and Kelly shrank back.

“Mom.”

Panicked, Marissa lost her grip and dropped the knife.

Andy lumbered through the door. The flashlight caught Kelly full in the eyes, blinding her. Kelly squinted and looked away. He crossed the room with long, slow strides, like he had all the time in the world.

This was it.

Each slow step drove shock waves of fear rippling through her gut. She wanted to shrink away. She wanted to run, but she didn’t because she knew that was what he wanted. He wanted her scared. She refused to give the bastard the satisfaction.

Kelly stood strong, with her body angled sideways and her weight on her back foot, just the way Logan had taught her. Hands still tied behind her back, she stood like a shield between him and her family.

“Looks like the band’s back together,” Andy said with an unhinged grin.

He was bigger than she. Stronger. All she had was her quickness and the element of surprise.

Kelly lashed out with her foot, aiming for his groin. He jerked back, dropping the flashlight, easily deflecting the blow. He grabbed her heel and shoved, knocking her off balance. Kelly careened to the side and crashed to the floor. Andy’s laugh, low and chilling, rumbled through the cabin.

The flashlight rolled along the floor. Shadows danced across the walls. Brooke's crumpled form was caught in its beam.

"Oh, princess, you'll have to do better than that."

"Kelly," her mother shouted.

Marissa charged. She rammed her body squarely into his chest. Andy reeled back a few inches and nearly fell. Quick as lightning, his fist flashed out, connecting hard with Marissa's temple. Kelly heard the crack of the blow. Marissa tottered. Her knees buckled and she crumpled to the ground like a sack of flour.

"Looks like it's just you and me, princess."

He smiled, just a flash of teeth in the shadows, and for one brief second, it wasn't Andy looming over her mother, but Rick. He glared down with his drunken stare and his eyes full of hate. Then Andy drilled his fist into her mother's face. A fierce and terrible hatred welled up inside Kelly.

She wasn't a little kid anymore. And Rick wasn't here. It was his fucked-up son standing over her mother, and there was no way she was going to let him hit her again.

Chest heaving, Kelly lurched to her feet. She sank back into the shadows, circling around him. He spun and she heaved her boot into the side of his knee. She heard the crunch of bone beneath her heel. Andy grunted.

Before he could reach her, she skittered away.

Andy lunged. His hand snaked out. His fist grazed the side of her face; the bloodstone ring gashed her cheek. A bolt of pain as Kelly pivoted away.

"Get back here, bitch," he grunted.

Kelly kicked again, aiming for his groin for the second time, and missed. Her boot connected with his quad.

"Fuck," he cursed.

She stepped back. Too slow. His hand shot out, connecting with her side. Pain exploded in her ribs, robbing her of breath. She fell to one knee.

He was coming. She needed to move, but her strength had fled. She knew speed was her only ally, and she fought to catch her breath.

Andy reached out. Kelly ducked her head, and his fist rushed past. Missed. Kelly launched up, driving her shoulder into his solar plexus with all her might. More effective than a punch—Andy stumbled back. Off-balance, he fell.

Kelly regained her footing. Andy rolled onto his side as she stepped closer. Quick as lightning, his arm shot out and clamped around her waist. Jerked off her feet, Kelly slammed into the ground. Her head cracked against the floor. A black veil of unconsciousness enveloped her. For a fraction of an instant, everything stopped.

Kelly opened her eyes.

Andy straddled her chest. His hands snaked around her throat. Hot, coppery blood flooded her mouth. She spit into his face. Surprised, Andy reared back. Kelly shoved him off and scrambled away. Bolting to her feet, she took a half step back. Her legs were still wobbly, and the room dipped and swayed around her.

She shook her head, regaining her bearings.

"What's your damage anyway?" she said, trying to get a bead on where he was.

"You don't know what he was like."

"Who? Rick? You're blaming your father for what you've done? What did we ever do to you?"



A heartbeat of silence passed between them. He was close. Too close. He was right in front of her.

“Andy Bowman is dead.”

His fist cocked back. Kelly steeled herself for the blow.



Marissa opened one eye. The other was on fire, swollen to a slit. She could hear Kelly's voice, shouting, goading Andy. Pain crackled like sheet lightning through her. Her breath hissed like venting steam from between clenched teeth.

Her vision cleared and she saw Andy's shadow. His fist was cocked back, ready to smash into Kelly's face.

In the flashlight's glare, Marissa caught sight of the insulin pen. She grabbed it, spun the dial, and jabbed it deep into Andy's thigh. Her thumb pressed down on the plunger, and she counted the clicks—far more than a normal shot.

She prayed the needle hit its mark. It was so tiny it could have broken off on Andy's jeans. Distracted for an instant, Andy swatted the needle away.

Kelly seized the moment. She dove forward and drilled her shoulder into Andy's side. Knocked off-balance, he fell to the ground.

"Mom, the knife," Kelly said.

She drove her boot into Andy's ribs, his hip, anywhere he was exposed.

"The police are on their way," Marissa called. It was a stupid, desperate thing to say.

Andy grabbed hold of Kelly's boot and twisted. Kelly slammed to the ground.

"You're such a bad liar, *Mom*," he scoffed.

Marissa grabbed the flashlight and searched for the knife, desperate to protect her daughters from this wreck of a human being.

She heard his footsteps closing in behind her. The heavy tread of his boots vibrated on the floor. She turned and shone the light directly into his eyes. He raised his hand, shielding himself from the glare.

Kelly ducked into the shadows.

"Let us go, Andy. We're nothing to you," Marissa said.

He just kept coming.

"Let you go?" he mocked. "So one of you can show up out of the blue and fuck up my life again? My fiancée is dead. I lost everything because I ran into your goddamned daughter at a bar. No way I let that happen again."

His voice echoed through the cabin. A deep, visceral fear raced through Marissa. She kept the light aimed in his face and backed away.

"Is that why you killed your father? To bury your past?"

"I should have killed him years ago. He deserved to die. So do you. You left me there, you bitch. You packed up your shit and took the easy way out."

"We didn't . . ."

"Don't you fucking lie to me. I saved you and you left me there. You left me."

His enraged cry cut through the darkness, slicing through Marissa. She had left him. Back then he was seventeen years old. Bigger than Rick. Stronger than Rick. Almost a man. She never thought he needed her. She had left him in that house without a second thought. What kind of mother was she?

"Oh God, Andy. I'm so sorry," Marissa said.

"Fuck you."

Andy bolted forward and knocked the flashlight from her hands. Marissa cried out.

"Mom!" Kelly shouted.

A flash of metal glinted in the light, and the knife hissed across the floor. Marissa dove for it. Andy's fist lashed out. The blow swung overhead, and she scrabbled toward the knife. She grasped the handle.

Andy hauled Marissa off the floor by her hair. White-hot pain flashed through her head.

"Bitch," he bellowed. "You goddamned bitch."

Spit flew from his lips, spraying her cheeks. She gripped the knife and lashed out in a wild arc. The blade sliced through his neck. He screamed and released his grip, and Marissa dropped to the floor.

Andy's broad hand clapped over the wound. Blood welled between his fingers.

"Fuck," he screamed. "Fuck. What did you do?"

Marissa scrambled to her feet, poised for another attack. Instead of rushing toward her, Andy pitched wildly out the door and into the night.

"Kelly."

"Over here."

Marissa rushed toward the sound of Kelly's voice. Fear writhed like a living thing inside her. Her hands shook violently as she sawed through the last of the ropes.

"Brooke," Kelly called.

"Yeah." Her voice sounded like broken glass.

"He'll be back. Let's get out of here," Marissa said.

They crouched over Brooke's crumpled form. Hands cupped gently around her, Marissa and Kelly eased her off the floor. Brooke groaned like each movement caused her pain. Her bones jutted up through the thin layer of muscle and skin. She weighed no more than a twelve-year-old girl, and Marissa's heart broke.

They balanced Brooke's weight carefully between them and shuffled toward the door.

The door burst open. Andy swayed unsteadily in the frame. He dropped a gasoline can down on the floor. It clanged against the wood with a hollow thud, gasoline spurting out of the nozzle. Like a rabid pit bull's, his lips peeled away from his teeth in a hateful grin.

Blood blossomed in a dark-red stain soaking the collar of his jacket.

"Oh shit," Kelly said.

Andy's grin widened. He kicked the can over. Gas spewed onto the floor. The overpowering stench of the acrid fumes filled the cabin. Andy stood on the edge of the pool. The pure loathing in his eyes left her breathless.

A deranged grin stretched impossibly wide across his ashen face. Then his legs buckled, and Andy fell to his knees in the gasoline.

For a split second everything stopped. Hope fluttered in Marissa's chest.

"Is he drunk?" Kelly whispered.

"His blood sugar is dropping."

"Like with Brooke?"

"Faster because he's not diabetic."

Andy looked dazed. Disoriented.

"Now," Marissa said, tightening her arm around Brooke.

They shuffled toward the door. Fissures of pain shivered down Marissa's back. Brooke cried out, but Marissa ignored her and kept moving.

Andy reached into his pocket and clumsily pulled out a lighter. A Zippo. A flash of recognition jolted through Marissa. It was Rick's lighter, the same one she had given him as an anniversary gift

years before.

His eyes met Marissa's.

In a low, slurred growl, he said, "I may die here, bitch. But so will you."

Andy's thumb grazed the dial. She heard a hiss and flick. Nothing happened. He tried again. This time the flame flickered to life.

Marissa stared horror-struck as he dropped the lighter into the pool of gasoline.

*Whoosh.*

Flames burst up from the cabin floor. A blast of heat drove them back. The doorway disappeared behind a column of smoke and fire, cutting off their only escape route.

Flames raced up Andy's arms.

His shrill, inhuman screams filled the air. Marissa turned her horrified gaze away from the specter of Andy writhing, thrashing, stumbling out into the rainy night, knowing that as long as she lived, she would never purge that memory from her mind.

Flames snaked up the walls and raced along the cedar beams like a living thing. The flickering light illuminated the cabin, and for the first time she could see around her. It was bigger than it looked. There was a wide rectangular window at the far end. Six, maybe seven feet off the floor. If they could get to it, maybe they could climb out.

"Over there. The window."

Marissa clamped an arm around Brooke's waist, and they ran toward the back of the cabin. Brooke screamed. She jerked to a halt. Kelly lost her grip and Brooke fell to the floor. Stretched taut, the chain glimmered in the firelight, binding Brooke's leg to the iron bed frame. Marissa heaved on the chain. It was looped around the leg of the bed, which was bolted to the floor. Her shoulders sagged. There was no time.

She spun, desperately searching for the ax. It lay on the floor, inches from the flames.

"Take Brooke," Marissa said.

The hiss and crackle of burning wood filled Marissa's ears. Fire lapped at the floorboards, and she leaped over the flames. Gasping for air, she lunged for the ax.

Marissa gripped the handle. Her back shrieking, she raised the ax overhead. Kelly used her body to shield Brooke while Marissa took aim. Ignoring the pain, she heaved the blade at the chain. The impact of the blow shook the cabin. The ax blade glanced off the thick chain and stuck in the floor.

Marissa wrestled the blade free. There was no way she was going to cut through the chain. Instead she heaved the ax into a floorboard beneath the bed. If she could free the bed frame from the floor, she could pull the chain loose.

Each blow of the ax drove sparks of pain through her body. Smoke, sweat, and tears stung Marissa's eyes. She didn't quit.

"Go," Brooke croaked.

"I won't leave you," Kelly yelled over the roaring flames.

With one last blow the floorboard splintered. Marissa fell to her knees and heaved on the chain. It slid out from beneath the bed frame. Brooke was free.

Marissa sprang to her feet and scooped an arm around Brooke's back. Burning chunks of wood rained down from the walls. All around them the fire hissed and popped and cracked. The furnace blast of heat was unbearable, and sweat ran down Marissa's back. They stumbled toward the window.

Kelly stood staring seven feet up, a desperate look on her face.

"Mom, we can't reach."

Marissa eased Brooke to the floor.

“I’m going to boost you up. You have to pull Brooke through.”

Kelly’s mouth went slack. Horror-struck, she stared at Marissa.

“What about you? How will you . . . ?”

“I’ll climb out after you.”

Kelly’s wild eyes brimmed with anger and fear.

“Bullshit, Mom. I can’t reach and I’m taller than you.”

Marissa coughed the smoke from her lungs. She was asking Kelly to do the unthinkable. But they were out of options.

She gripped Kelly’s shoulders in both hands.

“I love you, Kelly. I always have. I need you to be strong now, to do this for me.”

“Mom, no.”

Kelly’s shoulders shook. Sobs choked out her words and opened up a huge, yawning ache in Marissa’s chest. She pulled Kelly roughly into her arms.

“You’re the only one who can do it.”

“I can’t leave you.”

Marissa eased Kelly back and stared directly into her daughter’s eyes for the last time. So many memories filled Marissa’s head. Baby fingers, pigtails, dandelion bouquets, skinned knees, and good-night kisses. So many sweet memories.

“Please,” she said.

The cabin floor shuddered as a piece of the ceiling came crashing down. A billowing cloud of heat and smoke hurtled toward them.

Marissa hunkered down beside the wall, bracing her weight against it.

Sobbing, Kelly planted her foot on Marissa’s back. Marissa groaned under her daughter’s weight. Her legs shook, threatening to give way, but she closed her eyes and focused on a place deep inside her, drawing on her last store of strength. The pain didn’t matter. There was no tomorrow. All that mattered was getting Brooke and Kelly somewhere safe.

Up above she heard the breaking glass. Refreshed with oxygen, the fire reared up.

Finally Kelly’s weight lifted.

Wind and rain blasted in through the open window. Marissa heaved Brooke onto her shoulders. Shaking under the extra weight, Marissa stood. Pain howled through her back, but she clenched her teeth, fighting through it. She staggered to the window.

Kelly reached down. Behind Marissa the fire raged. The walls of the cabin popped and snapped. Smoke stung Marissa’s eyes and burned her lungs.

Kelly grabbed Brooke’s arms. Marissa planted her feet wide and pushed Brooke as high as she could manage. Her legs shook and sweat poured down her face.

With one leg inside the cabin and the other outside, Kelly straddled the window frame and hauled Brooke up. Cradling her sister’s weight against her own body, she shifted, leaning out the window into the driving rain.

Marissa watched on helplessly as Kelly swung Brooke out the window. Lowering Brooke as close to the ground as she could, Kelly released her grip.

A fierce stab of love and sadness pierced Marissa’s heart. She nodded at Kelly, urging her to go. Mute, her face streaked with tears, Kelly reached down, urging Marissa to grab on to her outstretched hand.

Marissa jumped as high as she could. Her fingertips grazed Kelly's. She fell to the floor, her ankle twisted beneath her. Kelly screamed.

It was no use.

“Go,” Marissa yelled.

Kelly sat frozen in the window frame, shoulders slumped. With one final look, Kelly swung her leg over the window ledge and dropped from view forever.

A shuddering wail burst from Marissa's lips. Exhausted, she pressed her back to the wall. The flames closed in. A fierce coughing spasm racked her body, sending sparks of pain searing through her. Bowing her head to her knees, she gripped Elizabeth's amulet tight in her sweaty hand, shielding her face from the blistering heat.

Elizabeth. She'd promised Elizabeth she would find Brooke. And she had. She had. They were out. They were safe.

She'd made so many mistakes, as a mother, as a woman. She'd lived with so much guilt, so many regrets about things that she had done or hadn't done or should have done. But none of it mattered now. In the end she had done the one thing that meant the most. She had saved her daughters.

It was enough.

Eyes squeezed tight, Marissa shut out the world around her. Now, in the few moments she had left, she searched for the happiest moment she could recall. A second later she had it—her two beautiful girls on the Oregon Coast.

She focused all her energy on remembering every detail of the day they'd spent at Cannon Beach, freezing it in time—cool waves racing up the beach, thick, the heat of the summer sun in her face, warm sand in between her toes, Kelly's smiles, and Brooke's laughter trailing in the wind.

She thought about Seth.

Seth was a gift.

A powerful wave of love washed over Marissa. Panic receded like the waves racing away from shore. And she forgot all about the cabin, the fire, the unbearable heat, the pain she felt. Marissa forgot everything except her family. Outside. Safe.

All around her the cabin groaned and spit and died. But in her mind, on the Oregon Coast, on that beautiful summer day, Marissa felt no fear.





The boat's motor whined like a sulky teenager in the powerful current. Seth's teeth chattered. Hunkered down in the back of the boat, he stared into the soupy night. He couldn't see shit out here. Between the rain, the wind, and the dark, he was driving blind down the river.

*Bang.* The boat shuddered and veered right. Seth pitched forward. He grasped the aluminum sides with both hands, regaining his balance.

The grinding of metal against rock scraped down the side of the hull, and Seth tightened his grip on the tiller.

Shit, that was close. Whatever it was could have easily punched through the hull and sent him sailing into the river again, sucked under by the current. This time there would be no monster truck to save him, no firemen or police to fish him out of the river. He was on his own.

Cahill had said the camp was a few miles downriver, but he had no idea how far he'd already gone. He could have easily shot past it. Without any lights or any markers, finding it would be nearly impossible. Seth searched the shoreline for a clearing in the trees, rooftops, anything that indicated the edge of the camp, but there was nothing. Just the river and the miles of darkness stretching out ahead.

Terrified he'd missed it, Seth looked back, but it was useless. Even if he wanted to, there was no way he could turn the boat around. With the boat firmly in the river's grasp, the outboard motor was no match for the swift current. Seth rounded the bend and he saw it.

A thick column of flames and smoke twisted and writhed above the trees, stretching up into the inky sky. It was like a beacon in the night, and he saw it and knew.

Seth dropped his scarred face into his hands. The boat swerved.

*Oh God. Oh God.*

Closing his eyes, he saw the green door. The flames. He heard the sirens, too far away. His scars itched and he knew. He knew what came next.

Marissa.

Dead.

Seth raised his head from his trembling hands and watched the bright flames arc into the stormy sky, a terrible grief clawing inside him. Fire raced across the roof of the small cabin, and he knew with an awful, painful certainty what lay at the end of this journey.

*Pain. And loss.*

Seth stared into the flames and saw his life combust around him, the fire devouring everything he'd ever loved until there was nothing left.

The boat hurtled downriver, unheeded, pushed along on the powerful current. There on the shore he saw a slender figure jumping, arms scissoring wide overhead.

*Kelly.*

He recognized her narrow face, the wet blonde hair plastered to her scalp.

*Only Kelly.*

She was pointing at the cabin. Screaming. He couldn't hear her over the roaring river, the whining motor, his pulse throbbing in his ears.

He saw the single word on her lips and knew.

*Mom.*

She was in there. Alive? Dead? He didn't know. But one thing was for sure. He couldn't leave her there. Not alone. Not this time.

"Ah, fuck it," Seth growled.

Waving Kelly out of the way, he grabbed the tiller and jacked the throttle wide.

The fear of what lay beneath the water's surface was dissolved by the desperate need to get there. He stopped fighting the current and used it to propel him faster. The motor whined. The boat surged forward.

Cranking on the tiller, he angled toward shore, picking up speed, slicing through the black river. Up ahead he saw something metal reflect in the firelight.

What was it? Jutting up above the surface, it was the jagged edge of a windshield. A car? Marissa's car? Seth sped toward it, adjusting his angle, lining up like it was a ramp. Dead center.

He prayed it would work.

Metal groaned underneath the boat's weight. The bow pitched up. The boat launched out of the water and sailed through the cold night air.

Crouching low, Seth held on for dear life as the boat speared through the wall of flame. Wood crashed and splintered. Debris flew, and the hull shuddered. Seth was thrown clear.

He crashed on the floor near the back of the cabin. Flames danced and writhed all around him. The cabin groaned as if angered by his presence.

Fear drove Seth to his feet. He leaped back; a huge chunk of ceiling narrowly missed him.

"Marissa," he screamed, desperate, searching everywhere for her.

The blistering heat from the fire scalded his skin, igniting his scars like they were burning. Again.

Smoke rushed along the ceiling toward the broken window at the back wall, and he knew it was his only hope. Stumbling toward it, he saw her sprawled facedown on the floor near the back wall.

A loud crack, a hundred times louder than thunder, shook the cabin. Seth surged toward her. The cabin's floor heaved and groaned.

Marissa lay sprawled sideways on the floor like a broken doll.

*Oh God. Oh God, no.*

She was dead. Just like in his nightmares. She was dead. He couldn't save her. He couldn't . . .

A scream wrenched free from deep in his chest.

He pitched forward, landing beside her.

The floor shook. Wood tore. Another crack and the front half of the cabin was torn away by the raging black river. Heat seared across Seth's back. He gathered Marissa's limp form in his arms. He buried his face in her smoky hair.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Clutching her tight, he broke for the hole in the wall made by the boat. Flames shot up from the burning floor, singeing his hair, his hands, every inch of his exposed skin. Ignoring the pain, he ran for the opening, shielding Marissa from the flames as best he could.

The cabin heaved and the roof gave way. Seth launched out into the rainy night. He landed hard on his knees. Marissa tumbled from his arms onto the wet grass. Behind him flames shot high into the inky sky.

Seth buried his face in his hands—black and burned and shaking. He should have found a way to stop her, called the cops, had her pulled over. Something. Anything. He knew this was what Bowman wanted. He'd known in his gut as soon as he saw the fire in Carnation that this was how things would end.

He'd failed her. Just like he'd failed Holly. Just like he'd failed everyone.

Fingertips grazed his arm. Seth raised his head. Marissa's face was caked in soot and blood. One eye was swollen shut. The other opened. Her gaze locked with his.

Her lips moved.

*Seth.*

He pulled in a deep, ragged breath, barely daring to hope. He grasped her small hand in both of his, shaking.

“Oh God, Marissa. I thought I'd lost you.”

Kelly rushed toward them, screaming, “Mom! Mom!”

Marissa rolled onto her side, coughing. Kelly fell to her knees and threw her arms around her mother. Great wrenching sobs racked her body. Seth placed a soothing hand on Kelly's back.

Glancing up, he spied a form five feet away, closer to the river.

Legs still shaky, he rose, limping toward Brooke. Another body lay facedown in the grass, burned. *Bowman?* It had to be. Seth rolled the body over. Dead. Bowman was dead. He kept moving toward Brooke.

Brushing the matted mane of hair aside, he crouched down and pressed his fingers into the side of her neck and searched for a pulse.

*Nothing.*

“Brooke,” Marissa croaked.

Just speaking triggered another coughing spasm. Kelly's arm circled her mother's shoulders and she stared at Seth—looking every bit the scared teenager she was.

Seth rolled Brooke onto her back and crossed his palms. He drove them into her chest. Pain from his burns seared through him, but he kept going—knowing he was too late . . . knowing he had to try.



The church was filled to capacity. Bagpipes wailed out a slow, mournful rendition of “Amazing Grace.” The notes hung heavy, like the sweet scent of incense in the air. Each phrase brimmed with sorrow and loss.

Marissa pulled a fresh tissue from her purse. Hands shaking, she swabbed the tears from her cheeks. Seth’s arm tightened around her shoulders.

“You okay?” he whispered, gray eyes filled with concern.

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

She looked beyond the mahogany coffin to the stained glass window behind the altar. Pale November sunlight illuminated the image of a blue-robed Mary nuzzling her swaddled baby boy.

Marissa didn’t understand the heart of God, but she did understand the fierce power of a mother’s love.

Evan Holt stood tall and straight behind the podium. A poster-size photograph rested on an easel beside the coffin. It was a rare shot of Elizabeth Holt laughing. Her cobalt eyes sparkled with mischief and light.

Evan’s chin dipped. His lips flattened into a thin line as he struggled against tears. Marissa’s heart swelled with empathy, feeling his loss as keenly as her own. She thought about what Evan had said in the hospital, about how Elizabeth had stood by him when everyone else had given up, and she knew Elizabeth had been more of a mother to him than an aunt.

After a few seconds of silence, Evan cleared his throat. His voice, shaky at first, grew stronger and clearer as the words poured out of him.

“As many of you know, my aunt Lizzie . . . Elizabeth Holt,” he amended, “was an extraordinary woman . . .”

Marissa’s gaze strayed away from Evan and back to the photograph of Elizabeth. She reached for the amulet hanging from the chain around her neck and thought about the last time she’d seen Elizabeth. She’d made a promise that night, and she’d kept it. She’d found Brooke and brought her home.

Without Elizabeth no one would have argued with the cops and gotten Brooke’s case moved to the front burner. Without Elizabeth there would have been no foundation, no Henry Cahill. And no Seth.

Beautiful words flowed from Evan’s lips, filling the church like the sad, resonant strains of a violin sonata. By the time he finished his eulogy, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Marissa wished she’d had a chance to say thank you—to say goodbye. She bowed her head, tears falling like sweet rain down her cheeks.

Seth’s hand squeezed her shoulder. She dabbed her eyes and looked at him, no longer seeing the scars on his face. Instead she saw courage and sacrifice and love.

Seth’s lips parted in a rare smile, and Marissa pulled in a deep, steadying breath.

The memorial service drew to a close. The aisles flooded with mourners and well-wishers filtering out of the church. Marissa shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden pew. The Percocet was wearing off. Her back ached from sitting too long and her burns hurt. She needed to move.

Marissa coughed. She stood grasping Kelly’s thin hand, reluctant to let go.

Kelly wore a simple black dress and low-heeled pumps. She looked disturbingly grown-up.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Kelly asked, releasing her mother’s hand.

“I’m fine, honey. Just a little sore.”

Marissa brushed her fingers across the red gash in Kelly's cheek left by Andy's ring. The bruises were fading to yellow. Although the cut was healing, Marissa knew it would probably scar.

Kelly hugged Marissa gently, careful not to squeeze too hard. A lump formed in Marissa's throat, and she felt a wave of gratitude wash over her—thankful to have Kelly at her side and Brooke safe.

Over Kelly's shoulder, Marissa caught Logan's gaze. He smiled at the two of them. Kelly pulled back, and Marissa stretched her hand out toward Logan, who clasped it in his warm grip.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "You're planning to stop by the house, aren't you?"

"Of course. We'll meet you over there."

"We?"

Marissa arched her eyebrows and glanced at Kelly, who was grinning like a kid.

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to ride with Logan in his new Tesla."

"Tesla?"

"It's a car, Mom." Kelly rolled her eyes. "Jeez."

"I know it's a car," Marissa said, winking at Logan. "Have fun."

Kelly followed Logan out of the pew. The two exited the church hand in hand. Marissa watched until they disappeared from view. Seth slipped his arm around her waist and spoke into her ear.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Soon. I want to say goodbye to Evan first."

He nodded and planted a soft kiss on her hair.

"I'll get the car and meet you outside."

Marissa wiped the last smudges of mascara from her face and craned her head around, searching the crowd for Evan. But he'd already found her. Their eyes met and he broke away from the crowd. They met halfway down the aisle.

Marissa held out her hand, but Evan engulfed her in a hug. She stood still in his arms, momentarily surprised by the unexpected display of emotion. Then she pressed her cheek to his chest and hugged him back.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," she said as he released her. "Elizabeth was an amazing woman. I'll miss her."

"Me too," Evan said.

Grief hid in the hollows of his cheeks and the dark smudges beneath his eyes, leaving little doubt of the toll Elizabeth's passing had taken on him.

"She was lucky to have you."

Evan's eyes moistened. He nodded and averted his gaze.

"How is Brooke?"

"They moved her out of intensive care today. We're meeting with her doctor in the morning."

Evan's large hand squeezed her shoulder. "I hope everything goes well."

Marissa nodded. The gravity of Brooke's condition weighed heavily on her.

"Brooke had her first session with Dr. Frank today."

"The psychologist? That's good."

A beat of silence passed between them. They both knew Brooke's road to recovery would be a long one, and in the end, this experience would change her in ways Marissa couldn't begin to understand. It had changed them all.

"I'll be busy settling Elizabeth's estate for the next while—fighting off the vultures, as they say. Call me when you're ready to come back to work."

“You’re sure you still want me? Now that we’ve found Brooke . . .” Marissa’s voice trailed off. She’d never thought about what would happen after Brooke came home. She and Elizabeth had never discussed long-term plans. With Elizabeth gone and Brooke found, she didn’t know what came next. “The foundation’s yours now. You may want to move it in your own direction. Hire your own staff.”

Evan nodded. His smile deepened.

“You’re right. I am hiring my own staff.” He reached into his pocket and handed her a black business card. “Starting with you. Lizzie chose you because you’re smart and tough and caring, and I think she was right. After all you’ve been through, Marissa, I can’t think of anyone better equipped to help families in crisis. This is for you, when you’re ready.”

Marissa took the card from his hand, humbled by his confidence in her. Dropping her gaze, she turned the card over and read the silver ink.

*The Holt Foundation. Marissa Rooney. Assistant Director.*

Marissa’s mouth dropped open. She stared up at Evan, dumbfounded.

“Really, Evan, I . . .”

He silenced her with a raised hand.

“Lizzie’s orders. And as you may recall, no one argued with my aunt. At least not successfully.”

He winked, and Marissa’s hand closed around the card. A knot formed in her throat. Unable to speak, she nodded her thanks. Evan squeezed her arm and smiled. It was a sad smile, but Marissa was gratified to see it all the same. He turned and Marissa watched him go.

With a heart much lighter than the one she’d entered the church with, Marissa stepped out into the pale November sunlight. No clouds marred the cornflower-blue sky. She scanned the crowded street and saw Seth waiting just where he’d said he would be. He leaned against the door of his new car, patiently waiting.

Their eyes met, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Marissa smiled.





The sweet smell of flowers filled the hospital room. The windowsill and side table were covered with colorful bouquets and get-well cards from people all across the country, strangers whose lives had been touched by Brooke's story. Marissa perched on the bed beside Brooke, while Dr. Joseph studied the chart. His narrow face sober, he flipped the pages, his quick brown eyes taking in the latest test results.

Finally he closed the chart and met Marissa's anxious gaze. She wrapped her hand around Brooke's cold fingers, holding on tight like she had when Brooke was a little girl with a face full of wonder and fairies in her hair.

"Well," Dr. Joseph said, "I'm afraid Brooke has suffered a cardiac event. Ventricular fibrillation."

"A racing heartbeat?"

"Yes, that's one of the symptoms, no doubt brought on by prolonged hyperglycemia. There is evidence of mild damage to the heart muscle. If she had not received CPR right away, she quite likely wouldn't be with us."

A chill shivered up Marissa's spine at the thought of how close they had come to losing her precious girl. Thank God for Seth. Somehow he had saved them both.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she asked, "What about the memory loss?"

Dr. Joseph hesitated. He smoothed his hand down the front of his white pinstripe shirt and blue silk tie before he spoke. Marissa knew from the look on his face the news wasn't good.

"It's too soon to say for certain, but there is a possibility that the memory loss Brooke suffered could be permanent."

Brooke pulled her hand from Marissa's grasp. Anguish rippled across Brooke's face, and she looked away from both of them, staring sullenly out the window.

Dr. Joseph's compassionate gaze met Marissa's. She placed her palm on Brooke's back.

"First things first. We're going to stabilize Brooke's blood sugars and get her potassium levels back to normal. We'll continue to monitor her heart activity, and we'll run more tests to gauge the extent of the memory loss."

Dr. Joseph continued to speak, but Marissa felt far away, devastated by the knowledge that Brooke would carry the scars of this horrific event for the rest of her life. Her own scars from the fire were small by comparison.

It was so unfair. Brooke was such a good kid. She wrapped her arm around Brooke's shoulders. Drawing her daughter close, Marissa rested her cheek on Brooke's sweet-smelling hair.

The doctor asked if she had any questions, and Marissa shook her head. There were tons of questions she wanted to ask, but first she needed time to process everything.

It felt like too much.

Minutes passed in companionable silence as tears flowed down Brooke's face. Finally, she wiped her eyes and offered her mother a tremulous smile.

"I'm a mess," she said.

Marissa ran a hand down the mane of blonde curls and smiled through her own tears.

"I've never seen anything more beautiful. I'm so grateful to have you home. Safe. Whatever else comes, we'll face it together. Okay?"

Brooke nodded. Marissa settled Brooke into the curve of her shoulder and stroked the blonde curls, like she had when Brooke was just a little girl.

“What happens if I can’t go back to school?” Brooke said, breaking the silence.

“My mother used to say there’s no point in borrowing trouble. When I was a kid, I didn’t know what she meant and figured it was her way of brushing me off. Now I know different. Worrying won’t stop bad things from happening. All you can do is stand strong in the face of fear and meet each challenge head on. You can do this, Brooke. You’re stronger than you know.”

Brooke nodded.

Marissa’s cell phone rang. Reaching into her purse, she thumbed the mute button and the ringer fell silent.

“Who was that?” Brooke asked.

“Work.”

“Shouldn’t you answer it?”

“It can wait. I thought I’d stay here with you.”

Brooke squeezed Marissa’s hand. “I’m okay, Mom. Go to work.”

Marissa dropped her gaze to where their fingers lay intertwined.

“I don’t want to leave you alone,” she said.

“I could stay,” a voice called from the doorway.

They both turned. A bouquet of daisies clasped in one hand, Jesse Morgan stood in the door, looking uncertain.

Few traces of the boy were left in the man’s face, but Marissa would have recognized him anywhere. Brooke pulled away from her mother’s side and ran her hands self-consciously through her hair, tucking the errant strands behind her ears. Marissa caught the look in her daughter’s eyes and knew in an instant that Brooke’s feelings for Jesse had never fully faded. Love was like that sometimes.

Slinging her purse across her shoulder, Marissa crossed the room. Jesse barely looked at her.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “If I hadn’t . . .”

Marissa shook her head, and he fell silent. He stood rigid, braced for an attack, like she might curse him or blame him for ruining her daughter’s life or slap him across the face.

It was too late for regrets. Brooke needed to heal, and she needed to forgive. Marissa wrapped her arms around Jesse’s strong shoulders. He hesitated a brief second before returning her hug.

“Thank you for coming.”

Looking up into his startled blue eyes, she figured he might just be the best medicine of all. Marissa released him and made for the door.

“I’ll be back later,” she said.

Brooke didn’t answer. She had eyes only for Jesse. Marissa stopped in the doorway and glanced back.

Jesse set the flowers down and pulled a chair up next to the bed. He drew a book from his coat pocket and held it up for Brooke’s inspection.

“I brought you something to read.”

“What is it? It looks too thick to be a graphic novel. I didn’t know you read actual books.”

Jesse snorted, an amused grin on his face.

“It’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“What?” Brooke cried. Even from the doorway, Marissa saw her blush to the roots of her hair.

“Just kidding. It’s *Pride and Prejudice*. I remembered you liked it back in high school.”

Brooke paused. A flurry of emotions crossed her face—happiness and sorrow and everything in between.

“That’s very sweet. You can leave it over there. My eyesight isn’t back to normal yet, and I’m having a little trouble focusing.”

The crooked smile faded from Jesse’s face. He cleared his throat.

“I thought I’d read to you. If that’s all right.”

Two heartbeats of silence passed.

“You read?” Brooke asked, her voice thick with tears and laughter. “When did that happen?”

“Shut up,” Jesse said.

Grinning, he opened the book.



Marissa Rooney crossed the Smith Tower's lobby and stepped into the crowded elevator. Shuffling over to make more room for the other loading passengers, she jostled an older man standing near the back of the car.

"Sorry," she said, nudging over a step.

"Quite all right, Marissa. It's good to see you back."

Marissa turned and looked up into the smiling face of Mr. Regis, managing partner of the law firm. Happy to see a friendly face, she returned his smile.

"It's good to be back."

"Heading up to the foundation this morning?"

"Yes."

Regis nodded. "Very good. Elizabeth was right about you, you know. You're going to do great things. If I can be of assistance in any way, please don't hesitate to call."

"Thank you, Mr. Regis, for everything. Really."

"Maybe you can start by calling me John."

"Of course, John."

The elevator stopped at the sixth floor, and Mr. Regis stepped through the crowd to the front. He stopped just outside the doors.

"Oh, Marissa, one more thing. I thought you might like to know, it's Ms. Benoit's last day with the firm."

"Where is she going?"

Regis angled his head to the side. A slow smile spread across his face. "She's off to pursue other endeavors."

Marissa knew what that meant. She grinned.

"We're having cake at three. She'll be gone by two if you'd like to stop down."

Benoit's leaving the firm certainly was cause for celebration.

"I'll see what I can do."

The elevator doors closed behind John. The car lurched and continued up.

Evan had been busy, Marissa mused as she stopped to admire the newly installed doors. "The Holt Foundation" was etched into the frosted glass. Gripping the handle, she pushed through. On her way down the hall, she exchanged greetings with the familiar faces she passed.

"Ms. Rooney," a young woman called. Dressed in high heels and a slim navy suit, she looked every inch a professional.

"Yes?"

"I'm your new assistant, Jessica Perkins."

Surprise stalled Marissa in midstride. Jessica offered her hand, and after a second's hesitation, she shook it. Evan hadn't mentioned an assistant. What other surprises did he have up his sleeve?

"Welcome aboard, Ms. Perkins."

"Jessica, please. Mr. Holt has arranged a few meetings for you today. You'll find a copy of your itinerary on your desk."

"Thank you."

Marissa followed Jessica down the hallway to Elizabeth Holt's office. Affixed to the mahogany door was a silver nameplate. "Marissa Rooney. Assistant Director." She shook her head in wonder. A

few months ago she'd been little more than a legal secretary. Now, alongside Evan, she was managing Elizabeth's foundation. It was a lot to take in.

Jessica's voice interrupted her thoughts, pulling her back into the moment.

"A Mr. Wright is waiting for you."

"Oh?"

Jessica swung the wide mahogany door open. Looking tall and pale in his gray suit, Alistair Wright rose from the guest chair and extended his hand toward Marissa. She shook his hand warmly. Wright looked like he had aged ten years over the past few weeks. With all he'd been through, it was no wonder.

Alicia's memorial service had been a heart-wrenching affair. Marissa hadn't been able to stop thinking about how close she had come to losing her own daughters.

"Alistair," she said, greeting him with a soft voice filled with compassion. "I'm so sorry for your loss. How can I help?"

Marissa gestured to the guest chair, and Wright resumed his seat. Marissa gripped Elizabeth's amulet.

"I wanted to make a donation to the foundation in Alicia's memory."

Sorrow swelled in Marissa's heart. After so much tragedy, his generosity was extraordinary. Alistair reached into his suit pocket and handed Marissa a check. It was the largest single donation the foundation had received so far, and Marissa smiled, thinking of all the good this money would do for the people who needed it most.

"Thank you."

Alistair's eyes fixed on the amulet for a second. His gaze grew distant.

"Alicia meant the world to me, and now I'm left wondering what more I should have done to keep her safe." He ran a hand across his moist eyes. Marissa saw the lines of pain carved deep into his face. "If there is some small way I can help prevent a tragedy like this from happening to some other family, it's my responsibility to do so. I imagine that you feel similarly, Marissa."

"I do. I know your support would mean the world to Elizabeth."

He cleared his throat. "My law firm is at your disposal, should you have need of it."

He rose from his chair and picked up a silver-framed picture of Elizabeth—a young Elizabeth Holt standing outside the King County courthouse. Wright stared at it for a long time. His brows furrowed deep, he sighed and set it back down. "Well, I've taken enough of your time today."

"Not at all."

Marissa shook his hand and thanked him again for his generous donation. She stood behind the desk and watched his retreating frame and thought again how unfair life was. He was a good man who'd lost his beautiful daughter to a madman. She shuddered and thought again about how close she'd come to losing Brooke and Kelly.

Lost in thought, Marissa didn't hear Evan enter the office until he spoke.

"Was that Alistair Wright?"

Marissa nodded. She plucked the check off the desk and handed it to Evan.

"He made a donation in his daughter's memory."

Evan studied the check and Marissa went on.

"He also said his law firm would be willing to donate their services."

"Did you know Alistair was engaged to Lizzie?"

"Really?"

Marissa remembered the way Elizabeth had looked at Alistair the night of the benefit and his obvious reluctance to release her hand. She'd sensed then that there was something more between them than friendship. Turned out she was right.

"Back when they were in college. Lizzie broke off their engagement after the attack. She never really got over it. Afterward, she was obsessed with going to law school. Seeking justice," Evan said, angling his head to the side, a bemused expression on his face. "Or, knowing Lizzie, vengeance. Eventually Alistair got on with his life, got married, had children, but I'm not sure he ever really stopped loving her."

"Or her him," Marissa finished, fingering the gold amulet around her throat.

"Alistair gave that necklace to Lizzie. I never saw her without it."

Marissa's heart ached for them both. Love was such a precious, tenuous thing. She thought about her girls. And Seth. And the way their lives had changed, all because of Andrew Bowman. She was grateful they still had each other.

"Take a look at this."

Evan handed Marissa a thick manila file folder. She cocked an eyebrow and opened it. The first page was an eight-by-ten photograph of a young woman. She didn't look much older than Brooke. Her small hand rested on the swell of the baby growing inside her. Hope sparkled in her large brown eyes.

A chill raced down Marissa's back. She looked up, meeting Evan's gaze.

"Who is this?"

"Rebecca Kincaid disappeared from a mall parking lot two nights ago."

Marissa cringed, her eyes drawn to the life growing beneath Rebecca's hand.

"When's she due?"

"In two weeks. We need to find Rebecca and her baby."

Marissa's mouth set in a resolute line.

"Absolutely," she said. "Let's get to work."

**THE END**

• • • •

**Ready for more?**

**Dark Harvest is another pulse-pounding thrill ride.**

**[Click Here To Get Dark Harvest!](#)**

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

**[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)**

• • • •

CHRIS PATCHELL IS THE award-winning, USA Today Bestselling author of six novels. A former tech worker turned author Chris Patchell pens suspense novels set in the Pacific Northwest. Her novels have been praised by New York Times Bestselling author, Kevin O'Brien and #1 Amazon Bestselling author, Robert Dugoni. Her rich complex plot lines and well-drawn characters will keep you turning pages well into the night.

Visit [www.ChrisPatchell.com](http://www.ChrisPatchell.com) to learn more about Chris and her writing. Don't forget to sign up for her newsletter.







RESONANCE  
BY AJ SCUDIÈRE  
**Author's Rating:**

• • • •

**Language: \*\*\* Sexuality: \* Violence: \***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Resonance Copyright © 2007 by Griffyn Ink. All rights reserved. No part of this document may be used or reproduced in an manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

FIRST EDITION



**W**hen new CDC investigators Jordan and Jillian discover a new disease, they wind up forging a few signatures to track it down. But as they pull on the thread, they unravel a case that bumps into geologist David Carter and bioscientist Becky Sorenson. It turns out they are all looking at the same thing: the leading edge of a full magnetic polar reversal. When all of humanity is at risk, who will they save?



**T**welve years ago, airline pilots had to recalibrate their compasses. This was because the exact location of the magnetic poles had drifted, and it was a first in aviation history. Six years ago the poles had drifted even further, causing the need to again reset the compasses. They recalibrated again three years ago, then two, then one, and are currently realigning every three months.

Approximately 200 million years ago map north was magnetic south. But ten million years later, the poles switched places. They've traded again approximately every sixty million years, the last of which was sixty-five million years ago.

It is theorized that the dinosaurs achieved such great size due to the slightly larger magnetic field of their time. Today some living things - like homing pigeons and honeybees - are highly dependent on the earth's field. Even those creatures that don't seem to notice it are in jeopardy if it changes, since we don't know how they use their internal magnetics, only that they have them.

Like us.

And the earth we are sitting on is five million years overdue . . .





**S** *stupid paleontologists*, he thought to himself. Didn't know how to grid a dig properly. *Morons*. What had he been thinking? Sharing a site with the dino boys? And now he had chunks of strata strapped to his waist, each meticulously labeled in the dino boys' lazy scrawl. Each clearly mislabeled for direction or depth of find. They had acted like they understood the dip and the horizontal. But the markings were clearly honked up. Yet, some of the rocks looked right. Which was the ultimate insult. David couldn't even count on them to be wrong.

Maybe they were fucking with him, he sighed into the deep night, that was a sincere possibility. There was nothing like envy laced with continual disagreement to drive a wedge of dislike between two people. Those two people being him and anyone else on the dig. Your choice, as it was pretty much unanimous.

The paleo guys were all out for drinks and a discussion of the day's successes. There was that one big heap of bones, and oh yeah, that other big heap of bones, then there were the bone chips.

Using the winch and harness system they had set up, David lowered himself down the incline, tiptoeing and letting out line as he went. Not because he couldn't have scrambled his way down - he could have, the slope was a just walkable 45 degrees - but, in order to go on foot, he would have to dig in with his toes to get purchase and the dig would have been forfeit. Couldn't have that. At least he and the dino boys agreed on this one thing.

The other thing they had agreed to was not to hang out in the dig alone. That, of course, made sense. No one wanted to be the one left at the base of the site with a broken leg while everyone else ate lunch, or worse yet stayed out all night drinking. And no one wanted to be the one who mucked up the site, with no one around to say what went where.

But just because he had agreed *to* it didn't mean that he agreed *with* it. And, well, if David was being honest, they had already ruined the site, what with all the mislabeling and everything. Therefore the only thing he was risking was his own night out under the big black sky with a few broken bones. So he slowly kept letting out the line, getting a little further down the slope each minute. He didn't go too fast, for God's sake he wasn't stupid, and the pitch here was a bit on the sharp side.

His foot hit the first grid line. A thin white string wound round a short post hammered into the ground denoting the edge of the official dig area. David swore a few times under his breath, sure that he had scuffed a few loose pieces of rock into the dig. And that would earn him nothing but verbal and social hell come tomorrow morning. He decided to take it all a little more carefully. Besides now he was far enough down the backside of the slope that he wouldn't be spotted. The camp was on the other side of the crest where it wouldn't interfere with the dig, and no party-poopers making their way back early would see his beam as long as it was a small one. And that meant no bright headlamps. So he pulled the flashlight free, slipping it from the carabineer on his belt with a flick of his wrist.

*Crap*, he had shoved some pieces under the grid edge. Softly he stepped down and began flinging the loose gravel away. After five minutes at it he figured that he had covered his tracks well enough for a man who was probably going to get caught anyway and he decided to get down to brass tacks.

Pulling one zipper bag from its carabineer at his waist he tacked his line and used both hands to pull the rock from its baggie. Tilting his head, with the small Maglight firmly between his teeth, he read off the coordinates, then picked up the line. David let himself down a few more feet and high-

stepped to the right about fifteen yards, watching carefully for the meter lines that ran the grid. They had originally been only a few inches off the surface, but as this dig had progressed they had altered the smooth plane to extremely uneven, leaving the ground anywhere from just a few inches to just over a foot below the grid lines. The perfect heights for getting an ankle tangled and then bashing into the slope of the dig. And, oh yeah, breaking said ankle and mucking up said dig while you did it.

He moved slowly and carefully, each footstep set methodically into the loose ground, so as not to grind or scour any of the precious soil or bone chips out of place. And lifted high with the same care. Right foot right, find footing, left foot follow, set down carefully.

It seemed to take an eternity to get to the other side of the fifteen yard grid to the labeled home of his rock. As he landed, finally, in his square, he tacked the guide line again, allowing his weight to sit back against the taut rope. With the light in one hand he held up the baby rock and turned it over.

It was sedimentary, full of fossilized organic matter and exactly what anyone would expect of a layer from this location. His eyes perused all of this, reading it the way you would read a newspaper, for the whole story and never one letter at a time.

This piece had clearly belonged to an ancient streambed. From what the dino boys were finding, the water had nourished a whole bunch of critters up until the very last moment. What caused that last moment was David's job.

He liked the rocks, and it was natural to assume that he had gotten into this profession because of his father. The layers reminded him of his Dad a lot: cold, hard, and unreadable to all but the most trained of observers. David was an expert reader of both. Although, in his estimate, the rock was always easier to get a bead on at first and easier to get along with. Also, the rock always gave up the whole story eventually.

The streambed and the sediment was ABCs. What David was reading as he rotated his chunk of old earth and his flashlight was the tiny shiny chips in his piece. Now they were talking. And they said that the Paleo boys were retarded.

Shaking his head, he used the letter and number code on the tape to line the rock up with the direction and pitch it was supposed to have come from. Letting a little more slack into the line, he leaned down and placed the rock into the spot it supposedly called home for eons, until yesterday.

David's head tilted. His Maglight circled, and he studied the lay of the strata in the bed and the rock. It looked a little too damn good. Not to mention the remaining side of the bed from which the piece he held had been chipped. The two sides fit together like a puzzle piece.

Shrugging, David slipped the rock back into its baggie and pulled the permanent marker from his back pocket. He checked the upper right side of the label and clipped it back to his pants just as his stomach let a loud growl. His head perked, just as it had when he was a boy afraid of getting caught. But no one appeared to have heard. Hell, no one appeared to be within fifty miles of the site.

Cursing silently to himself, he wondered why it would have been so hard to slip a piece of jerky into a pocket, or for god's sakes, make a sandwich. It wasn't like he didn't have a belt full of zipper baggies already. But he didn't have time to go back. He needed to check his pieces and not make more enemies on the dig than he already had.

So he pulled the next rock from its zipper pouch and carefully began making his way to another grid square. Lift foot, set foot, lift other foot, set foot.

Four hours later he hadn't tripped at all, which was a miracle since he was silently swearing a blue streak. The dino boys hadn't mislabeled a single rock, which only made him more furious. Hell, you couldn't count on them for *anything*.

And if the rocks were all aligned right, then the rest was all aligned wrong. An eddy in the stream could explain one spot, maybe even a few, but not the consistency of the whole dig.

A bright light shone into his eyes, blinding him more easily than the dark of night ever had.

“Hey, pretty boy!” It was Greer. David had always figured that ‘pretty boy’ was the best Greer could come up with since he wasn’t one much inclined to the use of the more apt *asshole*. “You done checking out our grid markings? You didn’t break any bones did you?!”

“No, Fuckwad, I didn’t.” David held his hand up in front of his face. He was going to catch hell for this. He knew it now.

“That’s too bad.” Greer directed his five-billion megawatt stadium light at the ground and slowly David’s sight came back. He started climbing the slope cautiously and methodically, as Greer taunted him all the way. “Well, seems we disappointed you didn’t we? You thought we had mislabeled all your stones.”

“They’re not stones.” David growled as he climbed.

“Too bad. Now you’re going to have to do some real geology work. Not just come out and wave your hand like you always do and spout off what’s *just so obvious* that the rest of us must be blind.”

“Congratulations, Greer. You are right on so many counts. My rocks were in fact labeled correctly-”

“How many of them?” Greer taunted.

“*All* of them.”

“Uh huh.”

“And I do in fact have little bit of work to do when I get back to the tent-” He stopped climbing.

Greer spotlighted him again. It would have blinded him, but he wasn’t looking in front of him, just staring into the space ahead. If it meant what he thought it meant. . . well, . . .

“What is it David?”

“I want everyone off the site tomorrow. Just you and me. I need to check all other possibilities.”

“Everyone off the dig tomorrow!?! Jesus, David, do you know what you’re asking? Is your Daddy gonna pay our salaries?”

“No, but the royalties off my paper will. Dammit, Greer, clear the site tomorrow.”

If it was what he thought it was . . . well, he might just prove that the David Carter II geology center had been worth its money.

• • • •

GOD, WHAT WAS IT THAT made her feel like such a fool? All that school, all that ‘prestige’, and yet she stood there like a moron. Eyes wide, ‘yes’ ‘yes’ monosyllabic answers to each question. The horrible, lost feeling of being in an unfamiliar institution.

“So you two are the new peons.”

Jillian nodded. “Yes.” There it was again. The idiocy.

The guy beside her - Jared? Jeff? Jacob? - was cool and only raised his eyebrows to the question.

Dr. Landerly was hunched over his desk and had whitish hair that stuck out in about fifty different directions and looked as though it hadn’t made friends with a brush in a lifetime or so. He had male pattern balding and probably arthritis, judging by the way he held his pen. Whether he didn’t look at them because of pain or out of sheer rudeness was anybody’s guess. “You two turned in all your documentation and fingerprinting crap down in HR?”

Jake ? flicked the new badges hanging from their pristine white jackets, “Yup, hence the ten a.m. arrival.”

“Ready for the tour?”

At the sound of yet another one word answer, he finally looked up at them. For a moment he simply looked them both up and down, taking their measure. Jillian did the first proactive deed of her day and sized him up too. Landerly’s face reminded her of a grandfather, not her own, but that old man look, crossed with a little mad scientist. With his focus turned on them, she felt the same intensity that the papers he was marking on must have felt just minutes before. She was surprised the pages hadn’t burst into flame before she and what’s-his-name walked in and pulled a little of the good doctor’s attention from them.

“Well, you must be Jillian Brookwood, and you must be Jordan Abellard.”

*Jordan! That was it.*

Landerly tapped his forehead, “Deductive reasoning.” And despite the insanely poor joke, she began to like him.

He simply turned and began walking down the hallway, talking as he went and expecting them to keep pace behind them. He never checked. “This is your office.” He pointed to his left into an open door and what could only be called a large cubby. He was already walking away. Jillian had to nearly run to catch up with him, already midsentence.

“- that whole half of the building is I.D. That part you’ll only go in on an ‘as needed’ basis. Which basically means never. Unless you get promoted, or we decide we don’t need you or don’t like you but can’t think of a better way to get rid of you.”

For the first time Jordan turned to her, his eyebrows raised until she shrugged in return. Dr. Landerly’s voice trailed off as her focus slipped to the signs on the wall. Every etched plate had the tiny inscription on the top *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. But Landerly was old-school and still referred to it as the CDC.

Not ten minutes later Jillian realized that they had walked a short circle, and Jordan wasn’t missing that fact either. “That’s it?”

“Sure.” Landerly fixed them with another stare. “If you want to see the Infectious Disease side, you can go get your own tour. I told you, you’re peons.”

“I’m a-” Jordan stopped himself. “We’re physicians.”

“Yes, and you’re underlings. And you’re at the CDC. On my team you’ll be spending a lot of time drawing blood and writing reports.”

Which, Jillian admitted, had been exactly the job description. So she wasn’t sure where Jordan got off being upset. In truth, it had been just that part of the work that had made her apply. She had spent all that time and money on medical school, only to find out that she hated the endless churn of minor complaints that flowed through a doctor’s office. This job had been her proof that she hadn’t chosen the wrong profession.

Landerly had disappeared back into his office, and by craning her neck she could see him scrubbing through the most disorganized desk ever. But he held out two identical key chains and spoke again. “Keys to your office and your lab next door. Go check it out then get cracking, you’ve already got three cases sitting on your desk.”

There was no other dismissal, no wish of good luck or welcome, just the turn of his shoulder and the intensity of his focus directed elsewhere. The two of them no longer existed to him.

Turning, they silently followed Landerly’s instruction walking two doors down to the plaque that read G-1763 *Lab 13, Landerly*.

“Hi.” Jordan’s voice filled the empty space around a young man with inky hair who stood at the basic black lab island dialing the micropipette to a new measure.

“Oh, Hi. You two must be the new docs. I’m your tech.” For a brief moment he held out a gloved hand before realizing what he was doing and withdrawing the offer. “I’m Mark. I’m prepping slides for Landerly right now, but let me know what you need. My desk is in the back.” He pointed to the corner, to a table piled with skewed stacks of loose papers and file folders of various colors.

“Nice to meet you.” Jordan pulled back out of the doorway and wound up leading her back to their office, where they spent four minutes choosing which side of the large desk they each wanted, then another hour exploring the file cabinet they shared, and finding out what the previous occupants had left for them. Which turned out to be an odd mix of pens, pencils, microtest tubes and pipette tips, and one stick of mint chewing gum.

After a half-hour of hardly speaking she finished up organizing her drawers and labeling her hanging files, only to look up and find Jordan watching her from across the desk. “It’s two-thirty, are you hungry?”

She nodded. But he spoke again before she could get in a word edgewise. “You find the cafeteria and I’ll treat.”

She would have rather paid, but she held her tongue. She could do this, right? On the ‘tour’ Landerly had pointed down one corridor and mentioned food and vending machines. With a deep breath she marched off in the general direction they had started, and faked it to the best of her ability.

Two corridors later she could smell that she had found the right one. Then, after they ordered, she completely disoriented them on the way back. After they got situated and endured a few minutes of silent chewing, Jordan leaned forward. “Since we get to stare at each other until one of us goes insane or gets promoted, why don’t we get started with the usual stupid questions?”

She almost smiled. Almost. “The usual ones?”

“Like ‘Where are you from?’” He leaned back and Jillian barely covered her gasp at realizing the vast majority of his lunch had already been reduced to empty wrappers. “I’m from Lake James, North Dakota. Where it’s colder than a w-. . . well just about anything, and there’s really a lot more bible thumping and militia than you might guess. College and med school at UCLA. Your turn.”

“Emory Med, but I grew up in Chattanooga. Same town through undergrad.” She smiled from behind her limp cheeseburger. “Favorite fast food? Mine is Chick-Fil-A nuggets.”

“What’s Chick Fillay?”

“Ahhh, I’ll take you tomorrow.”

Jordan shrugged. “Favorite burger is Jack in the Box Bacon Ultimate Cheeseburger.”

“Jack in the Box?” She supposed that’s what happened when you met someone from the opposite end of the country.

“Ahhh, good, cheap food. College student fare. Too bad I can’t return the Chick Fillay favor. Jack-in-the-Box is only out west.”

Satisfied that she had the basics, Jillian figured it was time to start earning her keep. “We should get to work on these cases.”

“Can I just guess now? Botulism, gas leak, and Salmonella.”

“Really?” She put her hand to her hip. “I would have had you pegged for a ‘secret government weapons being tested on our own people’ type.”

“Nah, I’m a realist.” He picked up the folder and started through it, while she made a thinking noise. He laughed. “Do you realize that you even ‘hmmm’ with a southern accent?”

She nodded. “Can’t be helped.”

JORDAN WAS PISSED. The cases in their box this morning had turned out to be botulism, botulism and botulism. One, he was mad that his guess was wrong. Two, he had skipped the invite to UCLA's PhD program to come here and do research as a physician, even though he would only occasionally be putting the vast majority of his med school skills to work. He had thought that this would be more exciting than telling mothers that their kiddies had ear infections or strep throat. Three, they hadn't even had to leave their desks to figure the damn thing out. Four, Miss Jillian had turned out to be anal retentive. Although 'turned out' was being generous. She had looked the part from moment one.

Aaaaaaaack. Where was the next AIDS when your life needed a spark? Miss Jillian was sitting across from him diligently making notes in the two files that she held while he scanned the new one that had turned up in their inbox this morning. Jillian gave him a dirty look that he wasn't helping her write reports, and it occurred to him that Landerly had done this on purpose. Jordan was to be the forward thinker, the one who would make those reasoning leaps, and Jillian was the workhorse.

Her nose wrinkled and she brushed her hair back again. Not that it accomplished anything other than her getting to move her arm. The hank of hair fell right back over her shoulder. The phone buzzed, startling him about three feet into the air, and he was already trying to cover that fact before he was even back down. "Landerly wants us."

Jillian stared a brief moment through not entirely open eyes. "That was so not smooth." But she followed him next door and graciously didn't mention it again.

Landerly stood as they entered the office, his attention a physical sensation as it turned from the phone to the two of them. "This is why I created you guys."

"Like God?" Jillian's voice was dry and Jordan wasn't sure if she was kidding or what. But Landerly was, and he laughed a good guffaw and responded with "Maybe a demigod," before continuing.

So Jillian was already his favorite. How could two people on this earth have that same sense of humor?

The older man held up a file before speaking. "I've got a little girl in Deltona, Florida with a spider bite reaction that the local docs say doesn't look like your basic anaphylactic shock. They think the spider has some new venom or maybe is a vector carrying something else. She's all yours." He handed the file to Jillian just as Jordan decided that there wasn't anything he could do about it. And maybe he hadn't been hired to be the brilliant theorist. Which of course meant he would have to get his butt in gear and do some work.

"Anne in reception will have your schedule. You need to leave this evening to see the reaction and do anything before it gets worse." And like turning off the light, his focus was off them and they were expected to find their own way out.

By now Jordan knew his way around and he certainly knew Anne. She was the adorable blonde in reception, and he had made those thoughts clear to her this morning. Anne handed each of them an itinerary, but it was Jordan her eyes remained on. Not that he was going to dip his pen in the company ink, but there was a certain warmth in knowing the ink was receptive to being dipped. Jillian was walking away before he realized it and he smiled good-bye to Anne before turning to follow his cubby-mate down the hall.

At their desk, Jillian turned and stared at him, leaving him ready for some scathing remark about his behavior, but instead, with no preamble, she asked about Landerly. "Do you think he's just too old to go off gallivanting around the country? Why do you think he set up his team of two here? Why us?"

Jordan had no good answers and he told her so. But he did offer to make up for getting lost on the way to lunch yesterday and asked where he could find this Chick Fillay. “We have time to do fast food, right?”

“And the fast part is the part you seem to be having trouble with.” She didn’t look up and he couldn’t decipher the dryness in her tone. He had heard it several times now and he truly wasn’t sure what to make of it. That scared the crap out of him. And given that they were on their way out the door for a company road trip, and since she was a co-worker, he figured he’d better find his footing right away.

“Are you mad at me because I got us lost yesterday? Or for something else?” Her face was unreadable. Well, he thought it was. She just looked a little confused and maybe perturbed.

“No, I’m not angry.” After tilting her head to the side for a moment, she nodded. “You’re worried that I’m one of those ‘my feelings are hurt’ girls. Well, I’m not.”

“Then why no fast food?” She was still looking at him and Jordan figured that was the best way to read the book, when it was open. But Miss Jillian seemed to be written in a foreign language, one he only understood random phrases of.

Her words were slow and methodical. “Because I want to have time to pack. And because you got lost the last time the directions were ‘three miles then turn right.’ I just don’t have time.” Before she even finished the sentence, her purse was over her shoulder and she was heading out the door, “See you at the airport.”

He was still looking confused when he heard her footsteps change directions and saw her head reappear in the open doorway. “Should I pick you up?”

Again she read his expression before he got his words together. “We’ll both get there, and only one parking charge.”

“I can drive.”

She nodded. “So can I. And I know my way around. If you want to contribute you can pay the parking fees.”

“They’re reimbursed.” So that wasn’t much of a contribution at all.

“I know. I just hate expense reports.” She disappeared beyond the opening and this time didn’t come back even as he muttered to himself.

“And here I thought you loved paperwork.”

In a few minutes he had cleared his thoughts and headed home. It took him a while to locate things from the boxes. Jordan had lived here all of one-half a day longer than he had been working at the CDCP, and it showed. He found his only two suits - one still in the dry-cleaning bag. Scrounged up socks, without holes. Underwear, also without holes. Then went in search of his hanging bag. This, of course, was pristine. It had been used once, for his interview here.

He pushed that thought aside and turned back to his packing. There was no way of knowing how long they would be there. He had to plan for the possibility of a full week, so he stuffed all the spare pockets and pouches with extra clothes and, in a glimpse of reason, all seven of the ties he owned. After staring at the bag and waiting for it to tell him what else to pack, he finally realized that it would say no such thing, and so he threw in a few pairs of khakis for good measure.

The last step was to change himself. Jeans, tee, a sweatshirt, and an old pair of sneakers seemed the best bet for flying. They’d go see the little girl after they got settled in a bit, right? He decided to believe what he wanted and pulled the sweatshirt over his head, just as his stomach grumbled and the doorbell made the horrid high-pitched noise that the manager had called a chime.



“Coming!” Jordan crossed the short distance from the very back to the very front of the apartment and pulled the door open. “Hi.”

“Hey!” Jillian walked through the open doorway and past his open mouth. “I think you actually have a bigger place than me. You ready?”

“Yes.” Getting his bags took less than half a minute; his thoughts would take a little longer to gather. What was up with Jillian? She looked all of nineteen in her jeans and small white t-shirt, what with her dark hair pulled back in that ponytail. If she was in the airplane seat next to him, people would think he was a dirty older man.

But none of it even registered in her expression as he grabbed his luggage and trailed her down the stairs and out to the eerily quiet street. She simply popped the trunk of her little white car open and let him throw his bag on top of the two she had stacked back there.

“What is this?”

“Rav-Four.” She slid in behind the wheel, no longer Miss Jillian of the CDCP, but a complete stranger. “It has its quirks, but it’s reliable and, one day, when I get a dog, she’ll go in the back.”

She laughed most of the way to airport, navigating into long-term parking with ease. Her matching carryon was slung over her shoulder and she wheeled her hanger bag behind her, never fussing at the long wait at security. And when the plane took off from the runway at Atlanta International she was already asleep in the seat beside him.

• • • •

BECKY SAT KNEE DEEP in shallow, muddy stream water, her long bangs falling into her eyes. Melanie wasn’t listening to her, Brandon had wandered off somewhere, and her mother was going to be mad. She was wet, a little on the cold side, and she was the only one who hadn’t caught anything yet. She raised a hand to push her hair out of her face, not remembering until she felt the cold that her hand had just been in stream water that was *not* clear. Oh well, the muck would help plaster her hair out of her eyes.

For a moment she gathered her breath, then she yelled, “Brandon! Mom’s gonna be angry if you don’t stay with me. Get back here!” But Becky didn’t wait for him to show up. He would, and so she turned back to searching the running water for the small frogs she wanted. One jumped in front of her container and with a quick movement she completely missed it.

With a deep sigh she lifted her head up, and let out another long yell. “Brandon!”

“I’m *right here*, Becky.” He shook his head as he looked down on her, holding the bottom of his shirt in front of him making a scoop in which he piled all the containers he had filled with one frog each. Just like she had asked.

And to think biology had seemed like such a great field to go into. She had her doctorate, and yet her little brother and sister put her to shame at ‘obtaining specimens’. The only consolation she had was that Brandon and Melanie had also seriously shown up every other biologist and assistant she had brought out for the job.

“Becky, look.”

“Yeah, you did great.”

“No,” He scooted closer. She knew that he would have grabbed her arm. He had tried, but his lightning reflexes had him straightening the tumbling containers before they got too far. “Pick up that top one, he’s the biggest.”

With a smile of pride on her face, she held the clear Tupper up over her head and let the light shine through on a good size rana. One of the larger ones caught here, but certainly not the largest.

“He is pretty big. You holding out for more money?”

“Becky! I thought you were smart. *Look* at him! He’s got four legs, you retard!”

Melanie also looked up at the underside of the container, although what she could see from about three feet away was anyone’s guess. “Frogs all have four legs, retard.”

Becky shifted to give both of them dirty looks about the name calling, but left it at that, knowing full well she couldn’t win.

Brandon rolled his eyes with all the meaning a ten year old could muster. “Four *back* legs.”

“Huh?” Becky held the Tupper aloft again, this time higher to catch rays from a break in the tree cover. Frowning, she looked him over, and she didn’t see it until he jumped: four hind legs, two per side, coming out of the hip flexor joint. Holy crap! She shook the plastic container a bit. Yup, all functional. “Okay, I’ll give you two bucks for him.”

Brandon still clutched the edge of his shirt holding the ten containers stacked precariously in there, but his expression said that he wasn’t moved by the two dollar offer. “They’re all that way.”

“What?” She reached down and pulled another container from his clutch. Holding it high she gave it a slight wiggle and watched the small frog try to rebalance itself. Four hind legs. All functional.

She quickly set it down and grabbed for two more. Both had a second pair of jumper legs. In under a minute her breathing had sped up and she had ascertained that Brandon was correct.

But that would be wrong. Very wrong. With her brows pulled together, she went over to check the row of tupperware that the kids had caught here. It had been hard to see those spare legs at first. Maybe they just hadn’t noticed. But her little sister was a sharp one, and she’d already checked the locals out. “They’re all normal.”

“So, Brandon, there were . . .” she counted, “eight six-legged frogs where you were? And you caught them all?” He was a good catcher. Once he spotted it the frog didn’t stand a chance.

“No, they were all like that. At least I think they all were. Almost. There are more. I just ran out of lexans.”

“Where!?”

Brandon took off with Becky right behind him, Melanie would catch up, she knew. The trail was well-worn and well-known from her own childhood days, and they bounded down it, anticipating every fallen tree and protruding rock. She just kept running after Brandon, never having heard of anyone finding a full clutch of six-legged frogs before. A tree branch, that Brandon had held out for himself, came slapping back at her, but even without her conscious thought, her hand was there to catch it.

Six legs occurred in nature, and didn’t kill the frog most of the time. Usually they were slow and so predators got them. But it was a *growth* mutation, not a genetic one. It also usually resulted in just one spare leg, a five-legged frog. These *all* had *six*. So how would you get a whole clutch of them? Unless something was wrong with the site . . .

There was a nuclear reactor program a little west of here: Oak Ridge, where they had built the A-bomb. There were always stories of Melton Lake Dam being shut down for mercury levels being too high. But this?

They had run a long way before Brandon finally stopped. He pointed to a section of the stream. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary to the human eye. Even the trained human eye. “I caught them all here.”

Becky slowly walked to the stream edge then kept going right in, her shoes were already caked in mud and silt and of absolutely no concern to her. “So would you say about a third of them were that

way? Maybe a tenth?"

Brandon shook his head, "No, I'm telling you they *all* are."

Slowly she squatted down, getting a good focus through the running water. There were frogs here, lots of them, but with the movement and the refraction, those back legs were hard to distinguish. Hell, they'd been hard to spot at first in the lexans. *Shit! She had run to the site with no tupper!*

Becky swore at herself a little more, then went back to peering through the water. But it wasn't helping. She needed to see these guys up close. Looking back at Brandon she asked the sixty-four-thousand-dollar-question, "Do you think you could catch one bare handed?"

Small deep breaths came from just behind her, Melanie had caught up to them. "You . . . don't . . . . . have . . . . . to."

Becky turned to find her baby sister, leaned over, huffing for oxygen, but in Melanie's outstretched hand was a tall stack of tupper, with all the lids shoved down in the top one.

Becky shrieked. "You are a genius!"

"I . . . know." Job done, Melanie sat back to watch Brandon get frogs and Becky try.

Becky held each new catch aloft, the fifth came up with normal legs, prompting a question. "Brandon, how many normal frogs did you throw back?"

"Two."

"*Just two?*"

He nodded.

The sun was setting by the time Melanie arrived from her return trip to get the wheel barrow. As Becky had ordered, each of the frogs from the other site bore a scrap of masking tape across the lid. And all the lids bore a single digit - the number of legs on the contained frog. There were so many 6's that Becky had to look again. Each time she thought the numbers must be off. But they weren't. She stacked the five four-legged frogs from this site in one spot, thinking they would be as useful as all the sixes. Why hadn't they changed, too? And how did their numbers get to be only one out of ten?

Becky was frantically writing on the scratch pad she had brought along in case any question popped into her mind. She was beginning to think that today the fifty sheets the pad claimed to have weren't going to be enough.

She just couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary. It was your standard East Tennessee summer day by all measurable counts. So what was up with the frogs?

Eventually she had to give up. She had no barometer, no litmus paper, and no Geiger counter, so there wasn't much more she could measure, even if she wanted to. The Geiger counter gave her pause. What if there was some sort of radiation leak? If the government had buried some sort of waste here? Wasn't it possible? There were always news stories about plutonium being flown in and out of the labs. Could it have gotten here? And had she exposed her brother and sister to it, for . . . she checked her watch . . . four hours? God, her lack of protocol had been horrible.



Jillian closed the door behind her. No longer ‘Miss Jillian’ in his mind. My God, she was a little chameleon. In the airport she had looked like a kid, ponytail and all. And less than fifteen minutes after they had arrived she knocked on his hotel door, business professional from head to toe. In a deep teal suit that looked like it had been cut just for her and brought out her eyes. He hadn’t realized there was so much green in them.

She had, of course, immediately told him to quit staring, that yes, she did in fact own several suits and he needed to get it together. Jordan had never had a woman beat him at getting ready before. And certainly not look so good doing it.

She had thrown her lab coat over her arm then peeled off her jacket just like he had in the stifling Florida humidity. He had sweated buckets just on the drive over. She had looked cool, “I’m from the south, remember?” All he could do was swear to slap anyone from LA who ever bitched about the ‘humidity’ again. And ask God’s forgiveness for all the times he had done it himself.

He pulled his jacket back on to cover his sweat stains as they entered the hospital flashing their CDCP credentials. Jillian clearly actually owned some of the adult faculties he was pretending to. Everyone spoke to Jillian, wanted her opinion first. She was smart, confident, and on top of it. A million miles from the woman who would pour over paperwork, pulled her hair back in a barrette, and had that weird flat sense of humor. It almost pissed him off.

It also lent a lot of credence to his new hypothesis that he wasn’t the brilliant theorist. And if that were the case, why was he here? He’d made his own diagnosis. But Jillian had given the same one, and they had all asked her first.

She followed him out of the little girl’s room to confer in the hallway. “What did you think?”

He shrugged out of his lab coat. “Same as you.”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? West Nile with anaphylactic shock caused by the spider bite.”

“So we’re here for another two days at least.”

“Why?” She looked perplexed and he had the feeling he was about to be shown up again. It didn’t sit well.

“Because you can’t tell West Nile from Yellow Fever or Dengue Fever without a viral analysis or waiting out the symptoms.” By his count, two days was the least amount of time they might need to see the distinction. He waited for her to tell him all about the new reasons he was wrong.

But she didn’t. “What’s the difference?”

“You don’t know?” He was shocked.

She shook her head, her expression suddenly clearly belonging to the girl who had inhabited the other side of the desk from him. It just pissed him off. “I hate you, you know. You walk in there, all confidence and knowing all the answers then only confess out here that you don’t.”

Her head tilted, and she smiled, “No one wants to believe that it isn’t an exact science. And that family has had doctors telling them that they have no idea what it was and that they called in the experts. That’s us, Starsky.”

He sunk into one of the doctor’s lounge chairs. It was unfamiliar, but so much like every other hospital’s lounges. “The way I’m feeling I think we should go by Bonnie and Clyde.”

She laughed, lightening the load on his shoulders. “Nah, Bonnie and Clyde actually knew what they were doing.”

“YES, MOM I’M HOME.” Jillian had the phone wedged between her shoulder and ear while she folded her clothes.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like crap, Mom. I just walked in the door twenty minutes ago.” And, well trained girl that she was, she was already putting her clothing away. And calling her Mother.

“So now you’ve been with this job, like, a week? And you haven’t had a day off, what are these people doing to you?” Jillian heard the slight intake of breath and she knew what was coming. “I just don’t see why you couldn’t have gone into private practice. . . why you didn’t-”

“Mom.” The sigh behind her own voice was deeper and well worn. “I never deluded you about wanting a private practice. I never intended to come back to Signal Mountain and check ears and throats for a living. I don’t have the touch for that. Nor the desire.”

Nor was her mother getting the everyday prestige from having her little girl go off to Emory for medicine and come back to help serve the community. But her mother’s high hopes had been just that. And they belonged entirely to her mother. So, as far as Jillian was concerned, her mother could figure out what to do with them.

“So you enjoy traveling all over the place with no days off?”

“Mom, I have days off.” Then, just to be a little facetious she added, “You know, saving the world doesn’t happen on a nine to five schedule.”

That managed to shut her up for all of the three seconds it took her to shift gears. “So are you meeting any nice doctors?”

Her shoulders ached. Slowly rolling the one that wasn’t cramped up under the phone, she gave the same answer she had been giving for two years, since the end of her last major relationship. “No, mom, they’re all assholes.”

There it was, the expected intake of breath, but she spoke again before her mother could criticize her language. “But I did meet a really nice janitor, and he wants to take me out on Thursday- Oh Mom! That’s the other line! Maybe it’s him. I’ll call you next week! I love you!”

She barely waited for the resulting “I love you, too.” Before hanging up the phone and tossing it on the dresser. God hang her for using her mother’s prejudices against her, but . . . she just couldn’t put up with it any more.

The bed beckoned. She was tired of being good, tired of putting her clothes away, tired of explaining her life choices to her family. In Chattanooga, smart girls married men with money. Even in this day and age. She knew three girls who attended one semester of freshmen year, just to say they did it, before they went off and married their much older boyfriends. Jillian had wanted her own career, and her own life, and apparently you couldn’t have both.

She flopped back onto the comforter - tomorrow she had to go into the office and they had to write a report on the spider bite, and then there were four glorious days off until Monday again.

She had been in the apartment for all of two and a half weeks, and since starting her job she estimated that she had been here maybe twenty-four hours total, including sleep time. Shaking her head, Jillian decided to pass out.

After half an hour of staring at the ceiling while her thoughts ran rampant with her, she finally accomplished her goal.

• • • •

“THIS IS SILLY, REBECCA.”

*Ooooh*, Dr. Warden had downshifted to ‘patronizing’. As her boss, his only real function seemed to be the monitoring of anything he deemed to be under his control - which included employees, discoveries, and even paperclips. Becky just knew she wouldn’t last three minutes without actually hitting him.

Taking one deep solid breath, she nodded. “All right. I understand. My resignation will be on your desk in fifteen minutes.”

“Rebecca, where would you go? You can’t just resign.”

She faked a startled look. “My parents live down the street. And I’m sitting on a huge discovery that will pay off in a little while. I’ll be fine, but thank you for worrying about me.”

Turning, she began to walk out of the office. His voice caught up to her quickly. “That’s my paper. Those frogs are university property.”

But she was done. She squared up to face him, as he towered over her tall frame, making her feel small, but she knew she was in the right. “No, it’s not your paper.”

He started to talk but she held up her hand. “Just because three of those frogs are sitting in my office, doesn’t make them university property. I would point out that my purse also sits in my office. Most of those frogs are still at my home. Sitting under a lamp I bought. They were caught in Tupperware that I purchased with my own money, I have a receipt.” She grinned, then continued, even as she talked this was getting better. “They were caught by my siblings, on land owned by my parents, and since you haven’t anted up a penny for them yet, I’d say you would be pretty hard pressed to prove that I don’t own-”

He interrupted, as she knew he would. “In your contract with the university it says that all related discoveries-”

She laughed; God, her day was getting better. She had come for a reward for her brother and sister, and when he’d childishly refused, she’d upped the stakes. And now she was going to walk out with a paper. “Doctor Warden, *your* contract might stipulate that, but mine doesn’t. I crossed those lines out, on the advice of my brother. Harvard Law, ninety-eight.”

Warden paled, and it was all she could do not to dance a little jig right there in the second floor J hall of the Reynolds building. She forced a smile and continued. “You can sign reward checks for my brother and sister, and my paper will have your name on it. Or I’ll go draft my resignation, effective immediately, and you can explain to the higher-ups why this doesn’t say ‘University of Tennessee’ all over it.”

He didn’t say anything. Just turned and went back to his office.

Becky tried to keep her voice light. “I’ll be back for those checks in an hour.”

“But-” He didn’t finish and she just smiled.

It was down the corridor, around a corner and through another lab that her office sat. Definitely out of the way. She went in and started writing up the findings, but after starting with the date, time, and location she realized that she couldn’t do anything. Not *anything*. Not until Warden put it in writing that the paper belonged to her and anyone else who she chose to have on it.

If she used university equipment or wrote up anything, the frogs and the paper could legally become property of the UT Biodiversity office. And, since finding new and unusual species and behavior was what the Biodiversity team did, she would be hard pressed to prove it was a personal project. So, for the moment at least, her hands were tied.

The ranas stared at her from their Tupperware lined up on her shelf. Three of them. All in a row, all looking right at her, their little throats bobbing as though with their breathing. One big, one little, one medium. There was nothing extraordinary about any of the three, other than the obvious extra legs.

Becky was suddenly extremely grateful to Aaron. That he had chosen law school and in his own arrogant way had decided that no man was complete without some knowledge of the law. He said she'd be grateful when she was in her first car accident or bought her first house. Neither of those things had happened yet. But she sent up a silent *thank you* as she sat there.

She was also grateful for her own error, remembering how frustrated she had been, making an extra trip to the restaurant supply store for the lexans she had forgotten to bring home with her. It was all lining up. If she jumped ship she wouldn't regret it. And if she got fired. . . well, she really still wouldn't.

She filled her time reading emails, and doodling, and finally gathered the lexans into her arms. The water sloshed as she walked, the frogs trying to stay motionless out of fear, but constantly having to squirm to correct their balance.

Warden looked up as she entered. "You're leaving?"

"Yes."

"I have your checks." But he didn't hand them over.

If she was fired, it would be worth it just to spend this minute watching the prick squirm.

"Do you have your resignation?" He eyed her, and leaned forward but didn't ask again.

"No. Not if I get my checks now and tomorrow morning I have it in writing that the paper is mine and mine alone." She took the checks and balanced the frogs in one arm while reaching into her pocket to pull out a sticky note. "Here's my home phone number so you can call me and tell me when it's ready." Already knowing he wouldn't take it, she stuck it on the nearest bookshelf.

Against the ropes, he nodded, swallowed a bit, then reached out. "Mind if I take a look?"

Just before his mealy hand closed on one of the Tupperware she turned away. "Yes, I do. These are still my frogs."

It was two city blocks to the parking garage then up two floors, and all the way to the back. And this was privileged parking. She was only allowed here as an employee. Students had to park even further away. Her jacket was cloying and constricting, but she wouldn't set down the frogs. They were her future right now. And something was very wrong with them.

Her folks' home was a ways out in the county, it was the only way they could have all that land. It just wasn't as far out as it had been when she was small. Several of the neighbors had parceled large properties and housing developments now stood where nearby farms and fields had been.

She followed the local school bus the last few turns to her home and met Melanie and Brandon as they leapt down to the gravel roadside. "No one believes we caught six-legged frogs!" The wail was that of a plaintive seven-year-old who was about an inch from a seriously good pout.

But that telling everyone part made her nervous. Becky scooped up her little sister and asked Brandon to grab the Tupperware out of the front seat. "Let's not tell people just yet. They'll believe you when they see your picture in the paper, even if it doesn't happen for a while."

Melanie consented, and after a slow evening her father showed up and her mother took advantage of adult company, pouring them three glasses of wine from the box in the fridge, if it could be called 'pouring'. But it wasn't bad, and partway through nursing her drink and contemplating how she had destroyed her future and was now the proud owner of forty-three frogs she couldn't investigate any further than a good once-over, Brandon called up from the basement.

"Becky, your frogs are all staring at me! They're weird!"

Her mother yelled back, but didn't move an iota. "Of course they are, they've got six legs for chrissakes!"



“Becky, can we rotate them?!” Melanie wanted to torment the frogs, and Becky wished she hadn’t started those early biology lessons with her little sister. The girl was too bright - it would be great if she forgot something just once in a while.

“No!”

“But it’s fun!”

In a low voice she spoke only to the table. “Can’t argue that.” The frogs had a lot of built in responses. When put on their back they would flip upright and get ready to jump. If you rotated the ground beneath them, they would turn to stay oriented to the original direction. And it was all reflex. The frogs would do this in the lab even if they were decapitated. Of course that response only lasted a few seconds before the dead frogs would jello-out and lose all muscle tone.

But it was enough to make the squeamish lab students jump and scream, and the more sturdy-hearted spend good lab time just rotating the dissection trays watching the beheaded frogs reorient one way then the other. In a few live frogs the responses could entertain a couple of elementary school kids for hours. For the frogs’ sakes, Becky regretted showing it to her little siblings.

It was quiet for a few minutes. Well, maybe more than a few minutes, her wine glass was empty. They all turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Brandon and Melanie emerged on the landing, arms full of little clear lexans.

“Becky, they keep orienting themselves.” Melanie put one Tupper on the table with a small *thunk*. “Look.” She turned the Tupper and sure enough the little rana moved his front legs hand over hand and shuffled his back feet as the container moved, constantly keeping his nose pointed in the original direction.

“Melanie, I told you not to rotate them.” Looking to her parents for backing, Becky sighed.

Before her folks could put in their two cents, Melanie continued with her mini-lecture on the orienting process of frogs. She picked up the lexan and softly but quickly shifted it onto its side, leaving the inhabitant on his back. She put it on the table again, and up the little guy went, onto all six legs, squat and ready.

“That’s exactly what they’re supposed to do. So stop tormenting my frogs.” And to think she had spent this morning arguing for bonuses for the little Dr. Moreaus.

Melanie ignored her. “Now the four-legger.” She scooted over the container marked with the normal masking tape from its spot at the end of the table. Now center stage, the little rana performed, hand over hand, back legs shuffling, while Melanie rotated the container. Then she flipped him onto his back and set the Tupper upright in line with the three six-leggers.

And Becky saw it.

What Melanie and Brandon had seen. She barely paid attention to the little guy as he flipped himself up off his back and into ‘ready’ stance. It wasn’t what he did. It was what he *didn’t* do.

The difference was obvious. This time Becky grabbed one of the downstream frogs, flipping her softly onto her back, and as the little rana struggled briefly then expertly flipped herself upright, even Mr. and Mrs. Sorenson were getting onto their feet.

Her Dad spoke first. “Are they supposed to do that?”

“No, Dad, this is definitely new.”

When the four-legger hopped up, he faced whichever direction was easiest. No matter what she did, each time the six-leggers came to a stop, they faced the same way they had previously. All three of them, always the same direction, all the time.

Without speaking, each family member grabbed one lexan, and separated them to different rooms, hollering out. “Same way!” “Toward the bed!” “Facing the sink.” It didn’t matter though. All the

phrases meant the same thing.

She left the Tupperware on the floor while scrambling down the stairs, her family close on her heels. With breath held tight, Becky flipped the light switch. All the little six-leggers were staring straight at her. Oriented the same direction as the ones upstairs. Her voice was weaker than she meant it to be. “What direction are they facing, Daddy?”

“Northwest, looks like.”

• • • •

GREER WALKED INTO THE lab like he owned the place. Which was silly, David thought, because *he* did. “Hey, pretty boy, what’s up with your stones? Tell me something interesting, because I’m footing a helluva bill for that shut-down day.”

“It’s good.” It was better than good, but David went back to perusing his pieces. He didn’t even bother to correct Greer about the ‘stones’. It was just said to annoy him anyway.

“Dude, you’ve got to give me more than that.”

David didn’t even look up. And that was the wonder of Greer. He always meant what he said just as he said it. You never needed to see his face. “All right, you are on par with Hell Creek.”

“*Excellent.*”

Yup, he didn’t need to see Greer’s eyes to know that the sarcasm flowed in rivers.

“Now how about something I can use?” His friend prodded. “I want information that I’ll find worthy of shutting down my dig for a full day, and I want it in complete sentences.”

He looked up, gauging what to give away and what to keep. “Well, you’ve got the iridium layer at the KT boundary, just like you were hoping. Only here, it’s better than Hell Creek because you’ve got a rapid lay down. Which gives you as close to full-on proof as you’ll ever get that the dust cover directly coincides with the dino die-out. It’s real thick at the KT, tapering off over the next several hundred years. No glass or ash content that the lab can discern—”

“You just said ‘the lab’, that means you didn’t do my analysis yourself.”

*Shit. Explain, explain.* David took a steadying breath. “Well, I couldn’t get it done in the time frame you wanted. The lab here did it and I oversaw it. It’s good work.”

Greer nodded slowly. “Our agreement was that *you* do the testing, but you farmed it out. So tell me what was so hellfire important that you shut down my dig and then blew me off for it?”

This time David looked up. “You don’t tell anyone.”

“Fine, but you tell me.”

Making his way into his office, he closed the doors behind Greer.

“Your dig is a hotspot. A magnetic jump point.”

Greer raised his eyebrows, “Do go on.”

“Every so often, a long time, even by geological standards, the earth’s poles shift . . . swap places. It happens that certain spots shift first, then the theory is that when a critical mass of hotspots, or altered areas, is hit, the poles snap. Bam! And it’s all over. North is south, south is north and all that, magnetically speaking. But no one’s seen a magnetic hotspot on the KT before. It might explain the slight discrepancies in die-out times better than the asteroid theory alone.”

“And you weren’t going to share your *dinosaur theory* with me?” Greer leaned forward on the desk, eyes blazing, and David wasn’t quite sure how to fill in the empty logic hole he had left. He was going to share, just not now.

“Listen, Greer, I’m still not positive. These rocks are good for it, but I need to get more. You know, most geologists never see a hotspot like this. My Dad was one of the few who did. I always

look for it-”

“Jeez, Carter, that chip on your shoulder must’ve been what stunted your growth.”

“Thanks, fuckhole.”

Greer smiled, “You’re welcome.” It would have sounded very genuine if not taken in the context of following the word *fuckhole*. “What are you going to do when the old man kicks off?”

He shrugged; it had been a question that plagued him for many years. “Same as I’ve been doing. Sit around, live off my Dad’s money and his name.”

“Dude, I’m going to let you in on something, because I think I’m the only person who likes you enough to tell you.” Greer shook his head, but David knew that last part was true. “You are the only one who thinks you’re getting by on your Dad’s name.”

“Yes, but you don’t have all the facts. My Dad bought my way into Princeton when my grades weren’t good enough.”

“Oh, so sad, and boo hoo, and suck me. You’ve proven your worth on your own since then.” Greer sighed, and that meant that the conversation was finished. “So when are you going to get positive about this theory and let me in on it?”

“I have to go to the Appalachians next.”

“Pray tell, why?”

“Because, I was scrounging old files, looking, and three years ago there was a KT dig there. Wharton took his top dogs and then got furious when they got back because the specimens were all mislabeled. He even dismissed three of his graduate students over it. But, I’m guessing now that it might have been another hotspot. And that, my friend would make a great paper.”

“Who are you taking on this secret dig?” Greer’s arms were crossed over his chest.

“I don’t know. I only just started thinking about going back to check it out this morning. Those are the specimens I was looking over out there. By the way, they have the same iridium strata as your Warren Fault pieces. – Hey, do you want to go to Tennessee with me?”

There were three slow blinks of his eyes. “I’m a black man. Why in the hell would I want to go to Tennessee?”

“Greer, this is the new millennium. No one’s going to make you jump down, turn around and pick a bale of cotton. I’m pretty sure they’ve gotten rid of that ‘separate but equal’ stuff, too.”

This time the eyes blinked once.

David smiled, “What you really have to be afraid of are the cabbages.”

“I need to fear leafy greens now?”

David shook his head. “It’s the name for the inbred, backwoods folks. They were called cabbages because the inbreeding led to large heads and equivalent mental capabilities.” The more he tried to convince Greer to come the more he realized that Greer was ideal for the spot. “Come on. They found bones. . .” He trailed off, using something Greer would enjoy as bait.

But Greer sighed. He was a smart fish, and he recognized that the worm had a hook jabbed in its back. “Haven’t your paleo guys checked it out yet?”

“Nope, there are just bits and pieces, and because they thought all the specimens were mislabeled, when they got back Wharton was furious and just threw everything into storage, calling the dig a complete waste.”

“What kind of bones are they?”

That question began to make David hopeful. “I don’t know, I’m not a paleontologist. But you’re welcome to look them over, they’re sitting right out there on the lab table.” He stood and opened the door letting Greer out into the main lab again.

They didn't speak. Working side by side, shuffling around the lab, getting a book or a test kit here or there. After a deep intake of breath Greer uttered the first words in two hours. "Damn, this could be crap or it could be a goldmine."

Carter just nodded. He'd had the exact same thought.

"All right, answer me honestly." Greer squared up to David, a good nine inches taller and with all the dignity David felt lacking in his own moral fiber. "Is there a chance that these are just mislabeled specimens? That the students didn't know what they were doing and none of this info is correct?"

David nodded. "I wasn't on the dig. I didn't know any of the students other than a few faces I saw in class as undergrads. I'd have to say that there's a possibility it's not even KT. But it appears that *all* the specimens are mislabeled. I have to go check it out."

Greer nodded slowly then pulled out his palm pilot. "How long do we need?"

"Two to four weeks. No telling 'til we get there." Carter went back into the lab for his own schedule, cool as a cucumber, but inside wildly excited that it was Greer going with him. No one knew his shit like Greer. "The major work is already done. But the site's three years old. It'll take some reworking and we won't have any students."

David looked for a reasonable chunk of time when he could go. Most of these digs were planned months in advance. "If we just need to confirm what we have, it'll be short, but if we find new pieces, we'll be longer, you know how it is."

"When?"

"A.S.A.P."

"Then I have to head home now. Explain all this to my ever-so-understanding wife. Find a way to make it up to her. Then I can leave two Mondays from now." His head was bent low over the palm pilot and he tapped at it rapidly with the little stylus. "But I have to be back at my place one month later."

David picked up his red marker and drew a line through the dates Greer mentioned, noting that he had drawn through two staff meetings and a dinner with the head of the department, and all sorts of other stuff that would have to be moved. "Looks great."

"Are you expecting U Wisconsin to kick in funding?"

David shook his head. "This is a private venture. It's the only way I know to not have to write a paper explaining my suspicions and then wait an eon while they decide to give it back to Wharton who fucked it up in the first place."

"Daddy?" It didn't sound as snotty as it could have. It was from Greer and there was no malice behind it.

But David shook his head again. "Nope." He took a deep breath. "I'm touching my trust fund for this one."

"Really?" Greer's eyebrows rose. "Then I'll fly in baggage and try not to eat."

"Nah, we're going nice all the way. Once I touch it, it's touched. It's about the principle, not the amount. But this will be worth it."

• • • •

JORDAN LET THE WATER sluice down over him. He had been right, which usually made him pretty happy. Except when his prediction had been a solid ass-whopping. When he had gotten to town, even before he had unpacked, he had driven in ever-widening circles from his new place, looking for a gym.

The first evening after joining, he'd met Martin. So they had signed up for racquetball together, and every Wednesday, except when he'd been in Florida, they had played. Jordan had come close quite a few times, but he had beaten Martin only once. The workout was good and the challenge and standing date was better.

If he was ever going to be in good shape and have a healthy sex life it would be now. He had avoided relationships through med school, focusing on his studies and what few one-night-stands he could manage. It worked well and didn't distract much, but didn't keep the johnson as happy as he'd have liked.

He cranked the water hotter, something he hadn't done before receiving his gas bill just yesterday. He could afford it. And today he had earned it. God, he ached. So he stood there, hands flat on the slick tile, one leg straight, the other bent in calf stretches. After a few seconds he switched legs.

His mind wandered to Jillian in her tub, surrounded by white bubbles. He'd seen her place. Her tub probably had the same yellowing tiles with cracked caulking that his did. But in his imagination it was a pristine white claw foot.

It got bigger. Room for two. He added Marla from UCLA. One of the other med students. Two years older than him and hotter than hell. She hadn't had time for any of them, as she was hell-bent on a surgeon out of residency and with his loans already paid off. But she was in his tub right now in his head. With Jillian nonetheless.

By the time the shower water turned colder, the tub was a hot tub. And included his high school crush, but with bigger boobs, Angelina Jolie, and Marcy the tech from earlier today. All kissing each other. And . . .

Shit.

He had to face two of these women tomorrow. The water was cold and he thought that the phone was ringing anyway. So he cranked the faucet off and grabbed for one of the two towels he owned. Wrapping it around him as he ran, he dove to catch the phone before the machine picked up. He didn't get to look at the caller ID even, "Hello?"

"Jordan."

It was his Dad. And that in itself was odd. They weren't estranged, just not close. If it wasn't a holiday, they didn't talk. So instantly he was alert for problems. "Hey, Dad, is something going on?"

"Yeah," It was a sigh, low and long, like when his dad talked about Mom. "Eddie died."

"Oh, no." The weight in his chest took him by surprise. He and Eddie had rarely seen each other since they were children, and Eddie had always seemed ill at ease after Jordan had gone off to pursue medicine and Eddie had left high school early to go into construction. In the ten years since he'd been out, Eddie had made a name in Lake James, built himself a nice house, married a cute girl and had a daughter. Then got leukemia. "I thought he was in remission."

"Well, they thought he was better, that he was going to make it. He put the weight back on. Grew some hair, was fine. . . we thought."

Jordan wracked his brains. He couldn't talk medicine with his Dad, but he had with Eddie. They had finally seemed to be on more even footing, and Eddie now spoke some med-lingo from his time in the 'slammer,' as he referred to the hospital. He had seemed fine at the family Fourth of July picnic, only a few months ago. "So, do you know what happened?"

"Don't think anyone really does. He got some stomach flu. Next thing you know he's in a coma and then this morning he died."

That didn't sound like anything Jordan had ever heard of. He wanted to drill his Dad. Get answers. Because that sure didn't make a shitlick of sense.

"Funeral's Friday. You should be here."

"I will, I'll be there sometime tomorrow. I'll call and let you know when I get in."

And that was the end of the conversation. He stood with the cordless phone loose in his hand, shoulders slumped, one hand running down his wet face.

In a few moments he was on the line with Jillian, briefly wondering if she was also wrapped in a towel, bothered mid-bubble bath by his call. But the thought was momentary at most. Her sympathies were heartfelt and he was told in no uncertain terms to leave for the funeral right away, she'd be fine inspecting the latest staph infection by herself. She even offered to drive him to the airport. He almost told her 'no', then thought better of it. Between low level pay, student loans, and now a last minute plane ticket, he could use the savings from not parking.

Next he called Landerly and left a message. Then hopped online, and even called the airline, getting all the requirements for the grievance discount. Thank god for credit cards. Lord knew, none of it was in his account right now.

• • • •

BECKY PROTESTED. "YOU'RE trying to distract me from my frogs." She sounded like a petulant teenager and she knew it. But that was the politics of the professional academic world. Gain your footing and hold on for all you're worth.

"Rebecca, what, really, have you found out about those frogs?"

"Nothing unusual-"

"Exactly. So I don't understand why you are so determined to miss out on this great opportunity." Warden sat back in his chair. If he was the villain in a film, he would look just like this. Only creepy music would be playing in full digital surround sound.

She hadn't told any of them about the directionality of the frogs. Probably because she couldn't explain it. And she didn't want anyone else explaining it before she found a suitable solution. Not that she had found even an unsuitable solution in the last week. Her mouth opened, but there wasn't anything to come out. She closed it again. Biodiversity was her job. She traveled all the time to collect and study animals. She would pack all her frogs home first. They would be in better hands with Brandon and Melanie, even if they would be slightly tormented.

"All right. Where are these birds, and why do I need to see them?"

"I knew you would realize that this is the right thing, Rebecca."

*That's Doctor Sorenson to you* was the first thought that entered her head. He called her by her birth name, Rebecca. Which she thought sounded far too mature for herself, yet he treated her like a child. An idiot child at that. The second thought that went through her head was, *Bite my ass*.

"It seems there's a flock of warblers in Dalton, Georgia."

She waited the briefest of moments. "This is an odd time of year for them. Did they just never leave? They should be in Canada."

"They did leave. But the local birdwatchers say they're back, *and* they're nesting."

"Nesting?" This was maybe as interesting as the frogs. "All right. I'm hooked. What do I do?"

"When can you go?" His fingers still steepled in front of him. His hair was still on the greasy side and she still trusted him about as far as she could throw him.

"Tomorrow."

“You’ll drive down, make a preliminary assessment and let us know if we need to assemble an ornithology team, or if there’s a fluke or an obvious issue.” He handed her a three by five lined card. The cheapest paper for making small notes on, by his own statements. “Call this man at this number when you get in; he’ll be more than happy to show you the birds and their newly chosen habitat.” Warden dismissed her with a disdainful wave of his hand, and gave her his back even before she could have possibly started out the door. But that was okay, his front wasn’t his best side.





Jordan looked around the living room. It was cozy and warm, and the deep-toned plaid couch screamed everything but ‘Eddie’ to him. Kelly must have done all the decorating.

The room was a definite step up from his own place. One, that it was in a house, on a lot with a yard and a swing set even. Two, the carpet was lacking in the stains his had come with. Three, the kitchen was fully functional.

He’d never been here before. After all the time he and Eddie had spent blowing things up together as kids, somehow he had never seen the house his cousin had built with his own hands and his own construction crew. It seemed a shame to see it only now that Eddie was getting buried.

Kelly sat on the couch, taking all of it much better than Jordan had expected. So when Aunt Agnes left her alone, he tried to casually saunter over with his soda in hand and position himself next to Kelly.

“How are you holding up?” It was her voice asking him that question before he could ask it of her.

“I’m all in one piece.” And before he could ask anything, she started in.

“Eddie was always telling me stories about the two of you and the M-eighties, or the illegal fireworks. Were they true? Could he have really walked into your medical school and convinced them that you had a sordid past and shouldn’t have been admitted?”

Jordan laughed. He hadn’t expected laughter and not from Eddie’s widow. “Yes, it’s all true.” And Jordan tried to use his opening. He had to know. “What happened? I thought he was in remission.”

“He just caught this stomach flu. It got worse and worse. The E.R. and his regular doctor told us that it would pass. Then he passed out, and by the time they admitted him he was in a coma.” She took a sip of the gin and tonic that she was holding in both hands, unaware that it had sweated a ring onto her linen skirt. Jordan waited, seeing that she was just steeling herself for something important. “Before . . . with the leukemia . . . he had made me promise to pull the plug. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it. I just knew he’d come back around. But three days later he flatlined and there wasn’t anything they could do. He was gone.”

For a moment, her hand shook, rattling the small cubes of ice exposed above the level of liquid in her glass. But then it stilled.

“Kelly, I don’t get it. That doesn’t sound like Leukemia at all. And I never heard of a stomach flu that put anyone in a coma. How was his white count?” He had leaned forward, elbows on knees, soda clenched in both hands.

This time when she looked at him her eyes saw his face, but no further. “Jordan, what are you doing?”

“I just want to find out what happened.” He reached for her arm, but she was already jerking it back out of his way, standing in one fluid motion, her hands raising.

“Why!?” Her voice was as loud as it was high pitched. “Why! What can you do? He’s gone. Just when I was getting comfortable with the thought that I might get the forever I signed on for. In five days he went from healthy to dead.”

Jordan opened his mouth to apologize, but she didn’t let him.

“Can you bring him back? I know that he’s dead. But stop asking me these goddamn questions. I don’t know what his blood count was. I just want him back.” She dropped the glass then. It fell in

almost slow motion, and even as he was aware of everyone in the room staring at him like the leper he was, he reached for Kelly and set her back on the couch to keep her from falling. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She was in tears now, full streaming tears, the fallen glass unnoticed.

Even if everyone else hated him, Kelly didn't seem to. Although he would have understood. He shouldn't have pushed her like that. With a great sigh Aunt Agnes picked up the glass, luckily still in one piece, and sent her husband, Bill, running for paper towels. Kelly stayed there, crying into his shoulder, while slowly, everyone around him went back to their business.

He had forgotten the cardinal rule. That these were people. He could always remember that when it was strangers. But with his own family he pushed. And he shouldn't.

And he had ruined it. As much as he regretted hurting Kelly, and pushing her past whatever safety barrier she had found, he more regretted that he wasn't going to get his information that he wanted.

They were all still looking at him. Why had he done it? He could answer but they wouldn't like it. They were all blue collar by choice, and he had gone out and paid through the nose to educate himself, to do what he wanted. But he had learned a whole new language, and they didn't speak it. Jordan didn't fit. And he'd upset one of the people who did. One at the center of the circle.

He rode home with his Dad in silence. Anyone else would think his father carefully schooled and stoic in his lack of expression these past few days. But Jordan knew better. Dad simply hadn't had it in him since his Mom had died.

He was in his old easy chair within moments, tonight. There was no reproach for Jordan's behavior, as he might have gotten when his mother was alive. Even though he knew his Dad didn't approve, he didn't hear about it. "Night, Dad."

His father didn't answer. Just a quick look in his direction and a nod let him know he had even been heard.

Jordan lay on the bed, his hands laced behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. His thoughts turned to Jillian briefly, wondering if her day at Grady Hospital had been horrifyingly long. But he realized that she had probably done just fine without him. A small smile played across his lips before it was erased by his medical mind.

Eddie had died of the stomach flu and a coma. And none of it added up. If anyone here would know that something was off with Eddie's death it was Jordan. But no one was listening.

Kelly's words haunted him.

*Why! What can you do?*

*In five days he went from healthy to dead.*

He couldn't bring Eddie back. He just wanted to understand. But there wasn't even an autopsy. Not for a man who had leukemia for five years.

His lids slowly gained the weight of sleep, and within moments the glare of bright light. He blinked against the harsh sun through the windows he hadn't bothered to close, because he hadn't believed that sleep was coming. He was still in his slacks, his shirt, and his tie. All of it formerly pressed and Sunday best.

He had the whole day to contemplate his horrible behavior from the evening before. The idea that God was punishing him for it began with the taste of old gym towels in his mouth.

With only a few blinks in a lazy attempt to clear his head, he pushed his way off the bed and into the bathroom. Relief surged at the flavor of mint replacing the gumminess of sleep. Jordan reached into the stall and flicked the shower on, the sense memory of where exactly to turn the dial remained even in this blurry state. Within a minute the water was a decent temperature, and he had yanked his

tie loose and proceeded to strip. He almost fell back asleep standing there naked under the ancient showerhead.

By the time Jordan was downstairs, his Dad stood at the stove, his one concession to real-life cooking was the electric griddle that was perpetually on the counter top. The smell of Bisquick pancakes brought Jordan back to every other weekend he and his Dad had spent since his mother had died. He sat down with no conversation and ate until he was near bursting. Wondering all the while, as he always did, if his father made the pancakes even on weekends when he wasn't home. He'd never had the heart to ask.

Just as Jordan set down his fork, the phone rang. His father motioned with the spatula that Jordan was to answer it. In China, children cared for their parents unto old age. In Lake James, Jordan saved his Dad the social effort involved in answering the phone. "Hello?"

"Jordan?" The voice was soft and sweet and he couldn't quite place it. "It's me, Kelly."

"Oh, hi-"

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday. We all need to make sense of it in our own way." He could hear her breath across the line in the sharp inhale she needed before she continued. "You need to know. I don't want to. I don't care what you find out. But I signed a release to the hospital, and told them you were with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and that you needed them to cooperate."

"Kelly . . ."

"No, It's okay. If it had been you, Eddie would have found the answers leveling a field with a caterpillar and a backhoe. This is how you find yours. I'm just sorry I wasn't more understanding yesterday."

"Kelly." He took a deep breath. "Thank you, and I'm sorry I upset you. I just . . ."

"It's okay. Don't worry."

"Listen Kelly, I wanted to tell you that Eddie once told me that he was the luckiest guy alive to have you."

"Liar."

"No he did. He then told me what a pansyass I was with my nose in books all the time."

He heard her sniff even as she laughed. "Thank you. . . have a good flight home tonight Jordan."

Great, he had made her cry. Yet, she had given him access to Eddie's medical records. He wanted to jump up and down and cheer. He hated himself for it. But he had nine hours at the hospital until he had to leave for his flight.

• • • •

BECKY WASTED LITTLE time unpacking her duffle bag and simply splashed some water on her face. The hotel was covered by the Amateur Birdwatchers; it was far nicer than anything Warden would have approved of her staying in.

She pocketed her room card and slipped her purse over her shoulder. Making certain that her door locked behind her, she found her way back to the elevators and wondered what she was getting herself into. She spotted Marshall Harfield easily, mainly because he was the only person actually sitting and waiting in the lobby. He had told her that he had dark hair and dark eyes, and that he would be wearing a blue ABA jacket. What he had neglected to tell her was that the dark hair was thinning and the ABA jacket was bright enough to scare away all kinds of wildlife and that it was struggling to stay closed around the wide girth of his belly.

He neglected to tell her that he was nervous and that he would startle when she approached him. Wiping his hand on his pants he held it out while he greeted her. But she couldn't very well refuse to shake his hand. He led her out to his car, plastered with ABA and various other bird bumper stickers. Some even thought they were funny.

As they left the parking lot, he began a stream of nervous chatter. Becky, of course, listened with half her thoughts to Marshall, and the other half wondering what she'd gotten herself into. Her heart leapt when he reached into the backseat, but all he produced was a series of marked volumes on the Georgia Spotted Warbler.

Within moments, he had her flipping pages, finding out details and seeing that everyone who had ever printed anything about the Georgia Spotted Warbler agreed that they were only Georgian during the winter months. If it was true, then these birds were way out of sync. And Marshall Harfield had found his groove and a warm smile that he shared with anyone who could get excited over an unremarkable brown bird.

Her whole attention was turned to him as he continued, and she didn't even notice the drive. They were pulling up to a farmhouse outside Dalton and four people were standing in the middle of the front lawn, their bright blue ABA jackets giving them away. They all but pulled Becky from the car and smiled and shook her hand in turn as Marshall introduced *Dr. Rebecca Sorenson* around to the lot of them. They were polite enough to make it through introductions, then they were all speaking on top of each other.

She posed the question to the group in general as she was getting the hang of understanding them. "So last year the birds flew in the proper pattern, and they left last spring at the appropriate time . . . but now they're here way too early."

"Yes."

"No."

"Not exactly."

Becky decided to go with the kid, Weston, who had said 'not exactly'. "Explain please."

"This is the nesting ground for this flock, every year they're here in Mrs. Chesterfield's orchard. Well, last year they didn't arrive on time. And two weeks later we found them while we were out looking for spotted woodpeckers over at the Dalton Arboretum. They were there, the warblers, and they were nesting. So we thought that was weird--"

Becky's brows knit with questions. "How do you know it's the same flock?"

Anne, the older woman, spoke up this time. "I've been watching this flock for years. The birds come and go, but there's a consistency. You'll see the same birds for quite a few years. We named the ones we can positively I.D. There's Marsha, Jan, Cindy, Greg, Bobby, and Alice. Sam, Peter, and Tiger didn't come back this year."

Clearly no one else in the group thought anything of the names that Anne was rattling off.

Marshall smiled again, his big beaming smile. "That's why we called the Biodiversity lab. Last year our birds were a bit off. But this is way out of our league." He grabbed her by the arm, but by now she took it as a good sign, "Do you want to go see them?"

She nodded, and Weston rummaged through his backpack to come up with a bright blue ABA hat, which he held out to her. "I thought you might like a hat. We have Lyme ticks."

"Thank you, Weston." Before she knew it, she was in the back woods of Georgia, in eighty-five degree heat, and eighty-five percent humidity, trailing a team of birdwatchers. They laughed, and she didn't even ask as they pointed out Boss Hog and Roscoe, two woodpeckers who were squabbling over a nearby tree.

IT WAS TWO A.M. WHEN Jillian spotted Jordan at the airport curb. He stood with one bag over his shoulder and a carry-on just clinging to the tips of his fingers, looking much worse for the wear than she was.

Pulling up, she spilled out of the car, her arms offering up a hug, and immediately she saw the awkwardness of the move, but it was too late to stop herself. He was a co-worker, and not family. Even if she was here in the middle of the night.

Jordan was startled by the move, but he hugged her back, maybe even just a moment too long, clearly out of it, and she wouldn't have been surprised if he passed out right there in the pick-up lane. But he simply threw his bag into the backseat, and slid, bone weary, into the passenger side. "Thank you . . ."

If he was going to say something else, it was lost in the moments between starting the car, and her intense scrutiny of the few other vehicles in the pick-up lane while she tried to find her way back to the freeway. From the expression on his face and the way he hid it behind spread fingers, his cousin's death had been hard on him.

When he finally looked up, she handed him the extra soft drink she had gotten for him. "I don't know if you want this, maybe you just need to go home and pass out, but I was getting one anyway."

"No. I'm starving, actually. Thank you." He sighed, sucked down a good portion of the soda, and two seconds later started talking again. "I can order a pizza right now, right? Will you come up and share it with me? I need your help."

That pulled her brows together. He was tired and not in there. And he wanted her to come up for pizza in the middle of the night? But again she didn't get to say anything.

"Eddie had leukemia. But he died of a stomach flu that put him in a coma." Frustration carried bell-clear in the soft deep timbre of his voice.

"What? I don't know of any stomach flu that does that." She pulled up to the curb in front of his building.

"Exactly." He popped open the car door and retrieved his bag. "I alienated my family asking questions. All they know is that he's gone. His wife is right, I can't bring him back. But I can't answer any of the questions either. . . . And you probably really want to go home and get some sleep."

"Actually, I'm wide awake now. Buy me a pizza and tell me all about it." She closed her car door and turned the key, managing only a small wince in the still city night air as the horn beeped that the alarm was engaged.

In the elevator he rummaged through his carry-on bag, producing a heavy folder that looked at once brand-new and well-worn. Jillian took it from him, while he entered his unit and went around the small living/dining area, opening windows, and turning on lights and the fan. The first slight breeze hit her face and it occurred to her that it was stuffy in here, even for the middle of the night. She turned the file over. "This says the file was released to Dr. Jordan Abellard of the CDCP. . . . Did you use the CDC to get this?"

He shook his head. "I went in with Kelly's release form, she had put CDCP on it. I had my badge and they never questioned it."

"That's not really-"

"I know," He put his hands up in the air. "What do you want me to do? I never said anything, they assumed. And I had the complete file in my hands in under twenty minutes."

Jillian couldn't smother her smile. "I'm fine with that; I was just curious if you knew that it was against policy."

His stance relaxed. "So what do you like on your pizza?"

"Canadian bacon and pineapple--"

His face immediately told her that he didn't feel the same way about toppings.

So she continued. "But I'll eat pepperoni, or sausage or olives, or peppers."

He paced while he was on hold and she thumbed through the huge file; it would take hours just to see what was in there, but it wasn't like she had a busy social life demanding her time. After a few minutes she had found nothing unusual and Jordan was ordering. A few phrases broke through while she was reading. "... two-liter coke . . . large pizza . . . half Canadian-bacon and pineapple the other half . . ."

She smiled. By the time he was sitting next to her at the old coffee table she had made a once over. "It looks normal - for a leukemia patient - up until that last stomach flu. So fill me in on the rest."

"You got the basics from the file. There were a few scares, but he kept pulling through. He was in remission since this time last year." Jordan shoved his fingers through his hair. "It was the longest remission he had maintained over the five year course of the disease. His white count was normal up until the end. It was fine when he was brought in. It sounded like flu, but everything sounds like flu."

Her heart ached for him. It wasn't just a medical mystery he was trying to solve. Jillian couldn't remember him ever mentioning his cousin, but clearly Eddie's death had shaken him up. "You know, there may not be an answer."

"I know. It's just so odd. If it's a disease that took advantage of his weak immune system . . . I work for a company that has the foremost technology to prevent these kinds of things from happening." He shrugged.

Jillian began dismantling the large folder into sections by visit and series. She handed one chunk back to Jordan. "Tell me about him."

He shook his head. "Twenty-nine year old, Caucasian male, mild smoker, mild drinker--"

She cut him off. "No, really tell me. Where did he live? What is his place like? His family?"

Two hours later, she was exhausted.

Jordan probably would have been asleep except that he was pacing tracks into the carpet. "What do I do, Jilly?"

"Let's sleep now, and at noon, when we get in, we take it to Landerly."

• • • •

DAVID PUSHED HIS HAIR back off his face. In the wet wool of the thick air it clung like spiderwebs, giving him willies as he imagined the one thing he was really afraid of.

Greer laughed at him, his usual low chuckle when David's harsh personality amused him.

"What are you laughing at? You're okay because your people are from here, you darkie!"

"Dude, you are way messed up. My people are from Africa. Trust me, we aren't built for this kind of humidity." Greer never stopped his careful chipping at the rock beneath him.

"At least your hair sticks up and out of the way."

"Yup. Which is the reason my race is superior and yours felt the need to better yourselves by enslaving us."

David also never took his eyes off the ground layer beneath them. There was no good comeback, and so he avoided one all together, the conversation trickling off to nothing while they worked.

There was water making constant background static nearby, and a damned obnoxious bird that had a call that just never quit. God had been laughing when he put the lungs on that thing. Just as soon as it shut up another one would answer it.

Evidence of deer had been all over the first few days, and it had taken nearly a week to push back what time and the East Tennessee climate had done to the abandoned site.

It was slow going in the back woods, with the rustles of forest and the slope of the Appalachians beneath them. The only sound that broke the peace was the two men calling each other names and the high 'ching' of the tiny picks striking rock. Neither of them had the easy swing of a student, so the calls of the birds were periodically interrupted by the sharp screech of metal glancing off rock followed by a colorful string of swear words. Then, after a brief pause, nature would resume its noise, hiding the fact that they were there from the cities and homes not that far away.

"Greer, this one's for you." Carter brushed off his knees, and stood, not cursing out loud this time. The pain in his joints that told of age was not anything he wished to acknowledge to the world.

"What is it?"

"Fuck if I know. It's a bone, maybe it's a damn trilobite. If you're lucky it's one of your lizards."

He heard the edge in David's voice. "Dinosaurs aren't lizards. You know it, I've told you that."

"Ah." David stood and stretched his hands over his head, taking in the thick mass of tall trees and virtually untouched wilderness that enclosed them. "That would imply that I listen to you."

He tried not to let his legs give him away as he moved to a new spot that had looked interesting. But, even from where he was bent over his dig, Greer saw it. "Well listen to this, my honky friend: I'm bigger than you, and stronger than you, and -" he pointed his pick at David's knees, "not nearly as arthritic as you. So don't call my dinos lizards. It's insulting."

"Hey Greer, you do know that all your dinos died, right? That means that you're studying an animal that is gone, gone, gone, and won't ever come back. You have a totally useless profession."

Greer snorted. "Dude, you think the limestone you hold is going to reveal anything other than what happened a zillion years ago?"

David held up one chunk that he had extracted, and smiled. "This baby can tell the future."

"Well, you just tell me what your Magic Eight Ball there says."

"We're headed for another polarity shift." David smiled. There he'd said it, out loud, even if it was only to Greer.

But Greer snorted again. "Yeah, in another million years." He pushed himself to his feet and dusted off. "Be sure to let me know how that pans out for you."

David started carefully picking his way through the grid lines. "Just go play with your petrified lizard."

But Greer was already standing over it looking down, trying to figure what the piece that David's pick had revealed might be. He turned his head one way then another, before sliding the instrument into the hammer-loop of his carpenter jeans and pulling out a smaller, lighter one from a deep pocket somewhere. His voice was no longer the one that insulted David, but a little more thoughtful. "There's a good chance this dig will help us solidify the dinosaur-therapsid link."

"Us? I don't need a link."

"Us paleontologists." Greer knelt down and spoke to the small whitish smooth piece buried within the packed limestone, "Come to Papa." He took a few small swings at the peripheries before speaking to David. "Actually, you do need a dino-therapsid link. The therapsids were dinosaur-like pre-mammals and warm-blooded to boot. Which means they are absolutely pertinent to you, Mr. Mammal."

“Like I care about the distinction between dinos and lizards and theradons-”

“Therapsids.”

“Exactly, *I don't care*. My kind survived. Me and my mammal friends.”

David could see the edges of Greer's smile even though he was bent over, softly chipping at the rock. “Come to think, I'm not so sure that you are a mammal. Mammals are warm-blooded.”

“Ohhhhhh.” David drolled out the monotone. “That was low, Greer.” Then he smiled. “Congratulations, I didn't think you had it in you. I thought maybe ‘honky’ was the best you could do.”

“At least I don't have to carry limestone in my pockets. Seems to me that's the only rocks swinging in your pants.”

David turned to look at his friend, but Greer was on his hands and knees, and all he could see was an eyeful of upturned ass. So he looked away. “You're sooo funny.”

But Greer didn't seem to hear him. At least, he didn't respond. So, bending over, David went back to reading the tags hanging off the intersecting lines in the grid he and Greer had painstakingly mapped. They had tried to match it to the original site that Wharton had laid out, and they'd gotten damned close as best as they could tell.

He turned to find the specimens that matched this location and came back with a few zipper baggies heavy in his hands. Wharton would kill if he knew that Carter was at this site. More specifically he would kill David. And bring shame upon his father. Ah, well. Wharton could go to hell. He was the one who had missed the geologic hotspot here. More the fool he.

Turning the baggies over in his hands, David read the markings through the clear plastic. The KT boundary here was much closer to the surface, much of geological evidence of the past washed away by wind and time. The Appalachians were much older than the Rockies, the fault lines here all but inactive, and so they had been worn smooth and low, exposing things to the surface, or hiding them just barely underneath. For him and Greer to come and pick at.

“Sweet!” The exclamation came from the spot he had abandoned to Greer moments before. “This was worth leaving my pregnant wife at home.”

“That ain't saying much.” Carter could hear the drawl developing in his voice, not that they spoke to much of anyone around here. But like the humidity, the accents were so thick in this part of the state that you couldn't help but absorb it. Like some communicable disease. “What'd you find? Petrified turd?”

“Dude, you have no sense at all. It's an egg, maybe a whole nest, so back off.” The steady sound of the light pick striking stone picked up again as Greer tried to unearth his find.

For the briefest of moments David wished for a team, where he and Greer could lead like they usually did, and have other people do the labor, the intensive and time-consuming picking and brushing and getting things out. But then he remembered why they were here alone; they had to be.

Another baggie with another set of markings was telling the same story. The polarity here was reversed. This specimen from just at the KT boundary had a clear magnetic direction. But when it was lined up with the site, north was south and south was north. Wharton had fucked up. And David was more than certain that he had dug up another hotspot. He tried to keep his breathing regular even as he felt his stomach roll over.

Greer let up a cheer as he unearthed something that would interest only him, so David just pressed his hand to his middle hoping to quell the churning there and did his best to ignore all of it. Damned birds started up again, and to add insult to injury a woodpecker started in on a nearby tree. He was only familiar with the Woody Woodpecker variety, so with a great sigh of misery, David lifted his



head to see if he could see the thing. Sure enough it was racking its head at jackhammer speed against a trunk, but luckily no obnoxious laughter emerged.

At this point the Deep South was so disturbing to him that he wouldn't have been surprised if Injuns had popped out from behind the tall oaks with feathers in their hair, and looking for scalps. Or maybe the deer could just come out and do a tap dance.

He had his hotspot, he knew it. Soon he'd be able to leave the land that time forgot. He just needed to unearth enough evidence so that there could be no argument. If Greer found a tie between the hotspots and the dieout times, well . . . there was no telling where it might go. Except that they would get themselves immortalized in every high school science textbook.

Carter needed more evidence. The rest of the world might not know what he knew in his gut. It was here and he was standing on top of it.

So he lowered himself to his knees and hunched-over again, and began wounding the earth beneath him, just a little more.

• • • •

“BOTULISM, BOTULISM, and botulism” had been Jordan's guess on the caseload that morning. Yesterday they had arrived at two in the afternoon, squinting in the bright sun, and trying to look like they hadn't slept sideways on his couch, Eddie's file dangling from their sleep slackened fingertips.

So the guess hadn't been very exuberant. It hadn't been creative. And it sure as hell hadn't been right. Jordan figured one of these days he had to hit. But then he began the worrying: Would he die of boredom writing reports about food poisoning while he never figured out what happened to Eddie?

And why the hell did old man Landerly have to pick this week of all weeks to leave town? He was barely able to get around the office some days, so what was he doing climbing on a 747 and hitting the beach? Just when he was needed, too.

He hadn't said anything, but Jillian's voice cut into his thoughts, so accurate that for a moment he wasn't sure that she was actually speaking, “He'll be back in a few days. Eddie's file won't change in that time.”

He did look up to nod and force a small half-smile as thanks for her concern. Today she was well put together, her dark hair drawn back away from her face in a tight clip. Her usual look for the office. Her clothing was getting more casual, and she was questioning him less and less as she worked. She churned out files like she was writing emails to friends. And she didn't question why his pace had ground to a near halt.

A few blinks and he tried to clear his head. A quick scan down to the bottom of the front page showed that it was not, in fact, anything like botulism. He had a clear cut case of Legionnaire's Disease in his hot little hands and he had stared at it blankly for half an hour.

Something pestered him while he began to slowly type, tabbing across the open fields on the computer screen, inputting bits of information here and there. And . . .

Jilly was watching him. Her keys didn't click, they had stopped some time ago, and that's what was bothering him. Just as his eyes lifted to meet her gaze, she spoke up. “Let's go get lunch. My treat.”

He shook his head. “I'm not keeping up, I'm just going to eat out of the vending machines. I just need to get back into the groove of things.” Why he wasn't already in the groove of it, after a full day back, was beyond him though.

“No you won't-”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, doll.” But even though he had refused verbally, Jillian was walking around the large desk, shedding her labcoat and dropping it onto a hook on the old curly coatstand shoved into the corner of the room. But the cubby of an office was so small it was all in arms reach.

“You need chicken nuggets.” Her smile got wider. “You’re frustrated because you lost someone you’ve been trained to save, and not only weren’t you there, you still can’t figure out what went wrong. And I can’t figure it out for you. And to make matters worse, Landerly is suddenly out of town, so you can’t get answers from the one person who might be able to provide them. But I can buy you chicken nuggets and I can help take up the slack a little so you can figure things out.” With a small shrug she dismissed her own generosity for nothing.

She had his hand in hers, although he was unsure when it had gotten there. And suddenly it seemed like a rather intimate gesture. When added in to the fact that she had just put to words what was eating at him, he couldn’t stop the curl of his fingers around the heat she offered with just her hand. He couldn’t stop the first smile he had formed all day, and he let her lean her full weight back as she made the motions of pulling him up from his seat.

They didn’t speak on the way over, and he let her order for him, not surprised that she knew exactly what he wanted; they’d been here at least six times in the past month and he hadn’t varied his order at all. So he tried not to dwell on Eddie. And three empty sauce containers later, he asked her, “So what did you find in the reports today? Botulism?”

She shook her head, knowing that she had blasted his predictions all to hell. “Salmonella-” Her voice kept his mind from wandering too far astray, “Then there were the three old people in the nursing home. Some sort of vague guess at a staph infection. It killed them but there was no real conclusive evidence-”

He looked up because her voice had just trailed off. Jilly’s mouth hung in a small open ‘o’, her blue eyes focused somewhere beyond his shoulder. The gears working in her brain were visible and he waited her out. The tension he hadn’t realized he was carrying tightening in his muscles every second. But he didn’t push her to voice her reasoning.

Briefly it flashed across his thoughts again that he hadn’t been hired to be the brilliant theorist. And if she was both the workhorse and the genius then perhaps he was just window dressing. Her lip turned in, and just as he had leaned all the way forward, waiting on edge for whatever she was going to announce, she looked at him and spoke. “Jordan, we have to go back and double check that file.”



Becky sank into her wooden swivel chair, with her head cradled in her hands. Warden hadn't let up on her regular load because of the frogs. Never mind that investigating animal oddities was what the Biodiversity lab was set up to do. Never mind that she had stayed and kept the paper with the university. Warden seemed to begrudge her the find because it had been hers. Angry birds here, creepy frogs there, it was all too much.

But-

Her head snapped up. Maybe . . .

Maybe there was a connection between the screwed up frogs and the screwed up birds. She worked on it for the rest of the day, trying to come up with some sort of link. Then drove most of the way home until her little Jetta sputtered and died on her. She trudged the last mile, and arrived weary in her soul, brain, and body. From where she threw open the front door, Becky could see that her mother was in the kitchen and Brandon and Melanie were playing with two frogs loose on the living room carpet. "Those better not be my frogs." It was meant to be a threat but she didn't really have the energy to back it.

"They are, but I'm supervising." The voice sounded so much like her Dad's that her head snapped up.

"Aaron!" She felt the smile spread across her face as she launched herself into his arms. Only two years older, Aaron had been her god since the day she was born. In her early teens, she had suffered through the indignities of having to share him with her friends. And later with having to share him with the town. Knoxville was like every other southern town. There were three religions: 'Baptist,' 'Football,' and 'Other,' in order of their likelihood of gaining you a spot in heaven. And Aaron had led the town to a state championship.

"Hey, Becky." His hair was blonde and short but his eyes were green moss just like hers. "Long time, no see."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just drove up for the weekend. And come to find out you've got yourself some weird little frogs." He looked over her shoulder, his eyes snapping wide. "Hey! Melanie! I told you two hands!"

That made Becky jerk her head around. Only to see Melanie roll her eyes and hold the frog out at arm's length wrapped in the short fingers of her right hand. She shook the frog slightly for emphasis as she spoke. "This is how you're *supposed* to hold them - with only *one* hand. Back fingers hold their legs down. Top finger and thumb hold their arms out, and they can't get away!" She rotated the frog to upside-down and back upright. It waved its hands but didn't accomplish much else. "Tell him, Becky."

Forced to display a small smile to Aaron, she conceded. "She's right." But then she turned back to her sister and with two hands slipped the frog from Melanie's grip into her own identical hold. "But you aren't supposed to flip them around like that."

"Whatever, they're so creepy anyway. I was just getting a lexan." With that the reprimand was dismissed and the little girl wandered off to get the plastic container. In a moment she held it up for Becky to slide the frog down in, head first, then snapped the container back closed.

Becky started when her mother spoke suddenly from directly behind them, and turned to find the woman using the same emphasizing hand gestures her younger daughter had just moments before, only

with a spatula not a frog. “We’re really looking into sending her to that gifted school out in Cedar Bluff. They just opened that new Magnet Program out there.”

“NO!” It was earshattering and they all turned to stare at Melanie who had gone red in the face in the space of a breath. “I won’t go! I don’t want to ride the *short bus!*”

Becky shook her head, far more used to their little sister’s antics than Aaron ever would be. He had moved away to college the first chance he had gotten, his status of ‘Golden Boy’ eating at him in a way even Becky had never understood. He had been out of the house before Melanie came along and had never really gotten to see her full-fledged personality.

Letting herself sink down into one of the dining room chairs, Becky toed off her thick sneakers and let the feeling of relief soak into her feet. She leaned back and almost closed her eyes before she realized that Brandon was standing right beside her, clear tupper in hand, the frog inside pointed toward the window. Becky raised her eyebrows; too worn out to voice her question, she let it show on her face.

“Melanie got too mad to tell you what we discovered. Watch.” Brandon walked over to the refrigerator. Becky tilted her head to see, but expected nothing other than the appearance of a moldy ham sandwich. He placed the lexan flush against the fridge and waited.

Slowly, the frog turned to face the old white unit. When he pulled the container away, the little fellow re-oriented to his original direction. He put it back and the frog turned again to face the fridge. Waving his hands like some demented magician, Brandon declared it “Cool, huh?” Then gave his theory. “I think he’s hungry see. . . Melanie says that’s not it, but she’ll see. Can I give him pizza?”

“No!” But her brows were pulled together and she was out of her chair in her bare feet, traipsing over to where he stood, her fatigue dismissed in the wake of her growing curiosity.

Trying it herself, Becky kneeled in front of the fridge and moved the container slowly towards and away from the white door. Her frown deepened as the frog made the same subtle adjustments every time.

“For god’s sakes Becky, I need to get the margarine.” Her mother tapped her foot impatiently behind her, not at all moved by the new level of oddity displayed by her catch.

Obligingly, she stood up and went in search of other objects the frog might turn to. She started toward the TV, which Brandon pertly informed her wouldn’t work. He grinned like a praised puppy when it didn’t. “It’s just the fridge.”

But Becky didn’t believe that. There had to be something else. But she just wasn’t sure what. She traipsed through the house, testing every large object she could think of. Aaron dogged her heels, for once following *her* to see what she would come up with next.

They were all three piled behind the front door watching the frog shuffle uncomfortably, waiting to see if it would change direction or settle into its familiar line. None of them heard the door click and all three fell into a startled heap when Mr. Sorenson opened the door onto them.

Melanie came bouncing over the pile of bodies struggling to right themselves, “Daddy, Daddy, you’re home!”

“Yes, I am.” He grabbed up his youngest and stepped gingerly over his other children, trying to gracefully right themselves. “Were you all so anxious to see me?”

Aaron shrugged, and Becky was amazed to watch the transformation from grown man to child that was so rapid across his features. “We were just checking out Becky’s weird frogs.”

Her father’s eyes caught her gaze. “Is it something new?”

“Yes! Daddy, Yes!” Melanie bounced in his arms. “They turn toward the fridge!”

Becky decided to be grateful her sister was no longer sulking in her room, withholding what might be valuable information, and she held the frog next to the oven. It stayed in its normal direction. Becky swore under her breath, dropping her behavior marks another few notches. But at the top of the oven, the little guy turned. He turned toward the washer and dryer, too.

“I know what it is!” She yelled out as she turned and smacked square into Aaron’s chest.

• • • •

“WHERE’S LANDERLY’S signature?” Anne shook her pretty little blonde head as she poured over the forms in front of her.

Jordan smiled and pointed. He was afraid his expression screamed ‘*It’s a forgery*’. He had vetoed Jillian standing beside him at this point, so she didn’t have to be here for this display of fraud. Also because she was a really terrible liar.

Anne giggled. “The way you’re grinning at me, and the number of times this thing’s been through a fax . . . you could have forged this.”

“I didn’t forge it.” The irritation that the difficult-to-read signature was his work was genuine. He hadn’t forged it. Jillian had.

But Anne just giggled again and entered the data. “It’ll be about half an hour.”

He raised his eyebrows, not giving voice to all the questions he desperately wanted to ask, but couldn’t because they’d give him away like a neon sign. Was she going to call to corroborate with Landerly? She had already made a comment about forgeries. Was she going to run it by the higher ups?

“Yeah, I can’t whip up a plane ticket out of thin air.” She giggled again, and as much as it reassured Jordan that she was dumb enough that he just might pull this off, it also was beginning to annoy the hell out of him.

“Thanks, babe.” He turned and walked away, not getting to see her response. *Babe?* He winced inwardly and went back to his desk. He already knew what would happen if they were found out. Landerly had told them that first day that the CDC would just send them into the Ebola lab without suits. His breathing picked up.

Just as he entered his cubby hole of an office and leaned wearily back against the inside wall, his leg vibrated, scaring the shit out of him. But it was just his cell phone, and as he held up the display panel he realized that it was Jillian. “Hi.”

Her panic radiated through the phone even before she spoke, poor thing. “Jordan, are you okay? They didn’t find out did they?”

“No. Our flights will be ready in about half an hour.”

“Where are you going?” The voice was masculine, and coming from behind him. In that first split second Jordan schooled himself to a calm response.

“You startled me.” Turning, he saw it was Mark from the lab. “We’re going to Florida.”

Mark nodded in understanding, although just what he understood was beyond Jordan’s capabilities. “Spiderbite-girl having a relapse?”

“Nope, something new. . .” He stopped himself before launching into an explanation; it would just be more to get tangled in later. Offering a smile, he turned his attention back to the conversation with Jillian, and ended it as quickly as possible in hopes of avoiding other such scares.

Mark simply wished him good luck, and turned to go. Or so he thought. Again the voice startled him. “Is Dr. Brookwood going with you?”

“Hm?” It came out before he put the pieces together. Jillian. “Yes, she is.” As he went back to his sorting, it occurred to him to add up Mark’s actions over the last few weeks: it equaled a crush on Jillian. But Jillian would never put up with that shuffling walk. No authority.

The desk phone yelled at him, an angry electronic buzz that was supposed to resemble a bell ringing. He answered it gruffly just to stop the noise. Realizing only as he got the phone to his ear, that there was every possibility that it was Landerly, calling to check up on them. Perhaps having noticed the, oh say, *thirty* fax pages he had received from them before they went about forging his signature.

“Dr. Abellard.” The wispy quality and lilt of the voice dispelled any of those fears in less than the time it had taken them to form. “This is Anne, at reception. Travel has confirmed your flights. You leave in three hours.”

“Thank you, Anne.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, glad that the one thing keeping him here was finished. He wanted to get away and hide from the people he was cheating. Maybe he could be on the plane before anyone figured out what was going on. “I’ll be by within the next ten minutes.”

No, they wouldn’t get caught. Landerly wasn’t going to be back for another week and they would be back before then; no one would be the wiser. And even Jillian thought she could justify the trip after the fact. Landerly listened to her.

He grabbed his briefcase, and hefted it to the desk, stuffing in the extra files. It brimmed already with all the paperwork he could find on Eddie and Lake James’ medical history. He gave only the barest of smiles to Anne as he breezed by the front desk. Her voice trailed him down the hall like so much cheap perfume, “Have a good trip Dr. Abellard!” Jeez, could she yell it next time? *Hope that forgery pans out for you!*

But he stuck his badge on the reader at the front door without unclipping it and waited the short eternity for the computer to decide that he deserved to leave and then actually slide the glass doors open. It was all he could do not to squeeze through sideways the instant a crack appeared.

The afternoon sun hit him full force, blinding him almost as thoroughly as it would after a matinee movie. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision, knowing full well that his sight adjusting was a matter of time and not moisture. He was basically tear free by the time he popped open the door of his overly blue Cavalier. He should get a better car. But that would happen a lot easier once his student loans were paid off. And that was a minimum of a few years away. He shoved the car into drive and left the building that was threatening to reveal his secrets to his bosses.

He dug his cell phone out of his pants pocket and depressed his #2 speed dial while he was waiting to merge onto the freeway. “Hi, Jillian. . . I’m out. Our flight is at seven-fifteen. . . . we get into Sarasota-Bradenton Airport at midnightish, . . . yeah, I’ll come by your place. . . . All right, Bye.” Traffic was getting heavier and he was glad to hang up.

But a conversation would have been preferable to the thoughts running through his head. Landerly would call from Hawaii. Or he would see his pager had gone off and all the numbers were the same. And when he did finally call in Jordan and Jilly would be gone. Bad move.

He pulled out the cell and held it at arm’s length in front of him, carefully feeling his way around the number pad. “Hi, Anne, can I ask you a favor? Can you forward all the calls to my office to my cell phone?”

“What about the calls for Dr. Brookwood?” He could hear her eyelashes beating a steady rhythm just from her voice.

“She’ll be with me, so they can all come to my cell.”

And he gave her the number and hung up feeling much better, until he realized that he'd given Anne his personal number. He just prayed that he hadn't given her any ideas.

His apartment seemed to be about ten miles further away than he remembered it. Crime sure did find a way of turning you upside down. And once he was there he wasn't really sure what to pack. So he threw in all the same things he had packed for his earlier trip to Florida and headed out to Jillian's.

He parked on the curb and buzzed her apartment, leaving his bag in the back seat. She didn't even answer the ring. Instantly the door began to buzz, and he followed the sound inside. Jordan jogged up the stairs hoping to burn off some extra energy. It didn't work, and coming face to face with Jillian, her hall door flung wide, didn't help him calm down either.

She was taking deep breaths and talking. Almost to him, . . . maybe not. "Landerly told us that when we found an answer we would know it. And that he would back us when that time came. He wasn't available. No one else would help, we knew that. We can ask each of them in turn if they would have signed off on it. They'll say 'no'."

So he took her by her upper arms and guided her back into the small apartment, "Jillian, calm down. We're going to be fine. We aren't going to get fired, for all the reasons you just listed." He breathed in. "Take a deep breath." And he waited until she did, "Now, we have to leave. Are you ready?"

She just nodded and started to reach for her bag, then fumbled with the lock to her front door.

"Jillian, if you don't calm down, they're going to detain us at the airport for being suspicious."

"Huh?" Her whole body stilled. "I was a cheerleader and a girl scout. I couldn't possibly be a terrorist."

He laughed. "Actually that would make you the ideal terrorist. So pull it together."

She laughed with him, the first easy, relaxed sound he had heard from her since they had hatched this horrible plan over lunch. And she managed to keep herself steady and calm, even when security did an open check on her bags. For the briefest of moments Jordan wondered if they would pull out anything good, like a vibrator or a chain of foil condom packets. But no, there was a novel and a bunch of photocopied files that he was pretty certain represented cases that she had searched and pulled together.

They made it to the terminal just as loading was beginning and joined all the other fliers funneling themselves down to the gate like so many cows to the slaughter. Once they were at their row, he made Jillian give up the window seat, arguing that she had slept through every single flight the last time. He didn't add that he had never gotten to fly until he was an adult paying his own way. The window still held a kind of magic for him that had worn off most middle-class kids by the age where they could read the take-off time on cartoon watches. And sure enough, even as he watched the houses and freeways below getting smaller and smaller, he felt the soft weight of her head settling on his shoulder, and the swish of her hair, unbound, falling across her face.

• • • •

BECKY'S EYES ADJUSTED to where Aaron swung the highbeam, lighting the whole area in front of them to ghastly shades of bright and black. All the shadows of midnight remained, just thoroughly delineated by the overpowering light. It became even creepier when they entered the woods at the back side of the field.

She started talking just to quell the feeling that she was walking where she didn't belong and where she was unwanted. "So how has--"



So did Aaron. "How do these frogs do?"

They laughed together, then she let him finish asking about her catch. "These are *rana*. A genus that really includes all your garden variety frogs, no bullfrogs though. They're indicator species - really sensitive to the environment. They'll mutate, like my little guys, really quick, if anything is off. You know, radiation, pollution, that kind of thing. Or magnetics."

"So, what is this then? We're visiting a polluted frog spot in the middle of the night, that might be loaded with radiation from the power plant?"

"I thought of Oak Ridge, too. They actually do grow some creepy frogs out that way sometimes. But they're on the other side of the town from us, and they tend to hop down towards Chattanooga."

"How comforting." He muttered.

She maneuvered around behind him, disliking how her own shadow gave her such a case of the creeps. "I checked them all out at school with a Geiger-counter and got nothing. Like almost zilch. I mean *you* would register on these meters, they're that sensitive."

"All right." He raised the light, letting her decide which path to take, and even though it didn't look anything like it did during the day, she instinctively knew which way to go.

"So, anyway, other than the fact that they have spare legs, and are all from this one spot, I've got nothing." She took another long pull on the coke she carried with her. "That is, until tonight I had nothing."

"But what is it? Are all frogs magnetic and yours are just backward?"

"Nope, I've never heard of it in frogs." They were getting close, the tiny creek making burbling noises even at this late hour, and the local frogs raising their voices in a hellish chorus.

"So why would these frogs be magnetic?"

"Other animals are." She raised the compass in her palm, angling it to catch the light, and read it. Still in the right direction. No worries there. Yet. She kept up her chatter with Aaron, they were getting close and she was nervous about what she might find out. "Bees are, and so are homing pigeons."

"Not enough to stick to the refrigerator."

"You're sooo funny - Aaron, look!" She held up the compass. The needle had flopped to the opposite direction. She stepped backwards retracing her steps out of the area where she had first found the freaky little frogs. The needle swung back to the correct orientation.

"Sweet Jesus." As she walked back and forth, it changed. To exactly the opposite direction. Sure she wasn't seeing it right, she lifted her head to ask her brother to shine the light over her way and was met with a blinding glare. For a moment she had visions that the sheriff had found them and was going to haul them in, cuffs and cruiser and all. Although they were on their own property and all they could be cited for was leaving the car by the side of the road.

In a second Aaron was at her side and the blinding glare was gone, directed down at the face of the compass, leaving her completely unable to distinguish anything beyond the borders of the light. Back and forth they walked for a minute or two, mesmerized by the swing of the needle. Then Becky pulled him forward to the edge of the stream and the spot where she and Brandon had caught all the frogs.

The needle stayed re-oriented. North was south and south was north. "This is where we caught them." She shoved up her sleeve and slowly bent over, sinking her hand into the cold water. The forest around them was now quiet, except for the wild trickle of the creek. It had no instincts and didn't know that something was amiss with all this bright light in the middle of the dark. But the frogs knew, and Becky could spot their shapes under the edges of the bumps and eddies. Their little noses

and eyes stuck up above the surface, trying to catch a breath, and yet be still enough to thwart the predator.

But Becky got lucky, and in a moment she had reached down and slowly wrapped her hand around one of the little guys thinking he had it made by being motionless. She held up her catch, even as the nearby frogs scattered away from the site of the latest loss of their brethren. “Look Aaron, four back legs.”

When she finished pulling up several six-legged frogs, she wandered the area using the compass as a guide, certain that some large object was buried here. Sighing, she was grateful again that Aaron was a lawyer. “What if whatever’s here is government? Can they keep me from publishing my findings?”

“Huh?”

“If this is a dump site, you know, for some magnetic ore, or there’s a secret lab under the ground,” Okay, now she was getting really far-fetched, “well, would they be able to stop me from writing this up and letting the world know?”

He thought for a moment. “No, we’re on our own land. I don’t think they have any legal recourse. But if you have skeletons in your closet that they might blackmail you with, who knows?”

She laughed with him. “I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t even steal paperclips from the school, and I’ve never made one of those freaky sex tapes.”

“Don’t let Mom and Dad even know that you know what those are.”

“No joke.” She crossed the stream on large stones that she had put there years ago and wandered through the woods, crashing through underbrush and sounding much like the Jolly Green Giant. She was half trying to convince herself that it was just the unearthly silence that made it sound that way. If Satan himself rose up before her, she couldn’t say that she would be too shocked. But just then the compass needle jumped.

Becky startled, then walked back and forth a few times, using the sway of the thin red magnet to get a feel for the edge of the spot. “Aaron.”

“Hm?” He looked up from his musings. “What?”

“We need to go get stakes and a . . . that yellow police tape stuff. There’s a clear boundary here. We can mark it.”

“But not now.” He refused, and once he shined the light back the way they had come, she had no choice but to follow or be abandoned to the noise and the blackness.

• • • •

“OH WE WEREN’T EXPECTING you.” It was Maddie, according to her nametag.

Jillian just smiled. She wasn’t half bad at this lying. “Really? I’m sorry. Our secretary was supposed to let you know that we’re following up the interviews done by Drs. Smith and Webber.” Maddie was Maddie Levinson. She and her husband owned and ran the Levinson Home for the Aged.

The round-faced woman just smiled and stepped back, holding the door open for them. “Well, you’re here now.” She seemed perfectly content to let them come in and reassess the place. Which clicked in Jillian’s mind as a good thing. If they were trying to cover up elder-abuse or something, the case for a new disease would never hold.

Jordan trailed her in and she introduced both herself and him to the woman’s husband, who was just as round and polyestered as she was. They had the same pie-faced smiles that ultimately seemed kind and gentle. A visual sweep of the area made it clear that this was a home that had been converted to a care facility. She’d read beforehand that these two lived here, twenty-four seven. “We

would love to comb through your patient records, if we could. Maybe we could just stay out of your way.”

But she had barely gotten the last word out when Jordan started speaking over her. “We just think that there might be something new here, and we want to be certain that it gets identified and stopped. I know the last CDC team suggested a staph infection-”

And for the first time the sweet moon face looked disgruntled. “I just don’t know how that could have happened. We’re so. . . . it sure hasn’t happened again, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

Jordan stepped close and put his arm on the woman’s shoulder, leading her to sit at her own breakfast table where he pulled a seat a little closer. “When Dr. Brookwood and I reviewed the file, we didn’t feel it was a staph infection at all. There wasn’t any evidence of it; they just couldn’t find anything else.” His hand covered the older woman’s, calming her immeasurably by that simple, unforward touch. Jillian watched the changes in her with awe. “Jillian is right.”

She couldn’t believe he had used her first name. Not that she was angry, but she didn’t understand. It was all about being professional, right? And having no clue where he was going, she decided to step back and let Jordan ride the wave he had created.

“We’ll want to go through all the old records like the other team. But beyond that, we’ll need some time to talk to you. Maybe you can tell us something that isn’t in the records.”

Maddie balked a little, “We keep very thorough records.”

Jordan didn’t even try to argue that one. “I’ve seen them, they’re some of the best in the business, but there are other things that you’d never think were medical, things that only a close caretaker, like yourselves, might notice. Any information you can give us would only help.”

Arthur Levinson, ‘Art’ by his nametag, finally spoke up, but only to talk to his wife. “Honey, why don’t you help them get the files and I’ll serve breakfast.”

And with that Maddie led them down the hall and unlocked a large, very neat office with mauve frills above the windows and ducks walking around the border at the top of the room. Walls of cheap, black file cabinets surrounded them, each carefully labeled and clearly locked. Mrs. Levinson let them know they were welcome to anything they wanted to peruse and, smiling at Jordan, handed over the small key ring labeled ‘office’ and asked what she could bring them to drink, or if they wanted a danish?

God, that was Jordan for you. Five minutes and any woman would be eating out of his hand. Look at the way he had worked over Anne at the front desk. Jillian was glad she wasn’t that kind of girl. But here they were - in the office, with all the files at their disposal. And coffee on the way. Sweet deal.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s get to work.”

“Roommates?” Jordan asked, not looking up from the labels on the file drawers.

It was Maddie’s voice that answered. “The roommates of our members who got sick? Well, there’s Mildred Hartford. She’s still here in the green room.” She paused while Jillian started scribbling furiously on her notepad, “third down the hall on the right. She was Joseph Finklestein’s roommate.”

Maddie continued - the second roommate was in the hospital in Sarasota with a broken hip. And the third roommate had moved to another home after developing a more severe case of emphysema. But Mrs. Levinson said she had numbers to reach all the current caretakers. Then she named names and rattled the numbers off from memory, impressing the hell out of Jillian.

Three hours later Jillian had about thirty folders pulled and open in various states of disarray around her. Jordan had about twenty more. They were getting somewhere. But God, if she had to

look at these cream-colored walls for five more minutes she was going to spontaneously combust. “Jordan?”

“Hmm?”

He didn’t look up from where he hunched over the files on the floor. He had graciously insisted that she take the only desk space. But in the hours in between he had sprawled, his jacket getting hung up over the inside doorknob, his tie loosening then disappearing. Now his sleeves were rolled up and he was in some unnatural position, chewing on the end of his red pen.

“I don’t know about you, but I need lunch.” She stood and stretched, ignoring the fact that her suit was wrinkled. That was okay, it wasn’t designed for stretching either.

When they finally pulled out of the driveway, they both began talking at once. “I think it’s a-”

“I’m positive it wasn’t staph.”

“Me, too.” She sighed, running her hand over her hair, smartly pulled back into a ponytail that looked as professional as a ponytail could.

“There’s no positive culture and nothing to link the three patients. No chain of infection.” Jordan looked out the window at the passing communities of cookie-cutter bungalows, all labeled as “Sunset” this or “Retirement” that. “And I don’t know if you’ve watched these guys . . .” he trailed off and waited for her to shake her head. Of course Jordan had observed them in action. She wasn’t sure why the thought hadn’t even occurred to her. “They are fastidious. Every injection clean. Every surface wiped down. Hugs and touching all the time, but I have never seen two people wash their hands so much.” He sighed, slumping a little lower into his seat.

“Do you think it was all just for show?”

“No way.” He turned to look at her, not doing his part to help find food anymore. “We walked in here, unannounced, just as we planned. There were already hand sanitizer bottles everywhere, sharps containers in every room, and if you noticed, both the Levinsons have very chapped hands, indicating this handwashing was going on long before we got there.”

Of course she hadn’t noticed.

What she did notice was a small sub stand with a name she didn’t recognize, and she pulled into the lot and climbed out. “None of the roommates has anything even resembling this. I called the nursing home and the hospital for the two that are gone. The hospital is ready to send the broken hip back to the Levinsons for the remainder of care.” She didn’t stop talking while she read the menu up and down. “So there’s nothing there to indicate it being airborne.”

Jordan sighed and pushed both his hands through his hair, adding his order right on the tail end of hers. Only his was twice as big. “They have all the same symptoms that Eddie did. I don’t get it.”

Jillian waited until they were seated and Jordan had his head turned sideways, taking a huge sharklike bite from the sub. “They were the three most immuno-compromised patients in the home at the time.”

That made Jordan look up. But she still didn’t pick up her sandwich. “And get this: Bertha Martin was a leukemia survivor.”

• • • •

BECKY THOUGHT THEY probably looked odd, marching across the field, dressed for camping, snapping photos while they went. Melanie had suggested the disposable camera from the checkout at Home Depot this morning. And Becky had gotten two. You just never knew.

The real work was in getting all the equipment out there. Aaron had taken that upon himself; he looked like a hiker gone mad - or a serial killer - with the lumpy bags, the pack and the shovel. She,

Brandon and Melanie followed like ducks, holding clear lexans of frogs that were finally returning to their home. But just to visit.

Once they arrived at the site, the frogs were set down and they all went to work with the compasses they had picked up. Melanie swung her little hammer, pounding a stake meant to hold garden edging into the soft ground near the stream. With the small mallet she hit at it until it was low, or until she mistakenly whacked some part of her body and swore a word that Becky wasn't aware her sister knew.

Brandon was a more efficient force; he and Aaron both having seen the need for method early on. Baggy army pants oozing garden stakes, both guys walked a line designated by the compass in their left hand, periodically pulling a stake from some previously unused spot on their person and pounding it into the ground with one swift stroke. Of course, Brandon pulling stakes out of his pockets resembled a gunslinger, with a swagger and a little preening where Aaron was all efficiency of movement.

Aaron looked up at her right then. "Hey, Doctor Smartypants, get in here and help."

"Aye, aye!" She crossed the creek on the old stones and set about mapping the other side. Within half an hour, all the loose ends had met up and they had an oddly shaped circle. Becky set Melanie to winding the tape from spike to spike clearly delineating the magnetic boundary, while the rest of them wandered the site, eyes glued to compass needles, looking for any smaller spots of greater activity.

That was an exercise in futility. There was nothing. Well, it was all or nothing. No one spot that gave a greater reading, or even caused the compass needles to jump or shimmy. No such luck.

"Okay, guys." They lifted their heads from whatever they were meddling around with at the sound of her voice. "It's hokey pokey time. Put all the frogs in the circle."

Even Aaron got into it. Each of the four eagerly grabbed a lexan and walked inside the orange boundary. They each set down the tupper with a flourish and waited for . . . nothing.

"Anyone?" Becky whispered.

"Nothing." Aaron told her. His voice strong with certainty.

"Nothing." Brandon repeated, bell clear.

Becky felt her heart sink. She had thought surely bringing the frogs back here would accomplish something. Melanie's voice called out next. "Nothing! Nothing!"

That was a little too chipper. Wasn't it true that the really smart ones always cracked?

"They aren't doing anything Becky!"

"Duh, Dorko." Brandon sneered, standing guard over his frog, legs spread, fists on his hips, sneer worthy of the schoolyard. "They're just acting like normal frogs."

"And they *aren't* normal frogs!" Melanie was at a near fever pitch.

"Holy shit." Becky whispered. "She's right." The frogs were no longer orienting. Reaching down, she turned the container. Aside from the usual the-world-is-rotating-under-me shuffle that all frogs did, this one didn't do anything. It didn't re-orient northwest. "Turn your frogs!"

This time even Aaron and Brandon caught on. "Okay, this is just too freaky." Aaron looked up at her. "I like things neat and understandable. This is beyond my boundaries. Can I have these little green guys arrested for disorderly conduct?"

Becky laughed to herself. The disorderly conduct was what they were *supposed* to do. It was the lining-up-in-one-direction that was creepy.

She took a moment to write notes. Then had everyone take their frog out of the circle.

Alignment.

That got noted too.

Into the circle, in new spots, this time.

Disorder.

Out of the circle.

Alignment.

But this time there was more.

“Everyone, back in the circle.” At least they didn’t look at her like she was crazy. Something was drastically wrong in the spot where they were standing. Her breathing hitched.

“Okay, we’re going to take our frogs and walk out a bit.” Three nods. “Every one has compasses?” Three nods. “Good, now start walking, *carefully*, away from the site.”

She had lined each of them up in a different direction, so they backed out like four corners on a compass until Becky couldn’t see any of her siblings anymore. But, loud bunch that they were, vocal contact wasn’t an issue. She yelled out, “My frog is facing southwest. Aaron?”

“North-north-east.”

“Brandon?”

“South-east.”

“Melanie?”

“West!”

She hollered out to her sister, whose little voice was coming through the thick trees from somewhere on the left. “Melanie! Have you figured it out?”

“Yes! They’re all facing the site!”



Jordan scribbled furiously on the pages of loose leaf paper spread out on the floor of the office with the awful mauve accents. He and Jillian had been here for two days, and he was never happier to not have a laptop. He had survived med school, ridiculed for his handwritten notes, but remembered everything far better than if he had typed it. And now this spreadsheet was taking over its eighth page, and he never would have accomplished this with the best notebook program.

Jillian watched while he organized and wrote and drew arrows in multiple colors. He started thinking out loud, “Okay, recap: Joseph Finklestein had lupus, Bertha Martin was a leukemia survivor, and Beatrice Weitzman had a kidney transplant and was on immunosuppressive drugs.”

Jilly picked up. “No other transplant patients here, according to files, the Levinsons, and patient report. No HIV positive patients. No one even close in immuno-status. So that gives us a set-up but what *is* it?” She chewed on the end of the marker she was holding. Normally that would have driven him nuts to watch, but he was too keyed up. He couldn’t sleep last night. And now he was running on pure caffeine.

“Go over Eddie’s case with me.”

Jillian nodded and started rattling stats again. She was better at that than any doctor he had ever met. “Stomach ache, reported by wife, at seven days prior to death, vomiting at six days.”

Desperately, Jordan tried to push it out of his mind that this was Eddie she was so carefully reducing to a series of numbers and isolated incidents. But that was what would solve the case. “Admitted for dehydration, in E.R., at day five. Given IV fluids and Raglan for nausea. Seemed to be doing better but was mildly disoriented and complaining of sleepiness. Nurses report that he was very sleepy and slept a good portion of his time in the ward. Nothing unusual there.

“Files indicated normal white counts, CBC and full Chem Panel show nothing out of the ordinary, in fact all numbers are very normal. Day three, patient goes to sleep and wife reports that he’s difficult to rouse. After medical intervention, a CT scan is performed and it is determined that the patient slipped into coma during sleep. On day one patient is put on ventilation due to oxygen sats being under eighty-four percent, and on day zero, all brain activity stops, and staff performs heroic measures to no avail. Patient dies at 2p.m.”

Jordan sighed.

There wasn’t much he could do at this point except sigh. He had arrows drawn to and from what he knew. Joseph Finklestein hadn’t had vomiting. His decline had taken nine days from first complaint to death. He had died at the home, with a very short delay between slipping into a coma and simply passing away while waiting for transport to a full medical facility.

Jillian opened the reports again. “Aaagh.”

He looked up, hoping that it was a good ‘aaaagh’, but apparently it wasn’t. “These guys were on so much medication that you can’t tell what changed and what didn’t. Just tracking their medication would take a whole flow chart like that!”

“Then we do it.”

Her eyes widened, and she almost looked scared, which was about the funniest thing he had thought in days. Jillian scared of paperwork.

She begged, “Only if you do it. I can’t do that . . . whatever you’re drawing. I need a spreadsheet.”

“Can you do this on a spreadsheet?”



She shook her head, her mouth moving to the straw of the supersize coke she was drinking, while she rubbed the sides to remove the sweat. Her scrubs bore the stains from the water drips where she had rested the drink on her leg earlier, and in this heat he didn't blame her that she didn't care.

He sat up to be close and spoke low; he didn't want the Levinsons getting tipped off that this wasn't an official investigation. "We still have to get Landerly's signature on this. The only way I feel relatively assured that that will happen is with a solid diagnosis."

She nodded.

Her voice pitched lower as well, but for an entirely different reason. "Do you think we're seeing SuperAIDS?" She didn't want to scare the Levinsons.

"Shit." He barely breathed it. "I hadn't even thought of that." His pushed his fingers through his hair and looked again at the gaily colored chart. Immuno-compromised patients.

She shook her head. "The set-up is right. But the play-out isn't."

Jordan waited for her to continue, he agreed, but wondered if she was following the same angle as him. "Flu-like symptoms at onset match, but not the lack of time lag, although that's always been hypothesized as the new trick up the virus' sleeve. Then coma and death. The issue is, those cultures should have shown not just something but *everything*."

"Right, HIV doesn't kill you. It's what AIDS allows to get a foothold that kills. So, no superAIDS." He was on the floor again, spread out with his paper. He'd been here for their whole stay, getting more and more ragged looking. Jillian had stayed up at the desk, but her posture had gone to hell in a handbasket. She was slumped in the chair, bringing her head to the coke instead of vice versa. Her knees pressed together, and her sneakered feet turned at odd angles resting on the shaggy caramel carpet. Her right hand played incessantly with her ponytail and if her mouth wasn't speaking it was gnawing something, the straw, the poor pen. He'd never seen her like this.

Then again, they hadn't yet had anything they couldn't solve with a report and a spreadsheet before. The only real trip they had taken had involved a case with clear answers once they looked at it from a few angles. This they'd tipped over, looked underneath, and shaken down, and only the barest of glimpses of ideas were falling into place.

"Okay." It was just a small statement, made on a tiny breath, but it was the beginning of a change. He sat patiently while Jilly straightened herself, and pulled a well worn folder off the desk. "Clear out some papers, flow-chart-boy, here goes."

And she rattled off a list of about thirty medications, making him mark in a different color any that had been prescribed within the last month prior to death. Joseph Finklestein had two. Increased dose of Lipitor, and Prescription Naprosyn for pain, because Ibuprofen was upsetting his stomach. Bertha Martin had one, Cephalexin for an imagined ear infection. And Beatrice Weitzman had no new scrips in that time. Between the three of them they were on forty different medications, and the number was only that low because so many overlapped.

Jillian set down her soda with a clunk and opened Eddie's file, her fingers expertly shuffling through reams of loose paper, never letting any fall or even slip out of place. "Ready?"

She rattled off a short list. When she closed the file, Jilly joined him on the carpet, scanning the flow chart. She watched and pointed a few times while Jordan cross-referenced and drew marks and asterisks between any duplicated medications that showed up. But they didn't seem to yield any new information. So the nursing home victims had been old? They knew that already. Not a single medication or even medication category cross referenced to Eddie. Eddie was close to med free. They checked lifestyle markers then. But as expected, the three Levinson Home victims all cross categorized nearly perfectly. Leaving Eddie the outsider, and thus the key to the whole thing.

Jillian ran her fingers down the list again. “Cephalexin.” She pointed to Bertha’s quadrant of the chart. “Why was she on it?” She fingered open the chart and looked puzzled. “Ear infection. That’s probably what tipped them off to staph.” She thumbed through the tome, coming up with the prescription date. “No good indication of an ear infection though. ‘Mild redness’ that’s all.”

Jordan frowned. That bothered him for some reason he couldn’t put his finger on, and he followed a hunch out to the courtyard where Maddie Levinson was hosing down the plastic furniture. She smiled when he approached, which he had to admit was a very magnanimous gesture at this point. He and Jilly had taken over her office for three days now. But she just offered him lemonade and asked, “What can I help you with?”

“Do you have a minute? I’m looking for some of that personal information that I thought might not be found in a medical file.”

Her eyebrows raised, but she quickly set aside the hose and wiped down two chairs offering him the first before settling her large frame into the second. She still seemed wary until he asked the first question. “Bertha Martin was prescribed Cephalexin for an ear infection she didn’t seem to have, just five days before she died. Do you know why that was?”

Maddie laughed. A clear vibrant sound accompanied by her slapping her thigh. “Yes, I know why.” She wiped at her eye where a small tear had formed, although he wasn’t sure if she missed her houseguest or had just laughed too hard. “Bertha was ornery, at times. And she insisted she had an ear infection. Wouldn’t quit her caterwauling until the doc gave it to her. He finally relented. She’d had enough ear infections that she probably knew.”

“And Joseph Finklestein. He was changed from Ibuprofen to Naprosyn also within the last few days before his death. Why was that?”

Her expression sobered right up, and Jordan didn’t doubt that her answers were as accurate as any could be. She knew each of these patients, and he’d lay odds that the woman couldn’t do simple algebra but could rattle off every dose of every medication every patient here was on, and put even money that she still knew the old doses, too. “Joseph started getting headaches right then. We didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

“So he said the Motrin wasn’t really helping?”

She sighed, her shoulders doing a soft heave before she went on. “He didn’t really say it. He didn’t communicate well for the last several months. But he kept grabbing his head, rubbing his temples, and . . .” She couldn’t find the words so she showed Jordan. She shoved her shoulders up under her chin, and put her hands behind her ears, shoving them forward rubbing the bone where her skull met her neck.

He watched.

Headache, maybe. Ear pain. Maybe.

“Thank you, Maddie.” He stood and offered his hand, which she shook politely.

When he entered the office, Jillian looked up at him, and Jordan launched into a shortened version of his discussion with Maddie, ending it punctuated by Jillian’s “Wow.”

“Will you call my cousin Kelly and ask her if Eddie had ear pain?” He continued. “I think we can safely say that we have something new, that isn’t airborne, and we’ve been sitting in it for three days.”

• • • •

DAVID HUNG UP THE PHONE. He had to. His ears were ringing. If Greer so much as got one iota more excited the earth was going to shift on its axis. The eggs were a true find. A full clutch, almost

all intact. Yada yada yada.

And McCann, Tennessee was a hotspot.

He turned over a specimen, eyeing it carefully. His old man would love to get his hands on this piece of history. But that was too damn bad.

The testing was showing up just like the Warren Fault pieces. Heavy iridium layer at the KT boundary. Reversed magnetics in all the pieces. What was killing him was the size of the spot. It seemed so small.

From his father's work he had believed, as his father always had, that the hotspots had to have a certain size, a critical mass, in order to carry a reversed magnetic field. Something there had to support it. Had to keep it out of alignment with the field of the earth as a whole. That implied some level of size.

But this didn't come anywhere near close.

He and Greer had practically gone door to door asking if anyone had an oil rig in their backyard, which had sounded retarded as all hell the first three times he asked. But sure enough, folks were friendly, and by the end of day three, they had awful stomach aches and forty-two core samples, giving David a nice view of the strata around his dig.

And here he sat. Wishing he had stayed longer. That he had known the horrible nausea and vomiting would disappear the next day. Because every oil well sample had come up negative. No magnetic reversals in any layer.

Add in that the lab staff had done the experiment blind. None of them knew what he was looking for. Just the series of tests, and that was it. So he sighed at the core samples. They had given up all their secrets like cheap whores. And he was done with it. Depressed almost to the point of tossing it at the trash.

While he had his hotspot, none of this was going to accomplish much more than remind everyone that his father had seen it first. Damn it.

• • • •

JORDAN PULLED HIS DECREPIT Chevy into the CDCP lot right behind Jilly's pert Rav4. They had stayed at her apartment last night, still going over the paperwork. Landerly would be back in a day. They had to get prepared to explain. To make their case and make it stick well enough to *not* get fired.

Together they had hovered over Jillian's computer, filling in the codes for the visit and symptoms. They labeled and sorted and listed evidence. They spent hours searching for linked cases and only came up with three in addition to the four they started with. And even those only looked similar. There wasn't any evidence that was close to conclusive. Then they wrote a paper for Landerly explaining why they had forged the signature. Documenting how many times and when they had tried to get it legitimately.

And here Jordan was: pulling into the parking lot, papers printed and sitting on the passenger seat beside him. Whether or not they would save his ass was still up in the air.

He and Jillian met again in between the cars where they parked. Took deep breaths together and then walked down the hall. Reaching the office felt like they crossed a finish line. Jordan wanted to hunch over and gulp air. He wasn't cut out for lying. Within a minute they silently took their seats and turned on the monitors on the desk, pulling up their files. Jillian looked up at him and smiled, her nod indicating that they were going to be okay.

The movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention just seconds before the loud clap of their door slamming open caused all his muscles to instantly clench. His heart plummeted when he saw that Landerly was standing inside their office. Well, those were his feet anyway. It took Jordan to the full count of ten to force himself to look up to Landerly's face.

The voice was old and soft, and anything but calm. "You two have some serious explaining to do about a signature of mine that I don't remember being on the continent to sign for."

*The world was going to hell.*

There was a long lull, then they both began speaking. "Dr. Landerly, we had so much evidence-"

"We tried so hard to get in touch with you-"

His leathery hand, palm out, put an end to the words frothing from their mouths. "I'll talk to you separately." He pointed to Jillian. "In my office, now."

As Jordan watched, she stood as though pulled by strings. Her expression that of sheer horror. And then she walked out the door followed by Landerly, who didn't so much as glance Jordan's way.

For long minutes, he sat there, unmoving, still digesting what had happened. Landerly shouldn't have gotten in until tomorrow. Had someone tipped him off? Had he come back early to corral his renegade peons?

Jordan knew he was going to get fired. That was all there was to it. He considered himself too much of a man to get up and start packing his belongings, not until he was actually told that he was fired. But it wasn't beneath him to let his gaze wander around the office, falling on various objects and cataloguing what was his.

The phone buzzer shocked him to life, his heart missing several beats before picking up a steady rhythm again. Gingerly he lifted the receiver from the cradle, "Hello?"

"Abellard. Get in here."

He winced, "Okay," but it was too late. Landerly had already hung up and Jordan was holding a phone that was softly buzzing a dial tone at him. He hadn't been this afraid of getting spanked since elementary school. At least then he had put smoke bombs behind the toilets in the girls' room and the whole thing had been fun.

The hall felt long, and Landerly's office was closed, forcing Jordan to grip the knob and open the door on the scene of his own demise. Jillian sat in the visitor chair across from where Landerly lorded behind his desk. She was ashen and looked like she had early stage Parkinson's, fine tremors snaked their way down her arms and out her fingers. Anger broke in a tidal wave as Jordan looked her up and down. Landerly had tormented her. He turned to let the old man have it, but was brought up short by the bark that Landerly leveled at him. "Is it true, what she tells me?"

He had to force himself to take a deep breath. "I've never heard Jillian lie."

That put the old man's eyebrows up. "So you orchestrated all this? By yourself?"

"I realize that I am not the genius here, and that this ploy may seem a bit above me. And, no, I didn't 'orchestrate' the whole thing. But Jillian didn't speak any lies to anyone. Jillian has many talents. Lying isn't one of them."

Landerly snorted. "Forgery apparently is."

"Apparently." Jordan knew he was shoveling the hole he was standing in. But he couldn't stop himself. "Tell me if that paper was three years old you would have recognized that it wasn't your signature."

Jillian gasped, but at least it earned him a respectable nod from Landerly, who then began talking right over Jordan's thoughts. "If you'd like to not get fired effective immediately, you had damn well

better explain this and why you couldn't wait until I got back, and it had better match Dr. Brookwood's story exactly."

Jordan thanked God Jilly couldn't lie worth shit. He knew their stories would match word for word. So he took a moment to gather himself, watching her visibly relax as he did. They would be here a while.

Eventually Landerly interrupted. "Same thing she said. The two of you using company policy to support your illegal trip . . ."

Jillian paled a bit at that, and Jordan put his hand over hers where it gripped the spindle arm of the chair. They'd at least be fired together. "Are you going to hear us out or not?"

Landerly nodded and managed to not interrupt again for the remainder of the story. He was silent for several minutes after Jordan finished. Finally he placed his soft leather hands on the desk and leaned forward, somehow managing to invade Jordan's personal space from over three feet away. "One: we never had this conversation. I don't know about that signature. I assume someone else okay'd your trip. Two: one slip from either of you and I will suddenly find that paper, and recognize the forged signature and you'll be out so fast your head will spin."

Jordan digested that. It actually sounded like they weren't getting fired.

"Three: you drive out tonight. There's another case that sounds like the same thing in the Appalachians. You're going to an area just south of Knoxville, McCann County."

"Another case?" It was Jillian's voice, though hard to recognize, it was shaky and soft and lacked all her normal confidence.

"Yup." Finally Landerly leaned back, "We'll name the disease after you two as punishment for this escapade. Now get out of my office. Go home. Pack and get your asses back here by five so I can hand you the paperwork."

"Yes, sir." His voice was strong, even if his belief wasn't. And Jilly was falling all over herself to thank the man whose name she had so expertly forged less than a week ago. She was gesturing wildly and Jordan reached up to pluck one of her hands out of its flightpath and used it to drag her out of the office.

She trailed him down the hall, hand still tucked in his, getting tugged along. When they got to the office she released herself from his grip and sank like pudding into her wooden swivel chair, leaning it back and bringing her hands to her head as though she could hold all the thoughts in. "I can't believe he didn't fire us."

"Yes, and we're not waiting around to let it happen either." Jordan grabbed her purse and handed it to her, before yanking her up out of the chair. "I'll drive, you're in no shape."

In seconds he had pulled her down the hallway, waving the ID card miraculously still in his possession at each coded entry and finally emerging into the bright sun. Jilly raised her hand to shield her face, then pawed inside her purse for a moment before producing sunglasses and keys.

He pulled the keys from her hand and dropped them back into the leather bag. "You shouldn't drive. I'll drop you off then swing by and get you on the way back."

"No, really, I'm-" She cut herself off when she saw how badly she was shaking. "All right, thank you."

He settled her into the passenger seat of the crappy little Cavalier, then closed her in and jogged around to the driver's side.

"Do you think-"

"Landerly said-"

“You go first.” He braced his arm on the back of her seat and looked out the rear window while he backed out of the spot doing all he could not to lay some serious rubber on the pavement in his hurry to be away.

“Do you think we’re really onto something? That there really are more cases?”

Jordan sighed. “It has to be. The only alternative I can figure is that Landerly is sending us into the mountains and a hitman will follow us. You know, so no one will ever find the bodies.”

“So, we’re going up into the Appalachians.”

“I have to say I’m freaking out about that.”

Jilly looked sideways at him again. “Why?”

“I’ve seen *Deliverance*.”

• • • •

JILLIAN LISTENED TO the deep sigh Jordan heaved into the door of the car. In sleep, he had wedged himself between the seat and the window, stuck at an awkward angle that seemed to bother only her.

His remark about being sent to McCann County to meet up with Landerly’s hitman ricocheted in her brain. But it morphed as it went. Landerly wouldn’t need a hitman; McCann was itself Purgatory, or so it would seem.

The Rav-4 bounced along the horrid road, and Jillian had thoughts about not getting reimbursed for the damage to her car. She tempered them with thoughts about not getting fired. Darkness had come to cover them like smog while she drove, along roads that needed little instruction. Blinking to keep her eyes open, she was assaulted by the bright glare of a green interstate sign bouncing her brights back at her. McCann, 1 mile, population 232. That was telling. That they included the population on the sign. And that the population included a significant digit in the ones spot. Ouch. Jordan had been right about *Deliverance*.

Jillian looked at the glowing digital numbers on the dash, they were going to arrive early, and she wondered how that could be possible. The drive had seemed interminable; she couldn’t even sing to the radio to stay awake, not with Jordan sleeping in the passenger seat.

Their turn was highlighted by a small brown sign atop a metal post, with one word “McCANN” and an arrow pointing the only direction there was to go down the dirt trail. She had the distinct feeling she was entering a land where a sixth grade education would be considered intelligent.

Jordan bounced around in his seat, his shoulders and head periodically knocking about. Surely he would wake right up, keep her company. But he didn’t. When she felt the frown cross her face she realized that she had been anticipating his presence. Landerly had done a good job putting the two of them together. They communicated well about what needed to be done, and they worked well together to be certain that it was achieved. She hadn’t ever felt that Jordan wasn’t pulling his own weight, nor had she felt she’d been carried. And he was good company. Which was more than she had expected. Most people had found her cold and distant, and she understood that. Pretty much she was cold and distant; she lived in her own world where the need to achieve drove her every waking moment.

Funny how Jordan had become her personal life now. He had other commitments and friends in the outside world of Atlanta. In the few weeks he had been here, he had made more connections than she had in all her five years at Grady and in Atlanta combined. On the way out he had taken time to call his friend Martin and cancel his Wednesday night racquetball game. For a brief moment she had regretted that she didn’t have anyone to call.

The road went on forever, made worse by the fact that it was little more than ruts in the hard-packed earth and any sort of speed was an unattainable goal. At least it had been used recently. Small bushes and grasses had been flattened in the middle of the parallel ditches that had yet to pop back up and look alive. Beside her, Jordan finally stirred, his eyes opened, his jaw worked and his voice uttered a soft, *What?* Before he shook himself fully awake and realized that he knew exactly where he was. In that moment he began apologizing for sleeping through such a long portion of the ride.

“So make it up to me by checking out the map to James Hann’s place so we can get the key to the house where we’re staying.”

Jordan complied, looking over the hand-drawn lines that Hann had faxed to Landerly earlier today. Google had come up with nothing. Not surprising since McCann itself didn’t register on most maps.

According to the shakily scrawled fax there were five roads in McCann. Parson, Main, Lintle, Shields, and Squirrel. Jillian had to admit that ‘Squirrel’ bothered her. And that, of course, was the road where the rented house was marked with a wavery X on the map.

Jordan turned the map one way then the other, “I take it we’re on Main.”

“To the best of my knowledge.” Her casual shrug was lost in the movement of the jostling car.

Trees had closed in over the road, overgrown and hanging low, scraping the top of the small car. It was either romantic or horrifying and Jillian squashed the urge to look into the backseat for stowaways. She was searching desperately for road signs, and when she was ready to sigh with weariness and frustration, Jordan pointed low. A hand-lettered wood two-by-four was nailed to the base of an old tree. *Parson Rd.*

That was good enough for her. And she cranked the wheel of the Rav4 hand over hand, wishing that she was already at the house on Squirrel.

The road was even worse than Main, if that was possible. Branches whipped the windshield at a ferocious pace, slowing them even more. Just when she was ready to comment, Jordan broke the nearly rhythmic *thwapping* sound, “Landerly hates us. He does not expect us to return.”

Jillian had to laugh.

It was that or cry. She’d had no more sleep than Jordan, and while she was glad they weren’t fired, never had she imagined this kind of sick punishment.

Just then the trees broke, and a small house stood probably a half mile back off the road. No front lawn or porch lights illuminated the outside, but lights were on in the windows, and given that it was approaching eleven, Jillian was willing to turn the car down the gravel driveway and take her chances that this was the Hann residence. A porch light flashed on in welcome even as she pulled up next to the garage.

In the dying residuals of her headlights Jillian noted the dilapidated horse barn and matching shed tilting precariously in the background, but her attention was diverted by the older man walking down the stairs. He looked nicer than what she had expected in these parts. His jeans were clean and unpatched, like his red plaid flannel shirt. And his face was just enough weathered to appear kind.

She plastered on a smile and threw open the car door. But he spoke first. “You must be Dr. Brookwood. Miss Greene didn’t tell me you were so pretty.” His smile reached his eyes and he held his hand out to her, somehow managing to convey comfort and friendliness with his remarks.

He held out his hand again as Jordan approached. “I’m James Hann. And I have a set of keys to our rental house. Just come inside and Melissa will get you a drink.”

Jillian started to protest, “Oh, thank you, but-”

Jordan's elbow in her lower back cut her off and his voice overpowered her own, "That would be great. It's been a bit of a drive."

So she bit off her retort and followed the two men up the short stairs. The inside of the place reminded her of her Aunt Lenora's house. There was a whipstitched cover for the Kleenex box in the shape of a church, complete with a steeple and open doors. Sampler pillows dotted the old brown couch in shades of pastel, broken only by the hideously yellow crocheted throw.

James introduced his wife Melissa, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties like him, who brooked no protest about popping out of her seat to get drinks even as he settled in. Jillian let Jordan handle all the talking, since he was the one who had accepted this invitation anyway.

She felt herself drifting asleep with her eyes open until James Hann's voice cut through the filters she had thought were turned off. "Y'all are married, right?"

While she tried to hide the startled look she was sure had materialized on her face, all thoughts vaporized at Jordan's immediate smile and knowing nod. "Of course we are."

Snapping her jaw shut, she turned to stare at him. Then worked furiously to cover the expression that she knew had clouded her eyes. If there was one thing she had learned at the CDCP, it was that Jordan said some wild stuff, but he could be trusted. So she forced a grin, praying it looked less demonic than it felt.

His smile was far more genuine, and he reached across to lightly brush her fingers. "Jilly decided to keep her last name. Dr. and Dr. Abellard . . . well you'd never know who was who."

Hann accepted the iced tea his wife was holding out to him without even acknowledging her presence, which of course prompted another negative reaction that Jillian fought hard to tamp down. Then she was discretely passed a bumpy glass full of tea and garnished with a lemon and a mint sprig. Garnish! At eleven thirty at night! And Jordan smiling and talking about them being married. It was the damn twilight zone.

"I noticed you don't wear any rings."

Jordan held out his hand for Hann to inspect. *Could the night get any weirder?* She just couldn't wait to hear this. "I've got a bit of a mark from it."

Jillian couldn't see anything but a pristine ring finger, but she kept her mouth shut.

"We can't wear our rings when we work. They get caught on the gloves." He smiled at her again, and she saw genuine humor in his eyes. He knew that she had no idea where he was going with this and he wasn't going to explain. "And Jilly here won't let us bring them on trips. They might get lost."

So she turned back to Mr. Hann and nodded as if she agreed. "You know. They're too important."

James nodded to her conspiratorially. "Melissa would have my hide if I lost mine."

In a few minutes she had guzzled her tea, far thirstier than she had known she was. Then Jordan was taking her hand and pulling her up off the couch. He had the keys to the house on Squirrel firmly in his other hand and the Hanns' blessings.

Mr. Hann watched from the doorway, while Jordan folded her into the passenger seat of her own car, then smiled as he held his hand out discretely for the keys. She slipped them to him, wondering even as she did it why she was going along with it all. A smile and a wave later Jordan had them turned around and bouncing back up the driveway, and Jillian could keep her mouth shut no longer.

"We're married?"

He laughed. "This is not like Atlanta. They just rented us a house and they'd probably rescind the offer if they had known we weren't married. Sin is sin."



“What?”

“Did you see all the God stuff in there?” He looked both ways for the non-existent traffic at the end of the drive, “They would have insisted that you stay with them. Is that what you wanted?”

“You’re serious.”

He just raised his eyebrows and held up the keys to the house. The keychain read *With Jesus all things are possible*.

“Well, holy Mary, mother and Joseph.” She hated when he was right and she didn’t have the wherewithal to even catch on.

It was fifteen minutes of relative silence later that they parked the Rav4 in front of the rental. Jillian fought the urge to cry. It was straight out of the Apple Dumpling Gang. Weathered wood siding, hanging loose in several places, the porch had a slight tilt to it, and in the windows she could see curtains with red roosters prancing back and forth.

She prayed that the beds didn’t sag too much.

Jordan hopped out and reached into the backseat to grab both duffle bags and headed to unlock the front door. Following right behind him, she was assaulted by the stale smell and stagnant air in the place. Jordan made a face that must have mirrored her own and immediately dropped their luggage and went around opening the windows. The night air was a welcome addition into the house.

Jillian wandered the place, snapping on lights. The kitchen was a countrified hell - roosters covered every surface. Wire mesh lined some of the cabinets in a way that could have been charming were it not part of the whole overdone theme. The hallway boasted a linen closet that was stacked with chenille throws and a variety of outdated floral print sheets. The one bathroom was cramped and pink, but Jillian thought the sink looked about as good as any could right now.

The faucet handle didn’t give when she turned it. And so, with a much harder crank, she sent the thing spinning and started a horrifying series of moans and gurgles that culminated in a brown thick liquid spewing from the faucet.

“Now that’s what I call hard water.” Jordan laughed from behind her.

Jillian spun around, furious not at him, but that things could be this bad at midnight when she hadn’t slept in four days and hadn’t even begun to unpack. She started to turn off the offending spigot, but Jordan’s hand on her shoulder stilled her, “Let it run, it’ll clear up.”

With that she turned and left the faucet to its own devices and started opening the doors at the end of the hallway. One was a master bedroom, if the term was applied loosely. The bed was queen-sized and looked like it had been furnished from a barn somewhere. The other bedroom sported a single pressed into the far corner with only a lone pillow and no headboard.

“I’ll take this one.” Jillian went back for her bag, but Jordan beat her to it and argued chivalrously that he would take the smaller room. In a few minutes she got him to concede and he lowered her bag to the floor, then called from a little further down the hallway “The water’s good now, bathroom’s all yours.”

She’d have to see that clean water to believe it, but sure enough, when she re-entered the water ran clear and pristine. Except for a smudge in the bottom of the basin there was no evidence of the sludge it had been turning out a few minutes ago.

Rapidly she brushed her teeth and scrubbed her face before heading back to her room and changing into her flannel pajamas. The bed both called to her and repulsed her. But exhaustion won out over unfamiliarity and she lifted the layers of sheets and blankets to slide beneath. She was rolling over to punch the pillow when the world dropped out from under her.

Eyes wide, she sat up and promptly slid off the end of the bed where the foot of it had fallen out from under her. She just gave up. Mumbling swear words, she yanked the covers off, and tromped down the short hall dragging them after her. Jordan's door was ajar and he was centered on the large bed in a draping sprawl, t-shirt and sweatpants bunched in a way that would be uncomfortable to all but the truly tired.

Jillian sighed. "Scoot over."



David reached into his pocket and felt like a fool. But he smiled at the stewardess and ordered a scotch even as he corrected his mental error to ‘flight attendant’. His fingers tightened around the three inch wide cylinder he had shoved there earlier. There were four more in his carryon, each with one end covered in plastic and tied down with a rubber band. He figured if he made so much as a false move he’d be shot by those plainclothes police officers that were supposed to be flying around as protection for regular US citizens these days.

The core sample he had taken from the McCann hotspot was hardly a weapon, unless someone used it to publish his data before he did. But he had watched the guy in front of him in the security line get a travel shampoo bottle confiscated and get rebuked for trying to get ‘these things’ on the airplane. How was shampoo even dangerous? Yet here he was with a solid, eight inch long piece of hard rock in his pocket. That could do real damage upside someone’s head-

“Thank you.” He accepted the scotch from the smiling blonde in the navy suit with the tie neck cloth that reminded him of his cousin Ester’s Girl Scout uniform. He shouldn’t even be *thinking* about the damage he could do with the rock-club. He just prayed they didn’t arrest him when he hit the ground.

Removing his fingers from the core sample he aligned his napkin with the edge of the tray, then the glass into the corner created by the scalloped edges pressed into the paper of the napkin. It was a habit he had inherited from his father - that and the habit of picking up rocks and trying to hear them speak. This one was begging him not to let it get confiscated. This one, compared with the four nearly identical pieces in his bag, was the whole reason he was on this stupid flight. Why he was headed back into McCann County again.

He brought the glass of scotch to his lips, glad that it had been a smooth ride, and that no one had caught his error in bringing the rocks on board. At least, not yet. The top layer of each was made of looser dirt, not packed in by eons of hard rain and pressure and walking animals. Yet it still had the tiniest amount of scrap iron in it. Not as reliable as the riverbed sediments. River silt would line up as the poles dictated. In water, the magnetic shards were free-floating and excellent indicators even hundreds of thousands of years later. But these loose pieces should have had just an overall trend that was statistically significant.

These had far more than that. No one had to crank the numbers to see it. Students had pointed it out as they analyzed layers for him. “Wow, Dr. Carter. Where’d this come from? Near an MRI machine?” The cores were from Wharton’s dig site; they showed hotspot activity from sixty-five million years ago. And today. The mystery kept growing the more he looked at it.

After he got off the plane, it was only thirty minutes before he was on interstate 75 headed north. It was all getting too familiar, and he found himself at the little run-down motel on the outskirts of Farragut, which was on the outskirts of Knoxville. The Whippoorwill Inn sported a sign that clearly revealed it had once been a Best Western. David was certain that the Best Western Corporation had disowned this bastard stepchild a long time ago.

The man behind the counter remembered him though as he walked up to the front desk and inquired about a room. For a brief moment he panicked that maybe they were full, and then what would he do? But he almost laughed out loud as the thought slipped away. Farragut was hardly a convention center. The only thing that might fill this place up was a wedding. And he had serious

concerns that most of the weddings around here involved shotguns and noticeably pregnant brides, so he pushed that idea out of his head.

His watch said it was barely 5pm home time, and he was already exhausted. He shook his thoughts out as he turned the key and let himself into the room. It was as stale and washed out as he remembered it, and he decided that he should take his luck escaping the airports with his specimens intact as a sign from the Gods. He would only do what the Gods told him to do for the rest of the day, and right now they were telling him to get some sleep.

He had just stepped out of his shoes when his cell phone rang, the clear digital tones strangely discordant in the time capsule room. When he didn't see a name on the panel he almost refused the call, only his close co-workers and a few friends knew this number, and the phone should have recognized them. But he let the phone go through another whole cycle of ring and wait before he remembered that 865 was the local area code, meaning someone here was calling him and that was just too freaky to not answer.

"Hello?"

"Yes, I'm looking for a Dr. David Carter the second."

"This is he." *This is weird.* The combination of his personal line and formal name. The tight, upper-classy sound of the female voice speaking to him.

There was a soft sigh on the other end of the line before the voice resumed the formal words that weren't telling him much. "My name is Dr. Jillian Brookwood. I work with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and we're running a survey regarding McCann, Tennessee. There are credit card receipts and several residents that state that you visited recently."

She paused and David realized that he was supposed to fill the space with an affirmation or rejection. He cleared his throat. "Yes, I was there."

"I'm going to record this call if that's all right with you?"

The CDC was on the phone with him and wanted to record the call? And weren't they in Atlanta, not Tennessee? So why was the call from a local number? He felt stupid saying it, but rather than badger her with his misgivings he just said "sure." If it was a prank he would have detected that thick southern accent in the air, right?

There was a small click and she resumed speaking. "One moment. Dr. Jillian Brookwood, of CDCP Lab G12067 . . ." Her voice faded away from him as he realized that she was recording all the information for the call. It was about as interesting as the legal disclaimers after commercials, but he snapped to when he heard his name. "Dr. Carter, you were recently in the town of McCann, Tennessee, correct?"

"Yes."

"What was the purpose of your visit?"

That made him pause. This was likely someone trying to get information out of him regarding his dig. "It was personal."

"About how long ago were you here?"

*Here.* She was in McCann.

"About three weeks."

"And how long was your stay?" Her voice came over the line cool, professional, detached.

"About three weeks." He barely paused before speaking again and making a point to interrupt her. "May I ask what this call is about?"

"Certainly. Have you had any nausea in the past few weeks?"

"Wait. What is this about?"

“We’re doing a survey-”

He cut her off again. “Why don’t we do this face to face?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I won’t be able to get to Chicago in the near future.”

“I’m in Farragut.”

“Now?!”

He almost laughed at the surprise in her voice. With just her tone she seemed to agree with his feelings, *Who the hell would want to be in Farragut?* “Yes. I’ll be in McCann tomorrow.”

“I can come to you, tonight even. Where shall we meet?”

He only knew of one place and it was a hole in the wall right next to his cheap motel, so he gave her an apology before he gave her the address. She told him she’d be there at eight and she hoped he was staying close to his hotel. Then he hung up and lay back on the old creaking bed. That was just too weird.

*What the hell did the CDC want in McCann?*

*Probably a brain scan of anyone idiotic enough to visit. Probably they had classified living there as a disease and wanted to isolate the gene. See if he was maybe a carrier or something.*

He closed his eyes and the alarm immediately malfunctioned and went off, causing him to swear. He smacked it and got up, going into the tiny bathroom to retrieve an alarm that actually worked. He pulled it from his bag and stared at it for a moment, 6:50. That was . . . 7:50 local time. *Shit*, he’d actually been asleep. A lot of good it had done him, too.

He had all of ten minutes to get himself together and go convince the CDC lady with the tight-assed voice that he was not diseased. At least she had sounded offended about being in McCann. That was a definite bonus in his book.

David set the clock back down and looked into the mirror. That was all it took to convince him that he needed to wash his face. If for no reason other than to wake himself up. If this CDC chick was the real deal, then maybe there was something interesting going on and he should pay attention, and he headed next door to the greasy spoon.

When he entered, an older woman said hello to him. Clearly as friendly as she could be, but she didn’t offer him a seat, or ask what he needed. He was expected to seat himself. Each seat looked about as appealing as the next, and that wasn’t a compliment. David crossed the small room and pulled out a vinyl covered chair that allowed him to see the door. And by the time the lady had walked up to him and asked, “Unsweetened tea, right?” and he had been shocked that he was remembered, a woman was walking in the door who looked as out of place as he did.

The waitress smiled her toothy grin and said, “Hi, honey,” to the woman, then walked off to get his tea. David stood, surprised by what he saw. As she came closer, clearly unsure who he was but guessing correctly, she tilted her head and examined him. She was much younger than he had expected, and while her voice had been all authority and questions, now on sight she was unsure, clutching the notepad and pen she held to her chest just a little too tight. “Are you Dr. Carter?”

“Yes, I am.” He stood up and stuck out his hand in a gesture that was way too formal for the setting. “And you must be Dr. Brookwood.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” She shook his hand, a firmer grip than he had expected from someone so young. They settled into a formal position, looking ridiculous, trying to keep an air of business decorum over a plastic tablecloth that looked like it had lived a past life as an abused picnic blanket.

He was going to say something, but the waitress lady, who still had yet to introduce herself, turned up at his side, and asked Dr. Brookwood “What can I bring you, honey?”

The doctor’s black eyebrows went up. “Do you have any bottled water?”

“Sorry, honey. But we got bottled coke.” The waitress didn’t even have the wherewithal to be offended by the unspoken suggestion that the water should be imported.

“That would be great, thank you.”

He glanced at his own glass of tea, a tall old yellow glass that had the lemon pre-squeezed into it. The CDC chick wasn’t drinking anything handled here. And suddenly he wasn’t quite so thirsty.

David swished at the tea, wondering what came next. But he didn’t wonder for long. Dr. Brookwood opened her pad and spread out a few sheets of a questionnaire. He was having trouble reading it upside down, and was interrupted by her voice, softly clearing her throat. “Shall we get down to brass tacks?”

And that was it. The good doctor was in her element and was off and running. She started up a tape recorder, a small silver thing that looked like a missing part from an alien space ship in this out-of-date setting. She re-questioned him about his whereabouts and the reasons for his visit. He re-lied about it being personal.

Then she asked him all kinds of questions about his feelings. Fever? Nausea? Dizziness? Disorientation? Gastrointestinal upset?

Within three minutes the woman who looked and acted as though she was anywhere but Podunk, Tennessee, knew more about him than his mother ever had. Then she started asking him more and stupider questions. “Has your stomach felt queasy in the past several weeks, since you returned?”

David felt the frown move into place on his face. “Didn’t you already ask me that?”

The professional mask broke form and the side of her lip curled just the slightest amount. “You wouldn’t believe how many people can answer the same question five or six times, but on the seventh try they suddenly remember that yes they do have a life threatening allergy or yes, they did have exactly those symptoms. My favorite thing to hear when I’m interviewing someone is: ‘come to think of it . . .’”

He almost laughed. Then he heard the words coming out of his mouth and was powerless to stop them. “Come to think of it, my friend and I did feel a little sick to our stomachs just before we left.”

“This would be . . .” She flipped back through her paperwork, scanning for the answers she had jotted down earlier. “Dr. Greer Larson?”

“Yes.”

“Was it mild or severe? How would you rank it?”

Dear God, she was insane. All this writing and she wouldn’t tell him what was going on.

He sat at the table, studying her intently and answering all her questions as best as he could. While she looked up at him only to ask another stupid question and another, and furiously recording his answers. Finally she thanked him as she stood up. “Please stay in touch. And *please* call daily with an update on your condition if you do go into McCann city. Thank you.”

He glanced down at her card making sure he had enough information, and looked back up to ask her if McCann actually qualified as a city, but she was gone. There were a few bills on the table, and the bell that had been hung over the door was letting the world know that someone had left this little hole.

• • • •

BECKY KNEW IN HER HEART that the birds were the next in line to be magnetically freaky, and that the project was no longer hers. She could only hope that they would recognize her efforts and give her a good billing on the paper that likely she would write every word of.

She drove herself to work in the old Jetta, hearing the wheezes from the engine that was never quite fully repaired. Her office smelled just a little stale, and she wondered for a brief moment if any of her colleagues had been in. But she pushed herself down into the wooden rolling chair and leaned over the desk. U.T. had sent her to Georgia, and several birds had been brought back to the school labs, using school equipment. She would call the birdwatchers from her U.T. phone providing a record of the conversation. It was officially out of her hands. Marshall Harfield answered on the first ring. And he recognized her name right away.

“We were wondering when we would hear any news about our Bradys.”

She tried to keep her voice light, even though she already knew what he would find. “I actually have a task for you if you can help us out, then I’ll be able to give you more information.”

The man was overly eager to help in any way he could, and it brought back memories of being in the woods surrounded by the ABA group, all talking at once. “I need you to gather your birdwatchers and to give everybody a compass and check out the areas where the birds first migrated and where they’re settled now. Do you think that you can get everybody together for that?”

“I can do it today.” She could almost see him puffing with pride. The manners her mama had drilled into her told her to let him know that it wasn’t necessary no matter how much she was anxious for the results. But he stepped in before she could have gotten a word in edgewise anyway. “We’re having a meeting at three and we can just change our agenda a little bit.”

“Is that okay? I don’t want to bother-”

“Just tell us what you want us to do.”

Becky was glad that he was so happy to help. She felt a little less like she had put a chore on him. And she spent a good while explaining how they should map and record the electromagnetics of the area and what they were looking for.

Mr. Harfield concluded with a sniff and a “we’ll know it when we see it, right?”

“Yes, if there is any activity you won’t be able to miss it.”

“I don’t suppose you can tell me why it is that we’re looking for this?”

She smiled. The man was a goon and always overeager, but he was a sharp tack. “I can. I hope it will be within the next several days. And the information you get this afternoon will help me gain the authority to share what I know.”

Becky hung up with a sigh, dragged herself to her feet and gathered a few supplies. The walk to visit the Warblers wound down a long hallway and around behind several labs. An undergrad was hunched over, muttering to himself when she entered. It took only the briefest of explanations to get him to agree to a break from mucking the crates. “I’m trying to figure out why they’re so creepy.”

“Well,” He laughed, “that’s a noble endeavor. But one I doubt you’ll be able to solve.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Dr. Jenkinson has been at these guys since you brought them in. We’ve been testing them with everything we know and can’t come up with squat.”

“Ahhh,” Becky sighed. “But I have the inside track.” She went back outside the doorway and gathered up the magnets she had set down just before entering, in a few moments he had one of the warblers out and Becky had the magnet in front of it. It turned when the magnet was moved.

“Ho-lee shit. You win. You do have the inside track.”

They tried bird after bird and then finally entered the room with their pockets loaded with as many of the magnets as they could find. The birds followed their movements, becoming obviously agitated when they separated, taking the magnetic pull in two different directions.

“So that’s why they were all staring at me when I entered.”



Becky nodded. “Actually they stare at the door all the time. What direction is that? Do you know?”

He looked around a little, orienting himself inside the building as the thought clearly formed for the first time. After a few motions that Becky couldn't decipher, his brows knit together and he said “West northwest.”

Becky was ready to smack herself in the forehead. Why hadn't she brought the compass? There was something about the way she had come down the hall. The undergrad followed patiently while she mentally retraced her steps backward from the birdroom, winding up in her office. Sitting in her chair with the empty shelves behind her.

*The shelves are empty.* Becky sighed. And only as he responded did she realize that she had spoken.

“Why are they empty?”

“Because I took the frogs home.” The breath rushed out of her. “The frogs were facing the same way.”

• • • •

“JILLY.”

Jordan's voice broke her reverie and she snapped to with a feeble excuse. “I was just thinking . . .”

Jordan waited, looking at her, watching, as though he might see her thought process. She knew she was a mystery to him, how her mind functioned, what she saw, and how she lived with such a singular drive. But at times like these, he sat, waiting for whatever she would come up with. And she felt the pressure of him expecting more of her than she was probably capable of producing. McCann was turning out to be more than she could handle.

She shrugged at him, giving up. “I don't have any idea what to tell Landerly, but we have to phone this in. We hit criteria.”

Jordan nodded. “Do you want to make the call or me?”

“Are you serious?” She would have laughed if she hadn't spent the day fielding the six new patients down with this illness - two already at a coma state before she and Jordan got to them. All their families had said was that they were ‘under the weather’ or ‘feelin' a little down’. Good God, one family seemed to think the father would just come out of it.

Jordan had sent her back to re-dress the first morning when she had declared herself ready in her suit and labcoat. He had said the good people of McCann wouldn't tell her *anything* if she dressed like that. He had made her dig through her bag until she produced jeans and the oldest looking top she had brought. What Jillian understood was that people would open up to Jordan no matter what he was wearing. Dirty little children just asked if they could hug him.

She looked around the makeshift lab in the bedroom with the broken bed. Her bag was stashed in the corner; the slanted bed wasn't even good as storage space, everything just rolled off. James Hann had offered to come over and fix it. So she had waited until he declared that he needed a ‘part’ and that he would come back with it in a few days.

Jillian wondered what ‘part’ one needed to fix an old wooden slat bed. A nail? A screw? And she stared around the obnoxious room feeling desperate. She couldn't come up with a solution or any idea of what they had. She wasn't even sure if it was viral, bacterial, or chemical. All she knew was that the weaker your immune system was the more likely you were to get it. And that they'd been living in ‘it’ for days. Bathing in it? Eating it? Breathing it?

And that wasn't anything more than they had known in Florida. Except that here they could trace a link. In Jordan's bold print it graced the wall - the connections from patient zero to the other locals who had come down with 'it'. Not that there was a standard incubation period or anything. Jillian couldn't wrap her mind around it. No matter how patiently Jordan waited on her. And she didn't want to have to tell Landerly that.

So Jillian forced herself to trail behind him to the kitchen where the old yellow phone was mounted on the wall. The push buttons were its only bow before modern technology. If it had been dial-up . . . well, she didn't think the CDCP even accepted dial-up calls anymore.

Jordan smiled at her, the large ugly receiver held against his head, the short coil holding him captive against the far wall of the be-roostered kitchen. "Hey Dr. Landerly."

Breath pushed into her lungs. She would never have addressed him with 'Hey, Dr. Landerly.' But then again, she wasn't Jordan. She listened, waiting for the screech that was sure to come. The questions as to why their assays hadn't showed anything. The makeshift desk top in the 'lab' was covered with test plates. But nothing had turned up.

Jordan nodded, knowing full well that Landerly couldn't see him. "Yessir. Problem is - we hit criteria for quarantine. . . . about fifteen minutes ago. . . . 19 . . . down or deceased. . . well, yes, but here that's the necessary 8 percent of the population. . . . do it ourselves? . . . ." His eyes looked up finally meeting Jillian's. He looked bewildered.

She was certain his expression mirrored her own as she imagined the two of them rolling yards of yellow tape around the outskirts of town.

"I thought we would call in a team. How do we hold quarantine with just two people? . . . ." The pause seemed interminable. "The law enforcement? This place isn't a city, so there's no police. . . sheriff? . . ." He looked at Jillian, eyebrows up waiting for her to provide the answer.

So she did. In a situation like this at least she was useful as a storage and retrieval center for seemingly useless trivia. "Just one man and his son. Jerome Beard."

"How many exits to the town?" Jordan beseeched her again, and while she got the original faxed map that James Hann had sent them she heard Jordan becoming irked with the old man. "No, I do not think better when I repeat your questions like an idiot. Jillian thinks better when I repeat your questions like an idiot."

She tried not to laugh as she held up the map. His look shut her up. Jordan's face clearly displayed that she would be the one making the next of these phone calls.

His shoulders slumped and his free hand went to his eyes. "Yessir. It looks like four exits. But that's -"

Jillian waited while Jordan's teeth clenched, her own lower lip folding in to be chewed on, a habit she had thought she had broken years ago.

It sounded a bit like Charlie Brown's schoolteacher was on the other end of the line, she could only make out that Landerly was speaking. And since she hadn't heard anything before, she gave serious thought to the possibility that he was yelling at Jordan. If she was braver she would have grabbed the phone out of his hand and told Landerly where to stuff it. If she hadn't landed her dream job with the CDCP right out of her residency . . . well, she had to admit to herself that there were enough ifs to leave the phone right in Jordan's hands where it already was.

Finally, Jordan spoke again. "It's a hand drawn map sir. It looks reasonably accurate but to be truthful checking out Mr. Hann's cartography skills wasn't on our list of things to do. So there may well be undrawn roads or paths - . . . well, we're in backwoods Tennessee. And these people walk or even ride horses a lot of places so there's no way we can cover all the exits. . . ."

Jillian stood there for forever while Jordan talked about the fact that they had checked every criterion they could think of. They were almost out of needles and reagents. All they had achieved was that they could reasonably predict who would come down with it next. Jillian's money was on Mr. Parson. He was married to a victim – exposure was strike one, was old - strike two, and his Chem panel showed that he had a very low TSH - strike three

But that was morbid.

And probably correct.

Jordan looked ready to explode. And Jillian stood nearby to offer support, but made a desperate effort to drown out what was actually being said.

How long she stood there like that, watching Jordan move his hand from his hip to his temples, switch the phone from one side to the other, talk about McCann and how little information they had, she had no idea. The first thing that registered was “Jillian and I thank you, sir.” As he hung up the phone.

His stance slugged even a little further down. His eyes all but closed. His back found the wall and he looked up at the ceiling, though Jillian had to wonder what he was looking at. She stepped forward to give him a hug, to thank him for handling that . . . monstrosity of a phone call.

For a brief moment she thought he didn't see her, and she saw her arms extend to him and she saw an awkward moment in the immediate future. But he was Jordan. He saw her coming and alleviated any tension by reacting. Just loosely draped his arm around her waist in a limp return-hug and mumbled ‘thank-you’ into her shoulder.

Her own voice was stronger, having not just been through the wringer with Landerly. “So, what? We just go to BigLots and buy about thirty rolls of ‘quarantine’ tape and make some makeshift roadblocks?”

Jordan chuckled a little. “Something like that. We try to keep the people contained as best we can. More recording than anything else. The backup ‘rural’ team will be here in two days.”

“Two days!” She stood up straight, planting her hands on her hips as she removed herself from his embrace.

“Yup.”

“Well - . . . how- . . . oh, fuck it. I'm not even going to try to figure that one out.”

Jordan's eyebrows raised again, and his blue-green eyes rolled her way.

She pressed her lips together. “Yes, I know the F-word.” Then she shrugged. Perhaps the best plan was avoidance. “Thank you for fielding that call. Landerly is going to kill us one of these days.”

Jordan shook his head. “No he won't. He's just going to name this disease after us. So whenever anyone feels nauseated they'll think ‘Brookwood-Abellard’. It's how I always imagined my life.” His tone changed to a little more wistful. “People will say, ‘oh, Abellard, like that horrid disease that makes you vomit and die?’”

Jillian was trying to get the picture. “Why isn't it ‘Abellard-Brookwood’?”

“Doesn't sound as good.”

“Oh, and there's a law about discordant names for vicious fatal diseases.”

He finally looked up and smiled at her, a real, full-on Jordan smile. And she was grateful that Landerly hadn't been too much of an ass.

“We should call and see if we can interview David Carter again.”

“We do need to see him. We need to get him quarantined. He's been in McCann, right?”

Jillian stilled. “In and out. Repeatedly.” Then more quietly “Oh, God.”

Jordan took her hand, pulling her behind him and out the door. “Not ‘Oh, God’. Everyone’s been in and out of McCann. And there’s no way to track it or to have prevented it.”

Jillian nodded, guessing that he was right. Her imagination that they were responsible was only partly true, and it was impossible, not to mention improper, to impose quarantine without the proper criteria. Still, Oh God.



There was a knock at the hotel room door. David opened his mouth to yell that he didn't need room service, before realizing that room service didn't exist here.

And that meant someone was really knocking on his door. He was hardly awake, and barely moving, given that he had spent the day climbing trails in the mountains. He'd been taking topsoil samples and testing them as best he could out in the middle of nowhere. But now he was sore, and slow, and he pushed his hands against the cheap paint job of the door and stuck his face flush against it before realizing that there wasn't even a peephole.

Well, there was a chain lock, not that that offered him any real protection . . . So he turned the knob, while muttering something about 'coming' and looked out the crack that the chain afforded. Not anyone he knew. Just some guy with a sweatshirt on.

"Are you Dr. David Carter?"

David nodded, still trying to clear his head, and a slightly familiar voice gave her name before he could place the melody and cadence in his memory.

"I'm Dr. Jillian Brookwood, we spoke a few days ago -"

He nodded and closed the door on the young man, jerking the chain out of its slot and letting the door swing freely this time. "Come in." He smiled and pretended he was awake. "What can I do for you?"

For a brief moment he considered apologizing for the state of the motel room. But it wasn't messy, just . . . awful. And he remembered that the good Dr. Brookwood had mentioned that she was staying in McCann, so his accommodations were probably better than either of theirs. He finally realized that the thing nagging the edges of his conscious thought was her voice, offering pleasantries and introducing her partner, who was scowling at David who was eyeing Dr. Brookwood. "-Dr. Jordan Abellard."

So David stuck his hand out and pretended he'd heard the whole thing. "Nice to meet you Dr. Abellard. Are you staying in McCann as well?" See, he could fake it with the best of them. He'd had whole conversations with his father where he hadn't paid attention to one piece of the shit his father was trying to feed him.

"Yes, Dr. Brookwood and I have rented a house there."

*A house?* "Oh, are you married?"

"No." Her voice.

"Yes." His.

But then Dr. Abellard looked sideways at his partner and laughed. Raising his eyebrows and putting his hands up like he'd been caught, he confessed. "No, we're not married, but the people who own the house are very religious. So we told them we were."

"Ahhh." So the Doc was off limits. That was a damn shame. But David just smiled and waited.

It was Abellard who caught on first. "May I sit down?" He motioned to the end of the unused queen bed near the door. "Jillian's report stated that you were doing research in the area and that you had come back for a personal visit."

David nodded. *Yeah, get to the point.*

"I have to tell you that this doesn't look like a personal visit. We haven't seen you in town at all."

David started to protest, but Abellard raised his hand. “Hear me out. . . people are getting sick.”

David raised his eyebrows in surprise, before cursing himself for giving away his hand. Dr. Abellard nodded at him, acknowledging his slip. “Yeah, I didn’t think you knew.”

Jillian looked as surprised as David felt about Abellard’s accusations. But she had the grace to sink down beside him on the green and gold-ish comforter and look up at David questioningly.

With a sigh, he fessed up. “You’re right. What do you want?”

“People are dying in McCann.”

This was just getting too weird. The CDC was sitting on his crappy motel bed telling him that people were dying in the town he was researching. “What is it that they have?”

Abellard’s lips were tight. “That’s just it. We don’t know.” He opened his mouth but no sound came and he closed it just as fast. Making David wonder what the doctor wasn’t telling him.

But he wasn’t about to find out.

“We do know it starts with a stomach upset. And you had that, but you have no other symptoms.”

“So, I don’t have *it*, right?” David felt the worry festering in him.

Jillian nodded. “We’d like your permission to run a series of assays on your blood, testing for the profile we’ve seen in the victims.” She pulled a rubber tourniquet, blood vials, gloves and a huge needle from her jacket pocket. Unlike her partner, she went straight for the punch, her eyes looking into his waiting for his yes/no response.

His chest moved. It was a gesture of resignation. They hadn’t mentioned the odd piles of stones stacked in the corner or asked him anything about his research. They only wanted his blood. “Sure. Just leave me enough to get a good night’s sleep.”

Dr. Jillian popped up off the bed with a surprising amount of energy, and she was shoving up his sleeve and had the rubber strap around him before he even had his arm fully extended to her. Her fingers were quite gentle given the amount of enthusiasm she had for getting his blood sample. Her gloves slid into place with seemingly no effort on her part, and she pushed the vein with her finger before sliding in the needle that he hadn’t even seen her attach to the vacuum tube. He felt the pinch then watched as his blood pumped into the vial.

After a moment she jerked open the tourniquet allowing him feeling in his lower arm again. Then held a cotton ball over the needle while she quickly slid it out of his vein without him feeling a thing. Only after inspecting the blood in the vial and turning it one way then another, did she look him in the eyes. “Thank you.”

*Yea, she could poke him in the veins anytime she liked.*

David pushed back a happy thought that she was over eighteen, and he couldn’t suppress a smile, “Is that all you guys came for?”

“No.” David followed the sound of the voice and stopped his musings about the raven-haired Jillian, remembering that the two were probably involved.

Abellard spoke again. “If your business here isn’t personal then what is it?”

*Damn.* “Well, actually that’s personal.” He saw Jillian’s lips press together, like she’d been hoping he’d just tell them everything. *Too bad, honey.*

“All right.” Dr. Abellard stayed in his seat on the bed, his head two feet lower than David’s standing height, but not showing any sign of weakness. “Let me take a stab at it then: you and your colleague came here to do some clandestine research. And you found something.”

*Shit.*

He turned to see if Jillian had that *I'm close, aren't I?* look on her face, too, but she didn't. She looked surprised, her attention finally pulled away from looking at the blood vial as though she didn't need the tests but could just read the red ooze itself.

Abellard continued. "You came back here to do more research—"

"Listen, I don't know what the two of you are doing here, but I don't need people prying into my life like this." Whatever blood that bewitching little vampire had left him raced faster, flooding his face with his anger.

Abellard held up a hand, palm out. "If I'm right, then you've stumbled onto something you aren't sharing with your university." His expression stayed David from kicking them both out the door right then. Barely. "And you know something very unusual and significant about an area where people are dying of a disease we know nothing about. . . we don't want to interfere with your research. We just need to know if the two are linked. We need to save lives."

*Bastard.* Abellard had him by the short and curlies.

• • • •

BECKY SIGHED WATCHING miles of interstate roll by and gallons of gas get guzzled on her MasterCard. She had gone around the area west of home yesterday. With her compass and her frogs along for measurement. But nothing had happened. The frogs always faced the same way. Just like they had when she had traveled the area south of home the day before. Today was east, and she could see that she wasn't going to open up any new discoveries to take back to the team and impress Warden.

She *had* been paying attention to where she was headed, but somehow she was out on highway 144, heading past the old route to the airport. She drove five more minutes with no real movement from the frogs before she gave up. And she didn't know how in hell she was going to explain this in an expense report to Warden. Hell, he wanted her five-dollar dinners pre-approved before he'd reimburse them.

"Aaaaagggghhhhh." The sound of her frustrated voice startled the frogs in the seat next to her. She had meant to just think it. The little harbingers of the apocalypse looked at her. All three of them, so sweet and froggy and innocent looking. But wasn't there a bible passage about that? *So beware evil. The wolf that comes as sheep in wool . . .* Then, of course, there was that whole *rain of frogs* stuff.

"Stop staring at me!"

Yeah, that was mature. Yell at frogs. So she growled at them. And the far one diverted his eyes. Then his head. Then he began a slow shuffle to facing away from her.

Becky almost stood on the brakes. She did slap on the blinker and pull off on the shoulder. One of the other frogs shuffled, too. Just a mild reorienting, but way more than these froggies were supposed to do.

"Holy . . ."

She slammed the old pile of parts in gear and pushed back out into traffic, cutting someone off. He flipped her the bird, but she quickly asked God's forgiveness; she knew she'd never get the other driver's.

The frogs' noses were all pointing off to the south by now. They faced an area that looked about as well traveled as the moon, and she had been on some of those back roads. She'd be stranded and eaten by cougars, or bears, or worse. She knew one man up there who swore the scientists in Oak Ridge had coordinated the whole thing with the aliens.



With force, she shoved her brain in gear. Her frogs should be re-orienting at the magnetic halfway point. That meant they were either very close to a smaller site, far from a big site, or exactly as far away from a site of the same size. Becky turned the wheel and followed the frogs' noses.

• • • •

JORDAN LOOKED AT THE page from the cheap printer they had brought along to spit out test results. It seemed a shame to get the scoop on whether you would likely live or die from a \$79 printer that wheezed and beeped like an abused photocopier when it ran out of paper.

Dr. Carter's results rested in his fingertips at the moment. The only person that they weren't sure of until just now. His white count was textbook, and he didn't test positive for anything else interfering with normal immune function. Meaning it was highly unlikely that he'd be in the next batch to come down with Brookwood-Abellard, as Jordan was already calling it to himself. It also meant the geologist was likely to come around trying to read the slopes on Jilly again. Maybe he just shouldn't start 'David' on the supplements yet, give him a little time to weaken up.

While it was supremely tempting, it did violate that whole Hippocratic Oath thing. Jordan scowled to himself.

Instantaneously, Jilly's voice reacted to his expression. "Does David have something?"

"No, David doesn't." He forced a smile, and forced down the thoughts that were bubbling up about Jillian. He set the printout aside, stacking it on top of the pages of blood tests from every person in McCann. His and Jilly's were at the bottom of the pile, along with a flood of nerves. "What we need to do is go out and get the good sheriff and his boy to help us set up the road blocks."

Jillian's giggles mingled sweetly with the harsh ring of the old yellow phone and, covering her mouth, she ran off to the kitchen to answer it.

Jordan knew what she was laughing about, too. In an earlier attempt to find the appropriate methods of shutting down the town, they had set up your basic D.O.T. barricades. Only McCann wasn't a town. So they set up James Hann's two sawhorses at the east entrance of Main, and Sheriff Beard produced a real barricade from the trunk of his cruiser, only it said "City of Kingsport" in black, sprayed-on letters. Neither Jordan nor Jillian had questioned the sheriff on that.

Sheriff Beard was McCann born and bred, and he'd informed them in a deeply twisted drawl that 'them bear'cades ain't gone keep anyone in or out, folks'll just pick'em up and go on by.' So they had hopped into the Rav4, desperate for a trip out of town anyway, and searched every store they could find, finally stumbling across some old Halloween barricade tape reading "Beware. Beyond this point lies certain death". Jordan had wound up being the voice of reason on that one. Jilly had begged him to get it and laughed herself into tears. And Jordan knew then that it was true: when the serious ones go, everybody better watch out.

She came back into the room now, all trace of laughter gone from her face. She took in a deep breath to help expel the nasty thought she was about to speak. "Jeb Parson's daughter just found him on his living room floor."

He bit his tongue to keep from making the inappropriate response that Jillian should claim that ten dollars she had wanted to bet. She had the first piece of her Trifecta. Jordan pulled up to the conversation on a medical level instead. "He's in a coma?"

Her head shook slightly. "He was dead when she found him."

It was only then that he noticed she was fingering the rolls of yellow 'do not cross' tape that had arrived via one very perturbed FedEx driver this morning. His truck was splattered in mud unbecoming a professional. But he had delivered thousand-foot rolls of bright red biohazard and

yellow quarantine tape, warning signs and corrugated waxed paper road barricades that assembled like cardboard dinosaurs. None of it would keep out a scooter, but it looked pretty official.

“We need to go to the Parson’s house then and-”

“We need to seal up the town.” Jillian’s firm voice pushed his concern down deeper. “Mr. Parson went down fast. We need to keep everyone who’s in in and everyone who’s out out. Until the men in suits get here tomorrow. Then we need to visit Sandy Parson and . . .” She turned around to walk out, but he heard her voice from the hallway. “-pray.”

They didn’t bother to unpack the remaining two boxes of barricade supplies, just shoved back what they had already inspected and threw the boxes into the trunk of the Rav4. They would have what they needed when they got there. Jillian tossed Jordan the keys, and was already flipping open her cell phone and dialing up some number she knew by heart. She paid little attention as she climbed into the passenger side of her own car. “Yes, David please.”

*David please.* He tamped down the urge to tell her that the polite form of address was ‘Doctor Carter’. Then he spent another round of thought on the fact that she had known the number by heart, and even if he was beginning to think something, he was too late. *Too bad, so sad.* And he’d better shove it down quick. If Jillian wanted to monkey around with someone it would have to be David Carter the second. Jordan had critical work to attend.

The conversation was brief and since the cell reception was so horrible, Jillian had to repeat everything she said at least three times. And Jordan had the whole conversation by the time she hung up. David Carter was not to leave his hotel room unless he spoke to her first. Not them, *her*.

It took fifteen minutes to drive the less-than-mile to the edge of town where Parson became Main. Hann’s sawhorses were still there, but true to Sheriff Beard’s prediction, they had been moved. Whoever drove through must have stopped to put them back, the gap wasn’t wide enough for a car.

Jordan parked the Rav4 right in the middle of the street after abandoning the idea of pulling over, and was greeted by a series of fresh hoofprints, dead center of the slightly widened gap. And he didn’t have a guess as to who the hell they belonged to. At this point in the game he wouldn’t have been shocked if a Conestoga wagon full of settlers showed up.

Jillian joined him and silently they each grabbed both red biohazard and yellow ‘Do Not Cross’ tape rolls and handfuls of wire. They separated and went about a hundred yards out from the road, winding tape around trees and wiring it to branches, sealing off the place at waist level. Jordan added tape and wire to hold the sawhorses into place. Someone would basically have to rip his work down in order to cross. *Or jump it on their horse.* He put his hands on his hips, and went about adding another level of tape at eye height. The yellow and red barricade looked flimsy but the tape was strong and wouldn’t rip. A good pair of shears would make short work of it though.

He wished that just for a moment he could tip his head back and be blissfully unaware, and enjoy the weather and the coming season. But he had worked hard and was still paying good money for the privilege of having his ignorance stripped away. So he simply opened the driver side door and she followed suit. They drove along, neither of them saying a word until they hit the west entrance of Main. The Kingsport D.O.T. roadblock still stood where they had left it, and Jordan looked specifically for horse tracks this time but saw none.

Meticulously laying out yards of the tape, Jordan hoped that being this far backwoods they wouldn’t wind up with a bad case of media crawling all over them. He and Jillian were both trained in what to say and how to refuse interviews should the news vans appear like vultures circling the town edges. He also knew how to keep things quiet and pray.

He was winding the last piece of red tape around the orange and white barricade, when he heard the gasp.

Knowing it didn't sound right, but having no other explanation, he looked up at Jilly, who was looking straight at him. They both turned to find a redheaded girl wearing jeans and low pigtails with a smattering of freckles just across the bridge of her nose. Jillian's expression gave away that she was rapidly searching her brain for a hint of recognition. Jordan knew instantly that he had never seen this girl before.

"Um?" Even with just that sound, it was clear that she wasn't the girl he had first thought her to be. After her next sentence it was clear from her accent that she wasn't a local and she was well educated. "I think you just taped my car in. . . . I . . . I have lab specimens in the front seat." She looked back and forth. "Oh dear God, what's biohazardous in there?"

Jordan's eyes narrowed, she didn't sound scared. But excited. Intrigued. And she was carefully trying to cover it. Jillian didn't catch that. She offered her most soothing tone, a mother to her child after a bad round of nightmares. "Oh, that's just to keep people out."

As the girl wiped her hand off on her jeans, he watched her stance shift. She knew what she was about and she held the cleaned hand out to him. "Dr. Rebecca Sorenson, UT Biodiversity Laboratories. And you are?" She said it with a lilt - that upward turn at the end of all sentences that females used to play inferior to their male counterparts. And she used it very well. Jordan heard the confidence behind it. She had known she didn't look the part. And he glanced down at his own sweatshirt and now dirty sneakers just briefly before sticking his own hand out to take hers.

He spoke quickly enough to divert the doctor's eyes from Jilly's surprised expression. "Dr. Jordan Abellard. CDCP Atlanta." He motioned to Jillian, who thankfully now had it together. "This is Dr. Jillian Brookwood, my colleague."

"Becky." Dr. Sorenson corrected as she slipped her grip out of his and transferred the handshake to Jillian. And just as quickly as she gave a good hard quick stare, indicating that she knew the score and she'd play fairly, she spoke again. "I won't go to the media."

"Thank you." Jillian's voice held unknown volumes of relief.

"Are people sick?" Becky looked them both in the eyes again. If he didn't answer her straight he would have to simply say he wouldn't tell her.

So he gave her one word. "Dying." And ignored Jillian's combined look of surprise and disapproval, but he saw that disappear even as he looked away and ignored her.

Becky turned the conversation toward him. Like Jordan, she knew an ally. "Why aren't you in full suits?" Then she answered her own question. "We've already been exposed."

She didn't show the emotion he expected.

But he nodded, confirming her answer.

"It's contagious." Her eyes wandered, focusing far away. And in a moment he realized that she was listening. And she frowned. Becky mumbled a word that sounded like 'warblers' but he didn't know what that meant. She looked him in the eyes again. "Wanna share?"

"Yes."

Jillian hid her shock better this time.

Becky sighed. "I have a series of mutated frogs and other species. You're standing in a spot that I just realized today when I came in has a reversed magnetic field."

Jillian's voice finally cut into the conversation. "We know."

JILLIAN PACED THE ROOM, finally keyed up enough to ignore her hideous surroundings. The bed still had not been fixed. And she desperately wanted to sit on it, lay back and maybe even cry. But she knew from experience that that would lead to rolling off. Which led to humiliation and frustration. And she couldn't sit in that horrible little ladder-backed chair for another moment. So she forced her feet to keep going. At least she would sleep at the end of this interminable day.

The motion served another purpose, siphoning off energy that she would gladly use to fillet Jordan alive. He had simply opened his fat mouth and spouted off to some girl with no ID a good portion of what the CDC knew, and what they didn't. And Jillian had no idea what reasoning he had. If any.

Not that they had been able to talk. Jordan had brought the girl back with them, and even called James Hann to see if they had a spare room for Miss Becky. Dr. Rebecca Sorenson and her mutated frogs had just left, finally, headed out to the Whippoorwill Inn. And Jordan sat in the wooden chair, re-reading printouts like the case was closed.

Jillian bit her tongue. She swallowed repeatedly. She pressed her lips together, as though that might keep it all down. But she knew better and of course it all came out anyway, with all the harsh air she had been holding back. "How the hell did you reason out telling her all that?"

Jordan looked up at her, not at all startled by her outburst. "She's not going to the media. She's with UT, and Biodiversity could be a big help."

Jillian's mouth hung slack for a moment before she put it in gear again. "She had no ID on her. You didn't even call UT to see if someone by that name works there!"

"She's trustworthy." Jordan remained calm.

Which just served to send Jillian rocketing to the other end of the spectrum. "Trustworthy!? How would you know? You just met her!"

He clenched his teeth then slung it right back at her. "Would you accept an argument from a blind man about the color of the sky?"

"Uh!" She knew she looked and sounded stupid standing there with her mouth open again. And she couldn't shut it off. The offended part of her brain stepped in to fill the void. "Blind! Well, I'm so sorry I wasn't born with your handy trust-o-vision, but you don't just blurt out classified material like that."

She had done it. She knew it. Jordan snapped, and came up out of the chair at lightning speed. He towered over her, his face close enough to fill her field of vision with the anger and hurt in his eyes, with his chestnut brows drawn tight together, with the clench of his jaw. "If we don't solve this, it's going to be named after us. And *other people will die*. What would you have me do, Jillian? Refuse help?"

Her teeth clicked, she brought them together so hard. She turned away out of his space in order to breathe in. And slowly out. It wasn't enough, and she forced herself to do it a second, then a third time. When she had pulled the pieces of herself together enough she spoke again. But she didn't look at him. "I may not have that intuition you do, but you should still consult me before you decide to spill secrets."

She felt his sigh even though her back was turned. "There wasn't enough time."

This time Jillian squared up and looked him directly in the eyes. "Yes, there was. And if you believe there isn't then you need to find the time."

He took a small concessionary step back as his hand came up to comb his fingers through his already rumpled hair. "You're right." His voice washed over her again a heartbeat later. "I'm sorry."

Jillian blinked in surprise as she felt all the support leave her, and she sank back onto the tilted mattress, knowing even as she did it that it was a mistake. She spread her knees, planting her feet firmly to brace herself against near-certain humiliation, and sunk her head into her hands. “What if she screws up the investigation?”

She heard the chair scrape up beside her before she felt the heat of his arm around her shoulders. “She won’t.”

She sniffed, and even as she did it became mortified.

“Hey, don’t cry. We’ll figure this out.”

With his acknowledgment it became impossible to hide the tears. “How am I going to figure this out when I can’t even remember not to sit on this stupid bed?”

She felt the deep rumble in Jordan’s touch long before she heard the sound of him laughing, and slowly she joined him. Even though her left leg ached from bracing herself upright.

Jillian finally gathered herself, the one concession to her tears a brief wipe with her sleeve. And she pushed herself off the bed and away from him before she faced him unable to hold back a final sniff. “I need ice cream.”

She rambled into the kitchen with Jordan following and pulled the carton out of the fridge, ignoring the roosters staring at her while she did it. She fixed two bowls and sat down, “We know that it isn’t airborne. The chain of infection just doesn’t make sense.”

“If it’s viral or bacterial it doesn’t match with anything known. So it isn’t contagious. And that leaves environmental as the best guess.”

She sighed, trying to enjoy the food, and grateful it was created outside the town boundaries. “But . . . we’ve checked everything. We have no standard radioactivity. No toxic chemicals. We’ve tested the water, the meat Parson’s has been getting, the air, the soil. What the hell else do we test?”

“We do have a magnetic anomaly in part of the town.” His spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl.

“Yeah, that magnetic reversal. It’s weird, but . . . let’s face it, an MRI is about a thousand times stronger than the earth’s field. And that’s an entirely enclosed magnetic field. And we put people in those every day, some people repeatedly, and aside from it yanking off your jewelry, there are no harmful effects. Certainly not vomiting and coma.”

She let a few bites melt on her tongue, before she started thinking aloud again. “It makes more sense that it’s immunological. Like AIDS was when they first saw it. It attacks people with weak systems.”

Jordan stood and politely rinsed out the bowl, which she was relatively certain had a pig staring up from the bottom. “But those people tested positive for everything. Ours test for nothing. Is it the weakened immune system combined with the magnetic field?”

Jillian shook her head and waited while she swallowed down the pat of ice cream she had just fed herself. “Immuno-compromised patients go into MRIs at five times the rate of non-immuno-compromised patients, without these effects.”

“How the hell do you know that?” He put his hands up. “Those cancer patients are often nauseated anyway, maybe the MRI compounds it and we just don’t see it.”

She shook her head in time to the thoughts churning inside. “It’s chemo that makes the patients nauseated, and there’re tons of immuno-compromised patients that don’t have chemo. But even then those patients still don’t exhibit ear pain, or coma and death. And if that is our culprit, those people ought to be going down fast and furious because they have far weaker systems than Mr. Parson did. . . What’s actually more than likely is that the magnetic reversal mucked up the machinery or assays and we have something standard but our results aren’t printing out.”

Jordan's grin crossed his face like a wash of brightness. "That's my girl."

• • • •

"HAVE YOU MEASURED THE strength of the field?" Becky rubbed her palms across the knees of her new jeans. Her bank account was now over two hundred dollars lighter due to four days of new underwear, two new pairs of jeans, t shirts and a sweatshirt. All from that fashion bastion WalMart. Never mind that she was on lockdown with men in her age range. Men that she'd never met before. Men with PhDs and MDs. And here she was dressed head to toe in cheap.

"Yup." David shook his head at her. "And I got nothing interesting. It's the same as the field anywhere. No Bermuda Triangle-like force to explain any of this."

She laughed, for a moment forgetting the roach that had scuttled out from under her bathroom linoleum and prompted her to knock on David's door suggesting a professional discussion. One that involved her being part of numbers greater than the roach. "So you're saying Atlantis isn't beneath the Appalachians?"

His eyebrows raised at her, blond and skeptical.

She had already topped the money she'd lost at WalMart with a very expensive phone call home, and she would have to call Marshall Harfield and tell him there were out-of-season warblers here, too. She changed the subject with little tact or concern. "So how long have the doctors had you holed up here?"

"Only since yesterday." He turned away, then back. "Are we all sharing here? And no one will be stealing or leaking anything until we all go public with it?"

She shrugged. "As long as the government doesn't declare it all classified and shut us down." David nodded. Looking every inch the son of the Senior Dr. Carter she had met three years ago. And every inch unconcerned about a penny of this trip. He sat on the edge of the gold polyester bedspread that reminded her so much of the one on her parents bed back home and ran both hands through his hair, showing her for the first time that the gold strands were thinning just a bit at his crown. "Okay, just outside of town, there's a geological hotspot we found on a dig. When the last polar shift occurred the polarity reversed there first. Maybe as little as a thousand years before the poles swapped on earth. There's another hotspot in Montana. And they're at the KT boundary."

"The dinosaur extinction." Becky supplied. When David gave her the slightest nod she kept going. "Do you think the pole reversal is tied to the die out?"

He put his hands palm up as though asking for divine inspiration. "My partner, Greer Larson is a paleontologist, and he thinks it may be, but we're still not sure."

"So, do you think we're on our way to another pole reversal right now?" She spoke in that slow southern fashion she knew belied her education and, at times like this, her concern.

"I don't know." He was upright again, unable to contain his nervous energy, his docksiders wearing a circular pattern on the already threadbare carpet.

"But you have a gut feeling . . .? You look like that's your professional opinion but not your personal one."

David faced her, his eyebrows up again, his mouth quirking, but only on the one side. "You and Abellard ought to get along great with your little insights." David sank next to her on the saggy bed, and him ceasing to move lowered the tension she didn't even realize she'd been building.

"So?"

"The short answer is 'yes'. I do think we're sitting on the next pole reversal. But according to our past data it may take a few thousand years. As best we can tell, we're due in any day now. Of

course, even our best estimates are give-or-take fifty thousand years. But within the past years the poles have begun shifting. We don't have any historical evidence--"

"Excuse me?" Becky leaned toward him. "The poles are shifting now? Our north and south?"

"Yup. About twelve years ago it was discovered that magnetic north had moved. Just a little, but enough. Four years later it was even further off. It's sliding fast these days. Geologically speaking, of course."

"Wow." She breathed in, aware of her own functioning just for a second, absorbing what he was telling her and shuffling it cleanly in with her own information. "They just slide right around?"

"No. As best we can tell, they do start sliding slowly, but individual hotspots reverse first. Weird little pockets of backward magnetics. Like here. Then as the hotspots become more numerous, they meld and, eventually, in a bang, the poles snap. Instantly magnetic north is south and south is north."

Her own backyard would then be a 'hotspot' as David put it. There really might be the rain of frogs the scientist in her was so skeptical of.

"You don't have to look so disturbed. It's all just a theory."

"Of course." Her whole life was based on 'just theories'. "And the competing ideas are?"

He ticked off the possibilities on his fingers as he rolled his eyes. "Our data sucks. All the samples were actually from riverbeds. Meaning a meteor could create that pull. Or an Atlantis-like anomaly. Or we're all retarded and we're just so anxious to see something that we're fucking up our samples."

"Yeah, I'm sure that one went over well with your Dad."

David made a hard choking sound. And Becky continued. "I met him once. He was a nice man. But he didn't seem the type to take that kind of disparagement from anyone."

David went back to talking rocks, brushing aside her reference to his father. "Then the last alternate theory is that we're right. That's exactly how it happens, except we've got our dates off by, oh say, twenty million years."

"I see."

He scrubbed his face with his palms, blinking a few times with the rush of red he had worked into his features. "I was going to go the Montana site, where the KT hotspot was and see if there's a hotspot there now. But I'm quarantined. And United Airlines doesn't give a 'detained in quarantine by the CDC' refund." He turned and looked her in the eye for only the second time since she came here tonight, and she sensed it coming. Her turn. "So what's your story?"





“Shove over!” It was tired and drawn out, and Jillian pushed against his back with all the strength in her arms. It wouldn’t have been enough even if she had been fully awake, completely stress-free, and stronger. Jordan asleep was a rock not worth her effort. “Jorrrdaaannn.”

It was the wail of the insomniac. She had heard it on her rounds as an intern and now regretted that she hadn’t found more sympathy for the sufferers. And now her mind wouldn’t shut off. They had called FedEx at midnight after frantically separating portions of the blood samples to send a full set of all they had collected to the Atlanta Office for re-testing. Just in case the machinery was warped by the almost non-existent magnetic field. Mike should be faxing them the results this morning and then Landerly and the quarantine crew would arrive later this afternoon.

Becky wanted to spend the day catching frogs. Jillian desperately wanted to inspect these biological specimens Becky was going to get. Check out the habitat. See if there would be any clues to the mysterious Abellard-Brookwood disease.

But in order to traipse through the woods she would have to get a good night’s sleep. And in order to get that, Jordan would have to shove his lead butt over a few damn inches! She gave another heave against his back and accomplished only the barest of deep sleep acknowledgments from him.

She’d stopped asking James Hann to fix the other bed. How could she push him to repair it? Tell him that she didn’t want to have to share a bed with her *husband*? She punched at her pillow and tried to find comfort and sleep on her small wedge of mattress. Forcing her thoughts to her puppy George from childhood, she willed sleep to come and found herself thinking of her mother instead. What would Mrs. Brookwood say if she knew her daughter was in bed with a man she wasn’t married to? Hell, her Daddy might just jam the business end of his twelve gauge into Jordan’s back and walk him to the altar. She was too exhausted to decide if that thought should make her laugh or cry.

At last, as the light brightened, sneaking around the shades and further into the room, Jillian felt the heavy weights of rest pulling her eyes closed.

“Jilly.” The soft whisper was accompanied by a warm hand that fit on her shoulder and rocked her gently. She felt the low tetany of a ‘hmmmmmm’ tremor through her chest but didn’t care enough if she actually made the noise.

“Jilly, baby, I need you to wake up just a little.”

This time the shake was firmer, and this time she made sure she was heard. “No thank you.” She rolled away. The hands rolled her back over. Her eyes popped opened and her features scrunched against the piercing light.

“Baby, Mr. Hann is checking the pipes in the bath.” Jordan’s face was only inches from her, and she felt the wash of jealousy over his chipper alertness. Until she remembered that she was the one who had paid for his heavy refreshing slumber. And then she hated him for it.

“*Baby*,” She forced her voice, now that she knew why he was being so oddly affectionate. “You almost shoved me out of our bed last night.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He sat on the edge of the queen-sized mattress, taking up the space she had occupied just a few minutes ago. “That’s why I let you sleep in so late.” He pointed to the clock and the blurry red digits proclaiming it was already well past eleven. “Why don’t you go back to sleep? I just didn’t want you to wake up and be startled, or walk into the bathroom and find Mr. Hann in there.”

“Huh?” She shoved up, leaning back on her hands, unconcerned that she could hear James Hann in the other room futzing with the broken bed. Or that she was in a sleepshirt and the covers were rolling away. Her face felt pushed and shoved in wrong directions and her eyes still didn’t open all the way.

Jordan’s hand cupped her shoulder again. “Why don’t you just go back to sleep? I just didn’t want you to wake up and be startled, or walk into the bathroom and find Mr. Hann in there.”

“I’m awake.” But the thick slurring of her words said otherwise. Her movements were slow and awkward. Jordan was able to push her back down without much resistance.

He pulled the covers up, tucking them around her shoulders in a gesture that almost made up for the bed being taken over last night. When she felt his hand brush her hair back off her forehead, she understood with certainty why the spider-bite girl in Florida had loved him so much.

Her eyes rolled open and shut a few times over the next several hours, and only on the surface of her mind was she aware that Mr. Hann had left, and Jordan’s footsteps were carrying to her more as vibrations than sounds while she tried to find the will to get up.

“Jilly? You do need to get up now.” In dim light she saw him check his watch, though she hadn’t been aware that she had opened her eyes. “Landerly will be here in about an hour.”

Cold water could not have been more effective. And the insulting remark to ask why he had not woken her sooner was barely stopped in its tracks by her brain. By force of will she pushed out the words she really meant. “Thank you for letting me sleep in this morning.”

“It’s the least I could do after playing hostile takeover in my sleep last night.” She glanced back at him and held her tongue again, but only because he had the decency to look sheepish.

She was in the bathroom before she called back to him, “Did Hann get the pipes all fixed?”

“No. They still squeal but they work.”

“Well, it’ll wake me all the way up at least.” She started to close the door but his voice stayed her hand.

“I got a call about fifteen minutes ago. Gemma McKnight went down this morning.”

She stepped back out of the bathroom, concern on her face as her arms folded across her chest. “Dead?”

“Only comatose.” He looked away, sadness painted on his features. They both only knew of one way out of this coma.

She breathed in deep of air that felt fresher than almost anything she’d inhaled in her life but was probably deadly. “Gemma was only borderline on her labs.” She turned to go back into the bathroom, stopping just short and turning back to Jordan, excitement bringing her back to the living. “Unless, of course they were wrong.”

He just shook his head. And didn’t look like he was going to say much more, just planned to stand there with the borrowed coffee mug complete with roostertail handle. She waited him out while he sipped at it, until he finally conceded to her stare and explained. “Mike faxed the results in this morning. Number for number they are dead on to ours.”

“Nice choice of words.”

The shower was less than refreshing, and she found herself on the edge of being flat out angry. There was nothing in this godforsaken house that was comfortable. And every time she encountered another person in this town of the damned, things went awry. They got sick. They delivered the news that someone else was ‘down’. Seven people had died and fourteen more were comatose.

Wrapping herself in a towel, Jillian peeked out to find the room vacant and closed the door tightly before dressing. She hadn’t worn jeans this often since she was an undergrad. Leaving her hair

hanging wet down her back, she padded out into the kitchen to find Jordan at the small round table eating a bowl of frosted flakes. Giving in to the urge to make only the most minimal effort, she grabbed a bowl and spoon. Then she lined up a row of eight pills of varying sizes and shapes, and one by one washed each one back trying to ignore what they meant.

They ate quietly and she was sure that his thoughts mirrored her own. Landerly was coming. And they had nothing good to tell him. No leads. Every road a dead end. And townspeople dying. One by one. Her thoughts strayed to the CDC vans that might even now be turning off the interstate and she prayed they had the wherewithal to arrive in differing unmarked cars. And at different times. Even just that many normal cars headed into McCann could raise someone's suspicions, but a white CDC caravan would have the press on them like flies on dead meat.

She started at the sound of a car pulling into the driveway then bouncing the long distance to the house. Jordan's gaze caught hers but they still didn't speak.

Landerly was here.

Jillian abandoned her half finished cereal and hit the front door, coming to a dead stop when she spotted the yellow space suit climbing out of the van and approaching her.

What had she been thinking? Of course they were in full suits. They had no idea what this was. She might have been showering in it. Or sleeping in it. Or inhaling it. If not simply getting it from touching, and being near those who had it or had already died from it.

She stood in the open doorway, feeling Jordan just behind her, only he didn't give off the waves of shock she was sure she emanated. "Landerly." His voice was strong and she could feel the heat from the coffee mug he again cradled.

"Abellard. Brookwood." Landerly's voice from inside the bubble hood was distorted. As though it had been yelled through a pair of paper cups and a string. "We have a full DeCon tent set up at the perimeter."

"Are we clearing the town sir?" Jillian upped her volume, even though she knew he had a microphone to collect sounds from outside the muffled interior.

"Not yet." His head shook even though the bubble-faced suit did not. "We talked with Drs. Carter and Sorenson on the way in today and we have them running a full magnetic check of the town. Then we'll clear anyone we can out of the reversal area."

Jordan's voice carried from over her shoulder. "Do you think it will do any good?"

Landerly held back a sad smile. "No. But we need to do it anyway."

Jillian fought the urge to defend their work. But she wished suddenly that she hadn't found the excitement that she had come to the CDC searching for. "Do we need to go through DeCon? Get suits?"

"No suits."

She should have known it. They'd already been exposed to the point where Landerly didn't see the need to waste money on them.

But he kept talking, interrupting the morbid river of her thoughts. He was looking at the house. "Damn, this thing is ugly."

"You should see the inside." Jordan's grin was evident in his tone, and Jillian wondered if he really thought it was funny or if it was a set-up on a cruel practical joke.

"All right, you two need to pack everything that's personal. Leave the CDC set-up and gather all the paperwork. Do that first." He turned and walked slowly and painfully to the van.

When it became clear that Landerly had explained everything he was going to, they simply headed back inside to begin their first assignment of packing up the files.

“What the hell is this-” Jordan pulled up short at the door to the ‘lab’ bedroom. A suit stood in the center and pretended not to hear them or actually didn’t. His back remained turned and he snapped photo after photo, inspecting each one on the small screen on his digital camera before turning his focus to the next thing.

Jillian pressed up on tiptoe to spy on the rendering of the most recent photo and was startled to see that it was of the wall charts, and clear enough to read every word. She grabbed a set of papers and when she turned she smacked into Jordan again.

“Hey.”

“Sorry.” But she didn’t look up, focused only on the pain in her nose and holding the tears at bay. Although if they were from the sting to her face or her pride she was unsure.

She felt her arm jerk in the socket before she realized Jordan had a death grip on her elbow. “It’s not that.” He stayed still and silent until she acknowledged him with a clear gaze. “Don’t be sorry. People are dying here. Just don’t go tripping and breaking a leg or getting an open wound. Now’s not the time to stress your immune system in the slightest.”

“Oh yeah. Landerly sending in the suits and giving us crazy orders that we don’t understand doesn’t stress my system at all.” Only to herself did she admit that her sarcasm masked a very real fear.

Jordan still didn’t loosen his hold on her arm. “I’ll get the rest of the papers and you start packing. You have more to pack than I do anyway.”

She resented the underlying sexism in the remark, until she admitted that it might not be biased but simply truthful. Her arm was free and so she didn’t look up but concentrated on the ground in front of her as she headed off.

Her hands and feet worked independently of her head, folding and rolling her clothing and stuffing it back into the duffle bag and she remained silent. Jordan appeared at her side with his own bag and together they went to the front door, encountering Landerly coming up the walk. His gait in the suit gave away his age, and Jillian wondered what it was about this case that got him out and about. Wasn’t that what she and Jordan had been hired to prevent?

“I was just getting ready to see what was holding you two up.”

Jillian opened her mouth to protest that it had been barely fifteen minutes since they had been ordered to clear out, but Jordan’s hand grasped at her wrist. Not that it mattered anyway, Landerly was talking again without paying the slightest bit of attention.

“We’ve got teams checking out the three cases you pulled as evidence - two of them appear to be the real deal. And there’re another two cases in Florida in that nursing home that I *authorized* you two to visit while I was in Hawaii. You’re going back.”

Jillian’s mouth hung slack, but she managed to keep it from gaping. Her eyes went wide with real fear. None of the ideas she had had about Landerly’s packing them up had to do with the possibility of further outbreaks. She had almost forgotten the Florida cluster. The entire nursing home had been exposed. She shook her hand, loosing it of Jordan’s now tighter grip that had threatened her circulation.

Landerly kept talking as though neither of them could possibly need a second or two to assimilate the damage and possibilities he was laying at their feet. “You’ll pick up Dr. Carter en route. He’s already back at his hotel packing, as he’ll be going with you to check out the area. Dr. Sorenson is staying here and will be working for the CDC obtaining wildlife specimens. We need everything you can gather on the Deltona cluster. See if we can crack this thing. It’s getting ugly.”

He turned away, finished.

Two suits emerged then from the back of the van, and from the looks of the gesturing all of the files had been duplicated. Jordan took her duffle bag from her nearly slack wrist and went to throw it in the back of the Rav4, only to be stopped by a suit. Jillian's brain was working too fast to think about where she was going. So she set herself behind Jordan and followed like a little duck wherever he went.

The cluster in Florida was growing. That indicated either contagion or . . . continued toxin exposure or . . . or a bizarre vector or . . . or . . . long incubation period. And that was the worst, that would mean far-reaching spread. The way AIDS was all over before anyone knew it even existed. Lentiviruses, or those that remained inactive long after infection, could be serious to society simply because the spread was undetected for so long that tracing the path from victim to victim was nigh unto impossible.

With a start from her morbid thoughts she realized the afternoon sky was a shade of blue you couldn't see in the city, and the autumn trees were alive in reds and golds she hadn't seen in a long long while.

• • • •

"I'M SORRY, YOU'RE GOING to have to fill me in on what the fuck you two are babbling about." David leaned forward, saying what he wished he'd said an hour ago.

The two of them had sat with their heads tucked together speaking English with enough Latin thrown in to be damned obnoxious. It was giving him a headache, and stress in his shoulders. And worse, it made him feel under-educated.

They looked up at his comment as though only just then realizing that he was on this plush flying den with them. And he almost stood up and walked to the back of the room again. He could just help himself to another scotch. Or he could stand his ground.

"What can we tell him?"

Jordan spoke as though he wasn't there. That cretin had the hots for Dr. Brookwood, too. But the more David watched the more certain he was that there wasn't anything actually going on. What he was uncertain of was whether the hot doc returned the feelings.

She shrugged and frowned and pursed her lips, and if they weren't flying straight into the pits of hell - retirement haven, Florida - he would have been turned on. "I don't know." She looked away from Abellard and up at him, causing him to realize that he had in fact stood up.

The CDC had appointed their private Lear jet quite nicely. The seats were pale leather, and cushy as hell. And in the back was a full bar that he had been the only one to avail himself of. For a brief moment he entertained the thought that Jillian wasn't yet old enough to drink.

"David, what level of security clearance do you have?" Jillian's voice was sweet but off, a perplexed honey bringing him back to the bizarre reality he was in.

He smiled a smile that spoke of the scotch he'd already had and the one he'd like to have next. "I have no idea. Let me know when you can speak to me."

It was Jordan who proposed an answer to the dilemma. "He must have some sort of emergency clearance. Landerly sent him with us." He looked up, not having moved from where he had swiveled his own seat to sit all cozy with Jillian. "Landerly is nothing if not logical. I'll take the heat for whatever we share with you. He can't mean for us to keep you in the dark."

David took the seat next to Dr. Brookwood, willing to give up the scotch in favor of a little maneuvering. He was upset to find that he liked Dr. Abellard, but that didn't mean he wouldn't steal

sweet little Jillian right out from under him. Well, from the looks of things, she hadn't been under him yet. With effort, he redirected his thoughts and focused on Jordan. "What is it that I need to know?"

"We have a spot of reversed polarity, which is weird as hell, and people in that spot are dying of something we can't classify. All our tests are coming up negative. If it's a virus it's got a protein coat unlike any we've ever seen before. All the assays are missing it."

Jillian's voice broke in beside him. "We can't find anything with microscopic analysis either."

"But you couldn't have had the best equipment there in McCann, right?"

Jordan nodded, "True, but we've been sending samples back and forth. The Atlanta office can't find anything either and they've got the best machinery anywhere."

David soaked in that for a second. "It sounds like you've got your hands full, and I have to say that I have no idea why I'm even here."

Jillian had stood and was stretching, the only one of the three of them to be able to reach full extension in the plush but midget height fuselage. "You're convenient?"

"You wound me."

"Yes, but I'll bring you another scotch to soften the blow."

So he asked it. "Are you even old enough to serve scotch?"

Her eyebrows quirked, but Jordan's voice carried to him, over his shoulder now because David had twisted as Jillian climbed over him and made her way back to the bar. "She's a physician, you know."

He twisted back around, "Yeah, but maybe she's really accelerated. It happens."

Jillian interrupted them to ask David again if he was going to take her up on that scotch. Right as her hand appeared over his shoulder handing Jordan what looked like a gin and tonic that he hadn't even asked for. Jordan smiled and said thank you, before meeting David in an eye lock that said he had some idea what the geologist was about.

Whatever.

In a minute he had his scotch and Jillian settled in beside him with a margarita.

"So? Upset stomach? Then coma, then death." David thought that was way too simple a way for a person to die. No bells, no whistles, no grand symptoms. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"And it's contagious?"

Jordan shrugged and lifted his drink in a long swallow that revealed more about his tension than his words or manner. It was Jillian who stepped up, filling in the holes.

"We can trace transmission from person to person. But with a small town like McCann that really doesn't mean much. At this point quarantine is mostly to keep tabs on everyone who's been exposed. We can't begin to hope to control spread at this point. Jordan and I are headed to Florida to pool the new data with what we have."

"Are they evacuating McCann?"

"As we speak." She said it like it was somehow her fault. So he changed the subject.

"What if the Florida site is a hotspot?"

"Then we've got some serious problems." Jillian set the unfinished drink aside and pulled a blanket out from under the seat, as though she had known all along that it was there. Covering herself, she turned away, tucking her feet up under her.

Jordan swiveled sideways and pulled out a sheaf of papers to leaf through, leaving David with his own thoughts. And he didn't like them very much.

He'd had an upset stomach when he had visited McCann the first time. So had Greer. And it had passed. Did that mean he'd been exposed? Was he now immune? The CDC didn't seem to be worrying too much about these two docs, although they all had been put on a regimen of medications. Then again, maybe it was just too late to do much more than medicate them and pray. And David didn't put much stock in prayer. It hadn't yielded anything of value for him before.

He tapped Jordan's shoulder, impatient for the millisecond it took the doctor to acknowledge him. "Are there carriers for this disease?"

"We have no idea. We can't figure out anything except that we've never seen it. The symptoms aren't like anything we know so we can't even assume it will act like other things of the same family." He looked back down at his papers, then up again, "Why?"

He almost couldn't say it. "My friend Greer had an upset stomach. Worse than me, when we were here the first time. He's gone home to his wife, who's pregnant. Could he pass it to her?"

"I have no idea. I'm sorry." Somehow Dr. Abellard managed to look like he actually *was* sympathetic. Yet within a second he was back to thumbing through his papers and jotting down numbers on a miniature legal pad.

David sank back in his seat, inadvertently swiveling it he let it rock gently back and forth, sustained in an almost harmonic motion by the flight of the plane. His scotch turned wet and slippery in his hands, leaving him no choice but to polish it off before the ice melted and it became even more of a soggy mess. He reclined the chair and, in minutes, sleep rolled over him, taking him to a foggy place with gravitational forces from all sides, and fossils that contained writing instead of bones.

• • • •

"MOM, I'M GOOD." BECKY shoved a hand through her hair, realizing that she was overdue for a shower. Her mother had started with 'I'm afraid that you're going to get sick.' And like a well written essay, all you needed was the topic sentence. The rest was just the jabberings of a mother well practiced in the art of worry.

Becky listened with only half an ear, waiting for a break in the tone or speed, hoping to get a word in. "I'm eating, Mom. In fact, the CDC is monitoring my diet. Even you aren't as strict as these guys." Becky left out the part about the medications they were feeding her and the men in the yellow space suits. "I need to know about the frogs. Are Brandon and Mel taking good care of them?"

"Yes. They went out and caught a few more just yesterday-"

"No! Mom, don't let them out there!"

"Why is that?"

Becky felt the gloved, yellow hand on her shoulder. They were monitoring the conversation, as Becky was still waiting for an emergency clearance status. The agent listening in was one of the conditions of phone privileges, lest she spill the scary beans.

"Mom, that area mutated the frogs." She didn't lie, she just didn't tell the *whole* truth. "I don't want the kids out there without me. And I need Aaron's new cell number. I tried his place a few times and got no answer."

She pressed her mother to go just a little faster, without revealing that an agent was standing over her shoulder, or any other little tidbit that would scare the woman even more. Becky spoke about three more words before artfully extricating herself from the conversation, a skill perfected out of necessity.

The space-suited alien didn't comment, he simply took the portable phone out of her hands and walked out of her tent, locking the 'door' behind him. Her bizarre forced vacation was turning into

the equivalent of Siberian work detail. She had actually been digging in the hard earth with a pick earlier today. If she had worn metal ankle cuffs with links leading to the next digger she couldn't have felt more imprisoned.

At least the CDC had even seen fit to send her three little rana along with her. The poor frogs were even more incarcerated than she. Each in its own little terrarium, always facing the heart of McCann. Becky hadn't learned much from her digging. The underground species seemed unharmed. But the local amphibians were whacked out, the newts and salamanders suffering the same kinds of fates as the local frogs.

The frogs she had pulled here were, in general, four-legged, but not any luckier than her first batch. The majority of these guys were blind, and many were pale in color, making it a wonder that so many existed. Pale wasn't a good camouflage color, so animals like that were often picked off by predators first thing. And the sheer numbers of these guys that were bordering on white made her wonder if they tasted bad or something.

Good, another thing to do tomorrow. And here she'd been afraid she'd get bored.

Tamping her internal sarcasm back down Becky made the mental effort to realign her thoughts. First she had to call Aaron while it was still early enough that he would answer his cell. She stuck her head out the door and asked for the phone again. The guy looked at her like she was a bother, and Becky had no doubt that she was.

Aaron answered on the first ring. And she explained more than she had to her mother. "Don't let Mel and Brandon back there. I know they want to play . . . but . . ."

"But what?" Aaron had never settled for the 'I'm the authority, do as I say' answer. And he had rubbed one person in town the wrong way with that over and over - their father. But now, Becky wished he'd give her a bye just this once.

But she gave him a little more information instead. "Frogs develop *after* they're born. So the environment affects that. Clearly *something* is wrong there. And Brandon and Melanie are still developing themselves. So please, just keep them out."

"Sure, sis." There was a pause, and even over the phone she could hear his brain gearing up to ask a harder question. "Does this have anything to do with the other area you found and your little 'extended research trip'?"

Becky sucked in a breath. The yellow suit sitting and listening in this time wasn't the same as a few hours ago. So she risked that they would cut off her phone privileges and just said, "Yes." And before he could ask anything more, she jumped in again. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Is this one of those 'no questions asked' favors? And when the bodies start piling up, I'm going to get disbarred kinds of things?"

Becky wondered why he'd had to use that reference to bodies. As if he knew more, or could read more from her tone, than he was letting on. So again she just said "Yes." She tried to put a little laugh in it, but she wasn't that good of an actress.

The yellow suit man gave her a stare, but she shrugged at him, like *what was I supposed to say?* And she asked Aaron to go out and recheck the boundaries of the site.

"Becky, are you in trouble? Am I going to regret this?" His voice was a hiss and the irritation and tired humor that had spun through his words even just a few exchanges ago was gone.

"Aaron, I'm okay." It was the best she could tell him, not knowing if she was sitting around waiting to die. "And you might help a lot of important research with this. Thank you."

He said a quick good-bye and hung up.



Looking up with a conjured smile, Becky handed the disconnected phone back to the suit, knowing they'd return with it when Aaron called her back. And she waited.

An hour later the suit came back in with the phone. "Hello?"

"Becky? Why the hell did I have to go through some sort of security check to get to you?" Aaron was clearly worried. And there was nothing she could really do about it.

"Because you did. How's the site?"

"Nothing." She could hear the chirping of cicadas in the back ground and the usual woods noises. He was there now.

"So it's all the same." She let out a breath, startled by its release.

"No, there's nothing here. The compass needle doesn't move at all. I walked the whole boundary twice."

Her brows pulled down, and her fingernail tried to compete with her words for space between her teeth. "So north is north and the whole site is just a staked out boundary?"

"Looks like it to me . . . wait. No, north is still south according to the compass." He sounded as perplexed as his words were making her. "But it's not changing at the boundary line. Not like before. It was real clear, now . . . nothing."

Her heart raced, throwing a lump up into her throat. She couldn't even think of the implications of what Aaron was telling her. So she asked the obvious. "Can you find the edge?"

Through the cell phone connection she could hear his boots crunching through the undergrowth. "Already looking for it. . . wait. Got it!"

"Where are you? Where is it?"

"About ten feet out."

"God. Aaron, just get out of there. Go home."



Jordan woke to the sound of sledgehammers keeping cadence inside his head. It was their third day here, and nothing was new. Oh, except the mysterious Brookwood-Abellard had struck Florida again. One of the coma victims had slunk off into quiet death yesterday morning. And fate was claiming another. Maxie Londers had only had ear pain prior to this. But quickly the vomiting that had begun at four a.m. had changed and Maxie was now on a ventilator, awaiting her turn into the kingdom of whatever god she chose.

He ached for the Levinsons. Art was less obvious in his grief than Maddie, but maybe more touching for that exact reason. Rolling his face into his pillow, Jordan made a half-assed attempt at self-suffocation. He should get up and brush his teeth and get dressed like every other day of his life. But unlike every other he would breathe a little harder down David's neck, begging and praying for a resolution to this thing.

On the one hand he wanted the problem to be the magnetic reversal. Problem solved. The bug they couldn't find didn't exist. Not their fault. But that would leave holes of uninhabitable space on earth. Surely all the hotspots couldn't be in North America, right? There had to be others elsewhere, right? And at that point the problem went way out of his scope. Hell, it had been out of his scope a week ago.

David was trying. Becky was trying. Jilly's fingers were about bare to the bone and his own back was about to break. He could simply cry foul and give up. He and Jillian had kept sharing a room, leaving the second free as workspace. So he could just not go into the workroom again. Simply ignore all of it.

"It's like there's nothing here to find." Her voice was soft in the false darkness created by the blackout curtains. It came from over his shoulder and the rhythm and timbre told him she'd been awake for at least a while. "I've kicked myself a dozen times this past week for not being a pediatrician."

He couldn't suppress the small laugh, and he finally rolled to face her. Somehow she was bundled under the covers with the look of a child huddled against the cold of winter. "What do you say we just leave and go set up a practice together? We'd be good."

"No, we're just missing something. I know it."

He sat up, letting the sheet slide down him, fully awake. If Jillian thought there was a connection they were missing, if it was niggling at the corner of her brain, then he trusted that it was there.

She sat up too, holding her head as though to keep the information from sloshing out. "There's a numbers issue that we're missing here."

Jordan's feet hit the less than plush carpet and he started pacing, energy renewed at even this slight prospect. "We aren't at quarantine, and we're way too populated here. It's too high profile to swarm down in yellow suits."

"No, it's not about quarantine. It's about numbers I *saw* somewhere."

They needed to be up and dressed and in the other room where all the numbers were lined up in neat rows and gathered on charts waiting for them. He forced a deep breath into his lungs. "I'm going to get dressed and go down and grab some food, then I'll bring it back-"

"No." It was positively frantic. "You can't leave me alone. Just keep talking to me. It's like a word on the tip of my tongue." She was throwing off the covers and stepping out in her shorts

pajamas that sported a squinty-faced red-head and the words *bad hair day*. At another time it would have made him laugh.

“Okay.” And even as he extracted himself from her grasp she re-clung to him. “What’s wrong, Jilly? Are you all right?”

She waved her hands in front of her face. “It’s here. And if I don’t solve it people will die!”

The starch left him. Perhaps Jillian didn’t have any answers. She just had fear and guilt the same as him. “Let me go into the bathroom and get dressed. Then we’ll go down and get breakfast.” He didn’t mention numbers again or solving anything. He didn’t really think they would.

“I’ll change out here while you’re in there.”

He nodded. Even in a panic, and buried under a brickload of guilt, Jillian was efficient. Closing the door behind him, Jordan allowed himself a brief measure of time where he could ignore the fact that Jilly was close to tears just beyond the wall. And that the hallway door would only open to a host of other responsibilities and problems.

They wandered down for the continental breakfast, and were heading back, food balanced in their hands when she stopped, almost causing him to put steaming coffee down her back.

“Room numbers.” She pointed at the numbers they were passing with each door down the hallway. “But not numbers.” With no warning she went from off to on and started back down the hall. “Not numbers.” Again she muttered, and Jordan knew that he would be the one to set down his carefully balanced breakfast and fish out the magnetic room key.

She was passing him into their room when her head snapped up. “Room colors!”

He nodded, his brain catching on to her excitement. As though he, too, could now see light at the end of the tunnel. He just didn’t know what was producing that light. “The Levinsons color-coordinate the bedrooms so the guests don’t have to remember anything but their color.”

She ungraciously unloaded her food onto the side table. “All the patients were in color coordinated rooms. And if we go back and check I’ll bet they’re all at one end of the house.”

He mentally tabbed through what he remembered of each of the patients, calling up a face, and a mental picture of the room. One blue, one pink, one purple, all at one end of the long house. “They were all in the north end. Even the new ones.”

They nodded at each other with Jordan supplying the words. “Another physical anomaly. But then why hasn’t David found anything?”

Heavy breathing sounded in the open doorway over his shoulder and Jordan leaped around to find David hanging in the gaping space, sucking in air even as he spoke. “David has.”

“What?” Jordan took in the wrinkled and filthy khakis and the bags under his eyes. Whatever David had been up to he hadn’t been dressed for it.

“There is just now a start of a reversal at the north end of the house. It’s a small spot. With a small field.”

“Why didn’t we see it before?” Jillian walked toward David, but it was Jordan who handed over his coffee with an “I didn’t drink any of it” to a grateful David.

“I’m used to seeing this stuff in deep layers. There’s a history of reversal here, but no one ever recorded it before. All the strata tell the story. But, right now the top layer is showing the shift, too. Not my forte, but I found it.” He took a sip of the steaming silt water and had the wherewithal to thank Jordan.

“So why are you just telling us now?” Jillian shook her head, still looking inside, not focused on either of the men in front of her, Jordan knew the signs.

“Because, sweetcheeks, I was up all night playing in the dirt.”

*Yup*, Jordan thought to himself, *that matches the appearance.*

“And I only just now found it.” He tipped up the cup, draining the last of Jordan’s coffee. “So you two can call the old doc and tell him it’s high time to move these people out! And I am now going to sleep.”

With that, he practically rolled out of view and Jordan heard the metallic click of his door closing just a second later.

Jillian stood stock still, thinking. “We’re missing somebody.”

Not able to help her think, Jordan called Atlanta, but not Landerly. “Mike, it’s Jordan.”

“All our numbers exactly match yours.” Something about the tones in his voice made Jordan sure that Mike was in the lab.

“Yeah, I figured they’d match.” His hand went automatically through his hair, a gesture of frustration. “But I’ve got another set of info for you to run.”

“Lay it on me, I’m going to be sitting on my assays here in a few minutes.”

Jordan laughed. “That’s funny.”

“What?”

“Sitting on my *assays*.”

“Oh.” He could hear the shrug in Mike’s voice, as though the thought had never occurred to him. “What do you need?”

“I need you to do a statistical comparison of the numbers we’re getting for our people and the general population.”

But Mike was Mike, and in a minute he got it. “What are my controls?”

Jordan rattled off the stats, then Mike was gone, his hands no doubt resuming their usual speed as he plated samples and provided numbers for them.

Turning, he found Jillian watching him. “Was that Landerly?”

That showed how long she had been paying attention. “No, Mike. He’s going to run a standard deviation for us. See if the reversal is lowering people’s immune systems so they get sick, or if it’s making already weak people sick.”

He could see her absorb that in a lightning flash, and as she made eye contact with him he realized her eyes were bright. He was opening his mouth to ask, but she beat him to it. “I know what we missed.”

“Yeah?” From the look on her face he was certain he didn’t want to hear it.

“Eddie.”

• • • •

BECKY SAT ON THE EDGE of her cot. With her legs apart and her elbows balanced on her jeans-covered knees. No one was dying anymore. In fact, everyone who’d been in quarantine had stayed healthy for five whole days. And according to Jillian and Jordan things hadn’t been going anything like that before they were all moved out of town. So good news was coming. Certainly.

And with the little blind amphibians she was picking up here, along with some seriously disturbed insects, she was certain that the environment was to blame. Amen to that, and here were the men, no longer in their yellow suits, approaching her. She just knew that they were ending the quarantine. Becky stifled a ‘Halleluiah!’

Two of them walked up in jeans and t-shirts looking very unlike the CDC scientists they were. But then again they were in backwoods Tennessee, and not their offices in Atlanta. She hazarded a glance down at herself and thought she didn’t look very scientific herself. One of them nodded at her

like he knew her, which was only confusing, until he opened his mouth. From his voice she could tell he was the one who had brought her the phone, consistently listening in on her conversations for the past three days. Briddle.

“Quarantine’s over?” She looked up expectantly, praying for an okay to return home, and check out her own backyard.

“Yes.”

She didn’t wait to see his reaction. Just jumped up and started packing her things. Becky had forced herself to hold off ‘til now, because she just knew she would have entered clinical depression if she had to unpack.

“We wanted to let you know that we’ve removed the project from Dr. Warden and University of Tennessee’s jurisdiction.”

Her busy hands stilled. “What?” They were taking her frogs?

“We would like to offer you the opportunity to stay with it, with the CDC. Of course, you’ll be compensated if we all survive.”

“*If* we all survive?” Her mouth hung open. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

Briddle looked perplexed. “Was it funny?”

The man behind him shook his head and rolled his eyes. “No, it wasn’t.”

Becky’s gaze snapped to him, recognizing the sound if not the face of the biologist who’d been working with her in the makeshift lab occasionally. “John!”

He stepped forward taking over the conversation for the un-funny Briddle. “There’s a lot of work still to be done. You know the animal species are going to help us suss this thing out. Plus there’s enough material for about, say, a billion papers.” His lips pressed together in what was almost a smile.

“Papers?” *A job? With the CDC? Chasing frogs?*

In a few minutes Becky had voiced all those concerns. Her packing remained forgotten as she sat back on her cot, suffering a mild case of shock. She *had* to go with the CDC or hand over her frogs. They were government property now.

She heard other voices outside. A sound she hadn’t heard before. The people of McCann being set free. Almost. “They can’t go home, can they?”

“No.” John shook his head, his face unshaved for what must have been a good four days. “The government will have to relocate them.”

“What do we do next? Do we set up a lab in Atlanta?”

“Eventually. But right now we need to go do tests on a new location in Florida.”

“Florida?” She said the word as though she’d never heard of the state before. Her brain really was on overload and she’d ruined her routine and hadn’t eaten any breakfast this morning because she’d been too excited.

“Can I go home first?” That was what was making her a mess. Her mom and dad were worried, Aaron thought she was on the run from the law, and no matter what the CDC was offering her, she wouldn’t take it if it meant she didn’t get to show her family she was okay.

“We need to head right out. They want us on site by tonight. Brookwood and Abellard are already there. And they have the same kind of magnetic anomaly.”

“You can’t tell her that!” Briddle stood over them, looking like he was going to wire John’s mouth shut. “She hasn’t signed her paperwork; she isn’t cleared yet!”

“She has emergency status.” John just looked up to where Briddle had planted himself in the corner of her tent. Again his face showed his dissatisfaction with the teetotaler. “Besides, she’s

going to sign.”

“You’re right, I’m in.” She stood and stretched. “But on one condition. I’m going home first. I’ll call my Mom and tell her to have everyone there so I can see them.”

John looked up at Briddle, still not standing, not giving the man any of the respect or formality he seemed to want.

“Oh, all right. But no talking to them about any of this, and you’re still on emergency status until we get the paperwork through.” He handed her a clipboard and she quickly read and signed everything. Basically accepting a probational position, and agreeing to defer to her superiors’ judgment of what she could and couldn’t share. But she knew what Aaron had said about government contracts. Your signature meant everything and then some. Theirs meant nothing.

Briddle left with his precious paperwork tucked under his arm and she looked back at John. “You’ll want to come home with me. When’s our flight?”

“They’ll put us on something this evening.” He, too, finally stood. “I need to go with you? I’m not much for carrying luggage.”

“I have forty of the frogs from my site at my house.”

She almost laughed as she saw his jaw drop, and re-phrased her thought. “I guess I should say ‘we’ do.”

• • • •

JORDAN STILLED. STANDING in the doorway, his question was answered. He hadn’t told his Dad that he was coming to Lake James. But here he was on a Sunday morning and the smell of pancakes was weaving through the house he still had a key to. “Dad?”

“Jordan!?” His father came through the opening from the kitchen, brandishing his spatula like a weapon, hope and fear both written plainly on his round face. “What are you doing here?”

“I needed pancakes?” He shook off the burdens of the flight, and the sound still in his head of Jillian giggling and the sheen in her eyes. David was with her and they would handle the stress they were all under together. Jordan had his Dad. Not that his father spoke much.

Case in point, his father simply grunted and pointed with the spatula to a vinyl seat at the old scarred table and brought Jordan a plate and fork while the griddle sizzled. It seemed not only did his father make pancakes on his own every Sunday morning, he made enough for Jordan who wasn’t there, and maybe even his mother, too.

He caught his Dad up on things while the pancakes cooked, his own voice the only thing easing the sounds of his father’s rhythmic work. “We’re here to examine Eddie’s case. A team of us. But I can’t tell you much more than that.”

He saw the nod from the back of his father’s head.

“I just wanted to come visit.”

Again the small nod.

So he ate. Better than he had eaten in weeks. Fresh, hot pancakes. With syrup from the plastic bottle with the grocery store brand label across the front. Nothing fancy at all. But the kitchen and the food and the smells - it took him back.

And something must have showed. Because when his father finally sat down he took one look at Jordan and asked, “Who’s the girl? Jillian?”

“What?” His face lifted from his plate and his heart kicked up a notch. How had his Dad seen what he was only just admitting to himself? And just a few days too late, too. Late enough to begin with the serious self-ass-kicking.

“That doctor you work with. You mentioned her last time you were here.” It was more words than his Dad had strung together in years, to him at least.

“How did you know?” He spent time cutting the pancakes and shoving another bite into his mouth to hide the expressions he was sure were giving him away.

“I’ve seen that look. Almost identical. On my own face, when I thought your mother was going out with someone else.”

Jordan almost laughed. If his mouth hadn’t been full, he might have. “That bad, huh?”

“What’s this other guy like?” Mr. Abellard held the fork as though it was a laser pointer and he was giving the latest PowerPoint presentation.

“Dad, you haven’t said this much to me in forever.”

The older man shrugged and ate another bite of the pancakes. For a full minute Jordan was certain that he had effectively shut down the one open communication he’d had with the man in years. And it hadn’t been worth it. So he followed suit and shoveled in more food.

But his father surprised him. “Didn’t know what to say to you.” There was a shrug, buried in the beefy shoulders and in his voice. “You went off to college. I’d never been, didn’t know what any of it was like. Didn’t have any friends who did. And ashamed because I couldn’t pay for it for you.”

“Dad-”

“But I *know* this.” He jabbed his empty fork at his son again. “I’ve heard about this Jillian. But what about the guy?”

Jordan’s brain churned, doing the thing that probably separated him the most from his father. The constant reassessment, the continual striving for more information. “How do you know there’s another guy?”

“No good excuse for you not to have her if there isn’t.” His Dad didn’t look up from his plate, not enough expression or anything other than the words for Jordan to realize that his father held him in higher regard than he had ever known. “So what’s he got on you?”

“Blond hair, good build, smart, little bit older, stable.”

“He a doctor like you?”

Jordan sucked in a snort. “Try: world renowned geologist. . . . And he’s rich.”

“Hm.” He sounded like the same old Dad. “Well, what do you have on him?”

Again Jordan snorted. “Obviously not enough.”

But his father waited. Eating his pancakes, and occasionally looking up, until it was clear that his father would think less of him if he didn’t at least give it a shot. So he did. “I’m taller . . . and I still have all my hair.”

His father laughed. A serious belly full of laughter, and it was worth the flirt in Jillian’s eyes when she looked at David just to hear his father laugh like that.

He waited, eating more than he should have, until he hit his threshold of pain. Thinking that if he ate enough his father would spill the secrets of the universe. Or at least how to undo the innuendo and whispers that he had heard from their heads tucked together when he woke up on the plane.

They had flown in first-class this trip. Time was less of the essence. Jillian having seen the connection at the same time Landerly had Mike plowing through back cases to discover Eddie and one other death in Lake James from five years ago. The fact that Eddie’s last name was Abellard and the date of death hadn’t escaped Landerly in the slightest. The phone had rung just moments after Jilly had spoken his cousin’s name. Those two scared him more and more. Another good reason to skip out and come visit his Dad.



David had insinuated himself next to Jillian, and should have passed right out given his night in the dirt. But no, he swore it must have been the coffee Jordan had given him. Perked him right up like he'd slept all night. Damned coffee. And the next thing you know Jordan found himself dozing across the aisle while Jillian and David talked about all the things they could. Anything but the purpose of the trip. Anything but the fact that three scientists were on the next flight to Minnesota for the CDC.

Despite the pancakes and the ugly turn of his thoughts, his father shared no more wisdom with him. Just a bear of a hug and hardly a word as Jordan said thank you for the breakfast and headed back to his hotel room. The one between Jillian's and David's.

When he finally slid the key through the lock to his room and flipped on the lights he found Jillian curled up on his bed still asleep, but starting to blink at the light, so he slapped it off. The flutter in his chest betrayed him, happy at seeing her in his room again. "I'm sorry, I didn't expect you in here." He almost kicked himself for saying it.

Her voice came out of the depths of sleep, "I just thought we'd set up the same. I can move if—" "No, stay put. It's fine."

She sighed, and he recognized the sound as that of her falling back deeper asleep. The last thing he heard from her was a mumble about a 'wake-up call' and 'another hour'.

• • • •

BECKY HAD HUGGED HER whole family and thanked them, and said she didn't know when she'd be back, and folded herself into John Overton's car.

"So your sister freaked me out with her Oak-Ridge-radioactive-waste theories."

"Yeah, well . . ." Becky didn't know what to say to that.

"That bit about the other spots with the frogs and were people sick? And was that why you couldn't talk? . . ." He trailed off only to come back full force, this time looking at her instead of the road. Both of which she wished he wouldn't do. "Did you *tell* her?"

"No. She's just that good." Becky sighed and spoke to her hands twined together in her lap. "She's really gifted, and she makes the rest of us look like idiots a lot of the time."

He nodded, and with a quick bite to her lip, she purposefully changed the subject. "So when your guy comes to get the frogs tomorrow, he needs to get other specimens from the UT lab. The American Birdwatcher's Association has a North Georgia branch that contacted us. They have warblers migrating out of season and away from their usual nesting sites."

He didn't ask, but she knew he didn't see the connection yet, so she fed it to him. "I tested them with magnets. They rotate to them just like the frogs do."

She grabbed the door and the edge of her seat with white knuckles as he yanked the steering wheel to one side and peeled into a car dealership before slapping the gearshift into park. His stare was leaden. "You have other species from sites in Georgia?"

She nodded.

He might as well have had the word *incredulous* typed across his face. "And you're only just now telling me?"

She felt the starch sneak up her spine. She was giving him gifts and he was mad? But she didn't fight back, just held some quiet dignity. "I've only known that I was your employee for about four hours. And my parents were around for most of it, so I didn't think I should say anything in front of them."

His hands covered his face for a moment. “First, you aren’t my employee. We both work for the CDC and we both push our papers for Briddle.” He dragged in a breath as though it would help, but clearly it didn’t. “Second, . . . people were dying and you kept this kind of information to yourself?”

She felt like she’d been slapped. “I . . . I . . .” *Calm yourself Becky.* And she took a slow, sobering breath. “You guys have had me doing tech work - out catching amphibs. No one asked me about any of it. No one wanted my theories and no one came to tell me when it was confirmed that the magnetics were causing the illness. I’ve been so stressed out that it didn’t even occur to me. And no one lives on these sites. It’s like the one in my backyard! . . .”

She stopped because she simply ran out of things to say, and so she said the only thing she could think of next. Nothing. But she reached for the door handle, figuring the CDCP had already released her from her UT contract and they were about to release her from this one too.

Overton’s hand on her arm stopped her, “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She remained suspicious of him for a minute.

He opened his mouth once and closed it before opening it again and actually having sound come out of it, “We still haven’t confirmed the magnetics theory, no one thinks it makes any sense. Just correlation, not causation.”

When he saw that she wasn’t planning on fleeing the vehicle anymore, he started back up and pushed the gas pedal, waving at the car salesman who was just now walking up to the car and grinning at them, smelling a sale. “So some of these warblers are at UT?”

“Yup, all of them. And they really should be part of this study. Warden doesn’t know about the magnetics.” Her chest constricted as she was telling him about her subterfuge. “I just found out before I left and was trying to gather more evidence. I figured he would have laughed me out of the building if I told him.”

“Thank God you didn’t tell him.”

Well, that wasn’t what she’d expected to hear. Since she couldn’t think of anything else to say, she changed tacks. “There are also some bees in LA. UCLA has a cluster there, too. And a definitive reversal spot. Where State Road 134 crosses I-5.”

“L.A.?” He slapped the wheel. “Holy shit.”

Becky didn’t think shit had ever been holy, but if there was ever a time for that expression it was probably now. “It’s the Biodiversity lab, I travel a lot to study unusual animal behavior. UT got a call from UCLA about three weeks ago. They have bees swarming in columns. Weirdest thing I ever saw. Their bee dance is messed up too. No turn and circle moves.” She paused waiting for him to ask her questions, but he didn’t.

John watched the road and Becky watched John, then continued. “So we wound up going out to the site to collect. And we took some amphibs, too. Blind ones like in McCann. And the bees have some sort of magnetic issues too. But UCLA is doing that testing.”

“Crap.” He slapped the steering wheel again, and she wondered if it was a tic, if he might start yelling out swear words randomly at any minute in a rush of spontaneous Tourette’s.

John pulled into the airport, taking the route labeled “rental returns” and shifting back to Becky. “You! You keep talking! *You* are a fountain of knowledge.”

“But I just ran dry.” She turned to the window. Disappointed that she didn’t have anything else to give. “I’ve been on this case for almost two months now and I don’t have any other information. All I’ve gleaned can be summed up in the half hour trip to the airport.”

DAVID STOOD AWKWARDLY in the front entrance of the yellow ranch house. This house was warm. And even in the front entryway he could see that a little girl lived here. His mind swept briefly back to the house where he grew up, where it wasn't apparent that *any* humans lived there. But here a toy barn and a handful of odd plastic horses gave testament to this child and her life.

He shoved it down in a way only the truly practiced could.

The wife of the dead cousin was emerging from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a small towel and calling back over her shoulder to a child "Wash your hands honey, we have company." Then she saw the three of them, people that she had hollered out to, to come into her house even though she didn't know who they were, and had never seen two of them before. "Jordan!"

She walked right up and, ignoring her flour stained apron, threw her arms around him in the kind of hug David had read about in books. "What are you doing-" But she cut herself off, noticing the flour she had left on her cousin's front and immediately began apologizing and dusting him off in a way that almost made David uncomfortable to be standing there watching.

"Kelly." It was Jordan, grabbing her arm, ignoring the last traces of flour on the front of him. "I don't know how to say this . . ." His hand came up and went through his hair.

And while he wasn't paying attention, Jillian stepped into the gap, filling in the story. "I'm Jillian Brookwood. I work with Jordan." She shook hands with the blond woman who was growing warier by the moment, but she kept talking right through the woman's expression, not missing a beat. "We've found other cases like Eddie's. We think there may be an environmental link."

Kelly stepped back, her hand clutching at her heart, although she seemed unaware of the action herself. Her eyes darted from one to the other of them, her other hand waved behind her until she stumbled back far enough for the couch to materialize behind her and she sank onto the arm, dark circles appearing under her eyes as she started to frown.

But Jillian kept talking, leaving no time for the widow to form a sentence let alone a full thought. "We have a good idea what it's linked to, but we need to run some tests." Turning slightly she motioned to him, bringing him into the fold of the conversation for the first time, "This is Dr. David Carter. We want him to look around the house, to see if what affected Eddie was here."

With a wave of her hand she dismissed him, to start wandering around and see what he could find. So he did just that, not wanting to stand there like a moron any longer and see the blonde's eyes cloud over, or her hand clutching for things that weren't there.

Pulling a tiny meter out of his back pocket he began pacing his way around the perimeters. They had started this crap with compasses and such, but had refined their choice of equipment as they better knew what they were looking for. The meter read normal. The field lay in the right direction, with the appropriate strength. And he felt like an idiot walking around this tiny middle-American house, with the little black box in his palm, getting nothing.

He had done this as a kid. Took one of his mother's jewelry boxes and cut a rectangle out of the top with a paring knife from the kitchen, and taped in a white piece of paper with red block letters and numbers written on it. He had walked his whole house reading the 'meter' that was so much like the ones his father used. Much bigger and less useful than the one he held today, but he had been so excited to do what his father did. Back then he had been a fool, but in his childhood hadn't felt like one. Today he sure as hell did.

He called back, "Mrs. Abellard?"

The house wasn't big, and she was all of fifteen feet away. Jordan's arm was around her and the hug was almost too familiar, as though those jokes about small town families being too close were true. The blonde looked up at him expectantly, a sheen of tears covering her eyes.

It was all he could do to keep from telling her that those tears wouldn't work on him, and this problem wouldn't be solved unless she could get it together. "There are two closed doors at the end of the hall. Can I go in?"

She nodded, and he realized how much he hated getting permission. What if she had said 'no' then died? Well, at least it would be her own fault. The first room he went into was the little girl's. More of the creepy, plastic horses covered the available surfaces of the bedspread and the white, standard issue, matching dresser and canopy bed, complete with pink ruffles. For a moment all he could do was stare at the girl-ness all around him, too frozen to do his job. Sure this house was warm, but tasteless. He'd be damned if he didn't vomit from all the ruffles around him before he left. Or was it the magnetic field? Either way he was bound to puke.

As he ran the meter next to the wall he began picking up a level change as he approached the corner.

"Sonofabitch."

It wasn't much. Not even a reversal. But at this point he'd seen enough to know it was coming. This was either the top edge of a coming bubble or the side edge of an already existing bubble. The normal field gave way, over a distance of about five inches. First weakening, then, if you could locate the exact spot and hold steady, you could find it – where the field went to zero. A phenomenon that should not occur on this earth.

He had zero.

Far in the back corner, right at the floor.

And he had a wall in his way.

The mother's room was at least more tasteful. Though it looked like the Dad was still here, too. David didn't analyze that any further, just headed for the corner that abutted the other room, where he had to move furniture and get down on his hands and knees.

It was here, too - the edge of an already existing bubble - and the thing was decent in size. A good part of the bedroom was affected.

"Sonofabitch."

"What is it?" The voice belonged to Jordan.

"Got one."

Even in the space of the two words, Jordan was at his side, kneeling, reading the meter over his shoulder. "Bet this is what got Eddie." His voice had trailed off at the end of the sentence.

David knew he should be sympathetic. But he wasn't. He was having the time of his life. His old man had *never* seen shit like this. And there were going to be papers until pigs flew out his ass. And Greer was going to ride that dino theory all the way to the bank. "Yeah, it's great."

"Thank you."

The sarcasm wasn't unnoticed, but David left it to sit, un-responded to. It's why he wasn't a preschool teacher. He heard the widow in the doorway, but didn't look up, didn't care to see that he had offended her. Let Jordan soothe the woman and explain to her that she needed to pack for herself and her daughter and that the CDC would be putting them into a hotel and starting them on medications.

"Lindsay was sick yesterday morning." There was a sound to the voice such that David wouldn't have been surprised if he turned around to find the woman actually wringing her hands.

"Vomiting?" Jillian's voice broke in, and he closed his mind to all of them. They voluntarily cleared themselves from the room, leaving him with his bubble anomaly.

He smiled. The swap was coming. Like nothing any of them had ever seen before. And he was sitting right on top of it.

For a brief moment he pictured his father's face when he heard.



Jillian stared at the wall, suffering the strange sense of Déjà vu she had. She had stared at a wall just like this. In three cities that looked just like this. Well, from the inside of a hotel room they all did. The only difference was the handful of medications she swallowed. The carpet was the same, a bizarre floral pattern that was created just for this hotel. They were all in reds and browns and creams, though, and all just as ugly.

Designed by the humans that she was trying to save. Looking around herself, she shook her head. Maybe she should be trying to save Becky's amphibians. It might be a more noble cause.

Landerly had called again.

The four bubbles here were to be abandoned. Again there was another team coming up behind them, and Jillian had to wonder where and why they were being moved. It seemed all they could do was show up and say "there it is." And steep in it a little more.

Becky had found another spot on the side of a freeway in LA. Jordan should have been happy about that. But Jillian knew that he was worried about his family. He was sworn not to say anything. They couldn't start a panic.

Well, no, they *could* start a panic. A damned good one too, if she put her mind to it. David had already popped up with an excited grin and told them he was trying to calculate when the shift would occur. He was looking at the number and growth rate of the reversal spots. He was calculating in the historical data from the KT boundary, the evidence that he and his paleontologist friend had been on the phone for hours discussing. And had left Jillian for the first time realizing what it felt like to be her family listening to her talk. God, it was boring.

And he had told her Greer's reversal/dinosaur die-out theory.

Jillian still got cold inside when she thought about that conversation. "David, all the dinosaurs died. There was mass extinction. There were volcanoes, which you are now telling me might have been triggered by magnetic reversal? The kind that we are looking at seeing here in the next what? Year? Month? Are we talking of going the way of the dinosaurs?"

"Well," Rather proud of himself, he had looked her in the eyes and almost smiled. "Most of the mammals lived through it."

She wanted to scream until her throat hurt too much to ever talk again.

But she didn't want Jordan to come running. Or admit her to an asylum.

Then again, there was comfort in just sitting in a corner, rocking on her heels and mumbling about human extinction and magnetic poles, while nurses soothed her and gave her medication to make her happy and calm. But the phone rang.

"Brookwood." She held the receiver to her ear. It was a CDC phone, and the damned thing was a secure line. What the hell was she doing with a secure line? She was supposed to be writing reports on other doctors' evaluations of things as simple as E. coli and botulism.

"Landerly."

She snapped to and didn't say anything. Landerly would just start talking when he was ready and there was a certain charming efficiency to it.

"You're not going to LA."

*Yea! Follow-through. Finally they could stay in one spot and-*

"There's a prison at the Nevada-California line and they have a bubble, too."

He paused. Jillian absorbed. And waited.

“We can’t move them. There aren’t enough facilities, and these are maximum security prisoners.” He sighed and Jillian knew what was coming, but she let him say it. “Our deadline for solving this thing just bumped way up. After the AIDS debacle the CDC can’t afford to let prisoners die. Start packing. Your tickets are waiting for you at the airport.”

And with a sharp click in her ear he was gone.

Jillian stood, the phone still clutched uselessly in her hand, her brain churning. The CDC had suffered from the AIDS issue. No one had cared enough, no one had done enough, because those suffering were gay men. It wasn’t all the CDC’s fault. They had actually done a lot. Private funding had failed to foot the necessary bill until grandmas started getting AIDS from blood transfusions and Ryan White became a tiny mirror with a big reflection of America’s ugly underbelly of prejudice.

And the CDC wasn’t about to be on the short end of that stick again.

So just in case Jillian didn’t feel enough pressure, there were now politics involved. Suddenly she understood physicians who medicated themselves. Demerol, Statol, Percocet all sounded fantastic about now. She allowed herself the dream of a good drug addiction for a brief moment before she hollered out to Jordan. “We’re not going to LA.”

She didn’t move from her spot, couldn’t bear to see his face. Not when she knew that he looked happy, and she was about to open her mouth and dash it. “There’s a maximum security prison in Nevada that has a reversal and we can’t move the prisoners.”

“What!?”

She could hear his feet hitting the floor. That meant he had been leaning back in the chair, thinking. For a moment she was glad that he hadn’t fallen backwards. Although she could have used a good laugh right now. Jillian started to yell out her response, but Jordan was capable of movement and his footfalls were pounding her way from just beyond the open door.

So she sighed. “We’re on a plane out tonight. We have to solve this thing and quick.”

“Why us?” His feet caught up to his head and he stood upright, shoving overworked fingers into undertended hair. Pieces of it stood straight up. And his blue eyes blinked slowly, like a man told that he’d just been sentenced to the electric chair.

Her voice was softer than she had intended. “It’s punishment.”

“For what?”

“Forging Landerly’s signature? I don’t know. We must have been very bad in our past lives. Do you remember torturing puppies or something?”

Jordan shook his head. “Very funny, Jilly.”

“Hey don’t mock me! I ran out of ‘very funny’ about two weeks ago.” She finally found the source of energy needed to move herself to the nearby desk and she plopped down into it unceremoniously while Jordan melted onto the bed. He rolled all the way through, onto his back, as though there was something to be learned from the ceiling.

After a minute Jillian interrupted the hum of the air conditioning. “It’s because of Eddie.”

“How is this because of Eddie?”

“That’s why we went to Florida, forged signature and all. That’s how we found those cases and linked it all together. Eddie was the start of it. If he hadn’t been your cousin I don’t know if we would have been this far along.”

“Fat lot of good it’s done us.”

“I know.” She resisted the urge to go to him and offer a hug. Although that wasn’t hard given that the phone call from Landerly had drained her of all her energy. With an effort far greater than should



have been necessary, she pushed herself up out of the chair and plucked the hotel phone from the cradle punching the four digit code to David's room.

Only David didn't answer.

She mumbled into the black handset, "Sorry, wrong number." Then stared at it like it had bitten her. How was that not David? She thought back through the code –

"You're probably dialing his number from the last hotel we were in." Jordan's voice came over her shoulder, indicating that he hadn't taken his cue from her, and hadn't moved an inch. "I bet you remember them all. All the room numbers and the layout of each place. . ."

Jillian was just happy that he couldn't see her blush. The poor boy had been subjected to Jillian-24-7. She could be her own sad reality-TV series. She punched in the code for David's current room and he answered on the third ring. "Carter." She curled her lip at the phone. She had to get a new 'hello'. They were all such techies.

"David, it's me, Jillian." *Well, that was a hell of a lot more human than 'Brookwood' barked out like an army order.* "We're on the move again. To the Nevada-California border."

"And what's there?" She could hear him rustling in the background. He was probably already starting to pack.

"Maximum Security Prison. With a bubble." Stopping herself, Jillian realized she was starting to sound like Landerly. Subject-Verb, minimal clauses and don't bother with articles or adverbs. And she seriously doubted it sounded charming on her. So, with a sigh, she started again. "They can't move the prisoners. We've got a tight deadline."

• • • •

JORDAN'S WHOLE BODY was leaden; the bubbles had grown black and faster moving. One was going to overtake him, but he couldn't force any more speed from his legs. Jillian and David had been running with him, but they had both disappeared along the way. David into thin air, and Jilly, smiling and waving, had been happily engulfed by one.

Although Jillian had gone willingly, Jordan knew there was no good in the reversals. It was certain death. In testament to that fact, there were lifeless, rotting bodies strewn around him on the street. The smell was overwhelming. And the rumbling of the bubble was freight train loud as it got closer. The ear pain and nausea overtook him, as he knew they would.

"Jordan."

He looked, still running, for the source of the sound. The second time the voice said his name, he recognized it as Jillian's, but he couldn't find her in the black.

With a jolt he slammed into the cushioned seat of the airplane as though he had been dropped from a high place, his eyes opening as the vicious dream faded into the back of his head. But the ear pain and nausea were real, surely byproducts of the rapid descent they were pulling.

He felt himself sinking through the seat, giving up and giving in, when Jillian grabbed his arm again. "You have to wake up. David's up. We're landing in two minutes."

They would call Landerly when they got in the car and got the secure line set up. They would tell him all they knew, and all they had seen, and wait for his mind to churn. Not that Landerly had been a banner help lately. That he was as stumped as they were had been a small comfort.

Jordan blocked all else from his mind and thought of the hot tub and the pool that would await them where they would stay near the state line. It was cheaper on the Nevada side, and that would mean gambling and lights and noise. But that would be all right he supposed; it might keep his mind off what he had left behind. And how Lake James was doing.

Kelly and Lindsey had been evacuated right away, in a bald and scary attempt to save them from the reversal that was growing in the corner between the two bedrooms, creeping a little wider each day like an infestation of mold in the walls. Lindsey had already been sick, stomach ache and ear pain that same morning they had arrived.

And that had scared the crap out of Jordan. Lindsey was the only living proof of Eddie's existence. Everything else would fade with time. He soothed himself with the thought that it seemed if they were able to pull a person out of the reversal in time, before they got too sick, they wouldn't have any effects.

On the flip side, if they didn't get the person out in time, there was only one course - the victim always ended up dead. And no one had any idea what the cut-off point was.

In his head he counted out the death tolls. Florida was at seven. Lake James at five, and maybe more. Twenty total in McCann, although no more since they had figured out to get people out of the area.

Both McCann and Florida had traceable paths. A patient zero. The look of contagion. Lake James didn't. The bubbles were cropping up all over the place and taking out random people. Or at least it seemed that way now . . . Jordan desperately wanted Jillian to have an epiphany. He wanted to interview someone, anyone, who would give him that last shred of information that would allow his mind to grasp the picture in the puzzle even though they were nowhere near complete.

And if Lindsey had truly had *it* . . . Well that was another story. He had seen her labs himself. And she was a perfectly healthy kid by all known measures. It would have almost been easier to take if she had been sick and nobody had known it. But if this thing was taking out healthy people now . . . there really wasn't an answer.

And why wouldn't it take out healthy people? Diseases killed without prejudice or forethought. They could wipe out entire populations without conscience. And even if this was simply an environmental hazard then what would they do when David's predictions came true and the poles swapped? When the whole earth was a reversal field?

He knew he was possibly looking at the end of 'life as we know it'. If it wasn't disease that did them in, then they would have to stand on their Darwinian principles and die the brave death of the non-fittest.

• • • •

BECKY TRUDGED THROUGH the high grass in the far back of her parents' property, hiking boots laced tight, stomach full from the family breakfast her mother had insisted was necessary because her oldest daughter had returned home the night before. And Becky had let her do it. Since she was heading back to Atlanta and the bio lab right after she packed her things. Which was right after she assured her parents that she wasn't going out to the frog site.

Which was a bald-faced lie.

She was heading crosswise through the property. Toward the back corner fence, carrying a walking stick with a mounted compass. Her backpack full to the brim of lightweight CDC equipment and empty lexans. By necessity she was out here alone. Was that a stupid thing? Probably. Who knew what this site would do to her? She might go into a coma and die right there on the spot. But something told her she wouldn't.

Jordan and Jillian and their infectious disease cronies hadn't told the biodiversity team any more. They hadn't found out if the illness was caused by one-time long-term exposure or if all the little

exposures added up to get you sick. If that was the case then she had been plenty exposed and just walking into a site like this was asking for trouble.

And the docs had no real theories. No one could tell if the older sites were stronger, or if the newer ones were. Or if size mattered. No, the one thing they had told her about that was they were counting on *her* to sort that thing out. No one felt the need to evacuate the animals from the sites. And it was Becky and John Overton who were supposed to be exploring those possibilities.

The boundary tape was dirty now. Little leaves clung to it. The bright color faded away. Maybe they shouldn't have put it so low to the ground. Maybe tent stakes hadn't really been the best idea. What if an animal tripped and injured themselves? What if a person did?

Closer up she saw pink tape. It wasn't staked but wound around tree trunks and draped across low lying branches. It was brighter, newer. The CDC had tagged it but not marked it 'keep out' or 'biohazard'. God only knew if the neighbor kids crept over the fence to play.

About ten feet from the tape she saw the compass jump. *Dammit*. She knew this site was growing and she hadn't been paying attention.

Fingers of sun came through the tall trees now, and winds found their way around the trunks. Becky pulled up her turtleneck, glad now that she had dressed a little warmer. Starting back again toward the site, this time she kept a clear eye on the compass. Strands of her hair slipped across her face and into her mouth right as the needle jumped.

This time she set down the backpack and pulled out a rubber-banded bunch of weighted flags. CDCP DO NOT TOUCH emblazoned in repeating letters across the orange streamers. She dropped one where the compass started to bounce.

The red needle danced in every direction, unsure which way was true north, confused by the one thing that was supposed to keep it constant. She dropped another flag where it became steady again. Of course this time it was pointed south.

Standing several feet inside the site now, Becky looked over the two dropped flags. The fuzzy edges were getting larger as the bubble grew. Her brows pulled together against the thoughts in her head, even as her shoulder blades pulled together against the wind that had picked up again and was biting at her exposed skin.

Becky breathed deeply, concerned about just what it was that she was breathing in. Unsure if the reversal caused the problem or brought the problem or fed the problem. God, they didn't know *anything*.

She thought she should feel something different. That her body should instinctively know she was somehow being exposed to something deadly. Her heart did beat faster, but Becky had no doubt that was due to her own adrenaline surging rather than any external force altering her heart rate.

In that instant the sun disappeared, causing her heart to speed up as her head snapped back. She saw the cloud dusting its way across the sky even as her brain reminded her there was, of course, a logical explanation.

But chasing the cloud was a jet. Probably taken off from McGhee-Tyson and headed into Nashville.

Her breath sucked in, and she stood, trapped, mesmerized, petrified, as the jet blazed a trail toward where she stood. In the clear sky it took almost two full minutes for the plane to reach a point directly overhead, and for the entire time she simply stood there, tense as a piano wire. Adrenaline keeping her whole body on high alert. Her brain flipping and discarding thought after thought about where to run and how to escape if the plane came tumbling down out of the sky.

Somehow, no one had thought to check the height of the bubbles. She knew it now. A possibly fatal error - if the plane flew low, and if the bubble reached up that far. The bee columns from LA indicated that these things could and did achieve some altitude. What would the pilot do if all the dash readings went suddenly out of whack? If the compass started jumping? If they looked down and saw they were headed east when they should be headed west? Would they change altitude, to avoid a crash, only to lead them head first into another plane *actually* traveling east?

But the jet passed over without any events, leaving Becky sucking lungfuls of the air inside the site. This job was going to kill her. Well, that was if it didn't kill the whole planet first.

She shoved her thoughts to the back of her brain - the disturbing ones anyway - and focused on the frogs. They would be harder to find this time. It was later in the season. There might still be a few straggling tadpoles. And that, she suddenly realized, was why she was here. Those stragglers would grow in the site as it was today, this week. And they would tell its story now. Probably the same one. But they would give her and John a better idea about long term exposure to the site.

Her stomach rolled alarmingly, and she refused to even begin to calculate how long it would take the reversal to reach the edges of her parents' fenced yard or, god forbid, the house.

Again she forced a tight rein on her thoughts to keep them from running away. Counting backwards would indicate that the bubble had been 'born' about two months before the first time Becky had encountered their own little 'Apocolypse Now'.

Becky faced the task at hand - spotting the tiny ranas darting among the refractions in the creek and peeking out from under crunched leaves. Within an hour she had populated fifteen lexans. And she lined them up for a good-looking over; which was about as scientific as she could get out here in the woods. Her fingers ached from plunging them in and out of the now cold water, from bumping and grating her fingertips and knuckles across the smooth looking rocks. Her brain ached, too. And she feverishly prayed it was from effort and stress and not the environment.

But all her frogs were normal legged. Just two hind jumpers. They were pale, not whitish, but not the healthy greens and browns of the earlier batches. Six were blind.

*Dear God.* They looked more like the batch she had hauled from McCann than the batch from here.

• • • •

INFORMATION WAS POURING in. David had been shocked that it had started so fast; Jillian had barely plugged in the fax machine when it started beeping and spitting out ink strewn papers. All three of them had forgotten to unpack and had sat, silent, in the supremely uncomfortable chairs around the nice cherrywood table in the corner of the hotel room. They had simply read and passed the pages, each of their faces knitting deeper into concern the further along they got.

About an hour into it Jordan had stood and stretched. Throwing a handful of worn and smudged papers on the table top, he declared he needed a break, and David had almost hopped up and agreed. Until he saw that Jordan's idea of a 'break' was to stop reading the fax pages and to start reviewing and hanging the hand drawn charts. Personally, he'd been thinking more along the lines of a steak and a hot tub himself. But as he watched the butcher paper go up, revealing its colorful circles with links and lines and notes, he kept his mouth shut.

The fax pages were coming in from all over. Suits were crawling the country, and worse yet, the World Health Organization was starting to collaborate their findings of a 'new disease' in India and Africa. David shook his head to himself, things were in the crapper when even the geologist could see what was happening.

The fax beeped, and gurgled, and whirred, and then started spitting out another black and white missive. David grabbed it even before the machine was fully done with it. Which was his plan, as this little portable shitbox had a tendency to hang on to the page once it was finished printing, and then, at a random interval later, release it, sending the paper flying out away from the table and sending three very stellar scientists scrambling like fucking idiots to fetch it.

He turned to Jordan who was standing back, fists perched on his hips, and way over-admiring his thumb-tacking job. "Listen to this."

Both the docs stopped what they were doing and gave him their attention while he went over the major, if blurry, points on the page. "They have an animal link between the Knoxville site and the McCann site. They think the McCann site may be a few months older. . . ." That was as far as he'd gotten but while he scanned it again, he let his mouth follow his mind. "They checked out the Georgia site. They still don't know why the birds came early, but the growth rate on that site leads them to believe it might be a full year old -"

Jillian's sigh interrupted him. "Thank God no one lives out there."

This time he read word for word, "The animals in McCann are showing unusual, new activity, actually phasing back to- Dammit."

Jillian looked at Jordan, who was looking back at her. Neither of them spoke, and David did his level best to ignore them. The page had simply run out, and wouldn't you know it, just as he looked up, the fax machine spit out the next sheet, sending it floating right past his open hands.

"Son of a bitch."

"Is the 'dammit' another metamorphosis phase, like larva or pupa?"

David didn't even waste an eye roll on Jordan for that one. Straightening the new page, he started in again, "-phasing back to normal. Most recent amphib catches in McCann indicate normal development as best as can be determined by present tests."

Jillian practically climbed into his lap with excitement. And he sure as hell did nothing to stop her. "Did the site reverse? . . . I mean back to normal polarity?"

He looked the paper up and down. "Doesn't look like it."

She looked disappointed, which David took to mean she wasn't going to crawl into his lap. And letch that he was, he could admit that that fact disappointed him more than the site not returning to normal. He hadn't expected it to anyway. "We've never seen anything indicating that they reverse back. Well, not for about sixty million years anyway."

Jillian wandered over to admire Abelard's thumb-tacking job, and the next thing he knew the two of them were spouting off crap about white counts and B-U-Ns, which he figured had nothing to do with burgers, and David made the executive decision that this would be a good time to ignore them. He plucked up the super-teched CDC phone and called Greer.

"David!"

"Buddy."

He opened his mouth to speak again but Greer beat him to it, already rambling about the McCann egg clutch. "-full fetus in one of them. Unbelievable. I need to tell someone, I have muscle attachment sites that no one has seen before."

A deep pit formed in David's heart. He was starting to see himself as Chicken Little. Only he wasn't an idiot. He was just the only one who saw that the sky actually was falling. He wasn't sure how much he cared. But there was the distinct possibility that everyone was going to get sick from this. And with the fatality rate at a hundred percent, Greer might wind up having to limit sharing his joyous minutia to his wife.

David was certain that he should be having a crisis right now. Only he wasn't having it. "Listen Greer. I need to know something, and you can tell that snappy wife of yours, as she is the smarter half. . ." David pinched the bridge of his nose wishing he was elsewhere. Wishing he was siphoning off that trust fund he had broken into to start this whole crapload of a mess. He was ready for some straight-out baking on a beach somewhere, with girls in bikinis and beer and a sedate heart rate. If one of them in the hotel room suddenly spontaneously combusted he wouldn't be surprised. "Greer, straighten me out on this: did your dinos die from lack of food or what?"

"No real telling. Just a good solid theory. Plants would have wilted in a matter of days given the dust cover--"

David interrupted. He'd been on the receiving end of Greer's theories before and he could qualify for a Ph.D. in paleontology long before they ended. "Yes, but that depends on the asteroid theory or the volcano theory. Go with this one for a minute and tell me if the evidence matches up: The dinosaurs got sick--"

"Wait, can I put you on speaker phone?" Greer was already doing it, if the clicking and the soft static were any indication.

"Hey," David turned to Jillian, "Does this thing do speaker phone?"

"Sure." She didn't stop her conversation with Jordan, just kept jabbering about qualifying diseases and healthy specimens, but her fingers flew over the secondary numeric keypad. The one she had punched codes into to link up once they had arrived. When she handed it back it was squawking at him at full volume. He told Greer and Leena to hang on a minute and looked over his shoulder. "You two might want to pay attention to this."

They jerked their heads apart.

"Who are we talking to?" Jordan frowned at him, which was fine, since David was certain that he was breaking several federal laws. But he didn't let that deter him. "Okay, Greer we're all here."

"Who's we?" Leena's voice was overeager, clearly way too stifled by her bed-rest.

David introduced everybody then set about swearing the Larsons to secrecy, which he thought was hysterical, but did it anyway. "All right. Here's the question: is it possible all the dinosaurs got sick at the same time?"

"Yeah right. They all just came down with a deadly virus." Leena's voice was sweet, even shooting him down. "It was too global, too quick."

"You think what's going around now is what killed my dinos?" Greer hopped in.

Jordan shot David a death glare, but Jillian was already too wrapped up in the science to be concerned about treason, "I think what David's asking is if it's possible. Is there any evidence that they could have gotten sick?"

Greer and Leena talked over each other. "No." "I think it's more like there's no evidence against it." "We just have a sudden lack of fossils and we know they died." "Why? What does this have to do with that magnetic reversal we found?"

David sighed. Too damn many scientists in the kitchen. "The reversal is making people sick." There. He said it. Let Jordan call in the CDC police. "But only those in the hotspots. The die-outs seem to correlate to the last reversal. Is it possible that the volcanoes were an aftereffect?"

"Of course it is." Greer's voice amplified as though he were talking directly into the speaker box.

Jillian's face took on a look of horror that David had only seen once on a really bad actress in a schlock film featuring killer clowns. "Does that mean that we could face volcanoes along with the polarity reversal?!"

Leena ignored her. “I think the real question is whether or not the dinosaurs were warm blooded. If they were, then they are more pertinent to your question, and if not then they aren’t. They relate less to humans and we might all react very differently.” She sniffled at the end of the sentence and David felt his heart drop. There was nothing he feared more than a woman and tears. But Jordan voiced the question, and Leena answered. “Of course I’m crying. I’m pregnant. I cry at country music.”

David steered the conversation back where he wanted it. “I know Greer thinks they were cold-blooded, do you agree?”

“Hell, no.” And she launched into an explanation he had heard Greer shoot down a number of times, but it sounded a lot more plausible coming from her mouth. “There are too many channels in the bone, indicating a network of vessels. It’s common to warm-blooded creatures. Some of them had necks so long that their heads would have frozen overnight if they didn’t self-heat their blood. Greer’s an idiot on that one.”

Jordan smiled. “Well, I guess every marriage needs its spark.”

“I don’t think it’s a warm-blooded/cold-blooded issue at all.” Jillian had turned her focus from a distant spot on the wall to the speaker phone, as though it was the thing actually carrying on a conversation with her. “We have amphibian species showing effects of the reversals. And they aren’t warm-blooded. We’re all getting affected.”

David heard pillows shuffle and Greer say something to Leena. He wasn’t sure what he said, but by the tone and cadence of Leena’s voice he got shot down. “Then, yes it is possible. No one’s really looked at it, because it doesn’t make sense for a virus to sweep like that. So no one has tried to find evidence for or against it.”

There was a pause, no one wanting to fill in.

But apparently the gears had been turning in Leena’s brain. “It does go with another problem I’ve been sorting thru-”

Greer’s voice walked on top of hers, “She’s on bed-rest, all she does is lay around and think. It’s dangerous, I’m telling you. She’s decided all the dinosaur die-out theories are wrong.”

“Really?” Jordan’s voice jumped in, overlapped by Jillian’s “Why?”

Leena picked her thread back up. “The issue is this: all the major extinction theories rely on the dust cover. There’s argument as to what caused it, but no real argument as to the fact that it happened. And there’s this problematic assumption that the debris cloud stopped photosynthesis in the plants, thus killing the dinosaurs . . . but somehow *not* the mammals.”

Jordan shrugged. “The mammals were smaller.”

Greer’s voice answered. “No, not really, there were a huge number of dinosaur species that were a lot smaller than what we normally think of. Many of them were as small or much smaller than the average mammal. So it wasn’t a size issue.”

“The mammals were warm-blooded.” Jordan threw out the next piece of evidence.

“No, so were the dinosaurs.” Again Leena’s voice was sweet, even in refusing him his basic beliefs. “And that actually is what gives the theory *real* trouble-”

It was Jillian who jumped in now, looking excited. The kind of excited David would be if she peeled off her clothes and straddled him. “Warm-blooded means faster metabolic rates. Which means that the mammals, the *smallest* mammals, should have been the *first* ones killed by the loss of plant life, not the survivors.”

“Excuse me?” David cut in. Fuckin’ biologists.

“Warm-blooded animals eat a lot more per ounce of bodyweight than their cold-blooded counterparts. They have to: it takes a lot of energy to make that body heat. So the cold-blooded

species would have lasted longer without food or even oxygen, and been far more likely than any mammal to survive a month-or-more dust cover.”

“So anyway,” Leena’s soft voice filtered through to them, “the dust cover doesn’t work if the dinos were warm- or cold-blooded and I’ve decided we don’t even have the real killer on our hands. The problem is that the killing factor is sorting who it takes and who it doesn’t by some unknown mechanism. What we understand, or at least what we’ve put together, doesn’t answer that question yet.”

David finally stepped up. “What about the previous extinctions?”

That made Jordan’s head pop up. “There were others?”

Greer answered, “Well, there was one about one hundred and thirty five million years ago. That wiped out a darn lot. And another about sixty million years before that. . . why?”

David sighed. “Just wanted to see if they matched up with the pole reversals.” He sighed again.

“Guess they do.” Jillian was staring at him.

“Son of a bitch.” That was Jordan, followed closely by Greer, having chosen the exact same words.

“I’m sorry.” Leena’s ultrafeminine voice could have been the words of a woman at a cocktail party. “Are you all insinuating that we’re headed for a mass extinction?”

David answered her in kind. “Yes, I believe that is what it sounds like.”

“Do you have any guesses as to when?” She was one of the few women he knew who was capable of holding this conversation, and not screaming, swearing, or breaking down.

“Any time between tomorrow and the next two thousand years.”





Head to toe in scrubs, Jillian walked through the prison as starched as she possibly could. For all her training, she had never provided care to inmates, and the way the men were looking at her was going to haunt her for more than a night or two. She would have felt more at home and less exposed walking through the middle of Atlanta in only a thong and red heels, in the dead of winter.

But the gauntlet turned out to only be the first half. Doors clanged. Metal scraped and moaned. Cinderblock only reflected the sounds; it didn't absorb or diminish them in any way. But when the doors slid closed behind them, Jillian's apprehension slid away as a deeper unease slipped in. Something was very wrong.

She had the feeling of being in the woods when the animals don't make noise. When you don't know what's coming, but you know that it is.

"He's down!" The cry was laced with a liberal dose of terror. And Jillian knew then that these inmates knew something was taking them out.

Shoving through the nearly impenetrable wall Jordan and David had provided, she ran flat out until she reached the cell where the wail was coming from.

When he reached a hand through the bars at her, Jillian stepped back. She had compassion for the fear in his voice, "Help me doc!", but not enough to reach out and touch him.

An officer in shades of khaki green came up beside her and asked what she wanted to do.

"Get this man out of here. But put him on his own. Away from here."

The voice wailed again. This time the man with the straggling beard pressed himself to the cage bars directly in front of her.

As the warden approached and unlocked the gate, she stepped back, hoping to get out of reach of the prisoner, and smacked into a wall of muscle. She jumped, spinning, only to find that David had come up behind her. He was dressed in a spare pair of green scrubs from the prison infirmary, in hopes that he would blend in with the other doctors. It looked bad enough without having to answer why a geologist needed to be along.

Jillian turned to find Jordan further down the line, his arms laced through the bars, taking vitals from the prisoners who lined up. She saw the sense in what he did. If this cell had a bubble, they should check and see if it stretched down the row.

Looking back into the stall as the man was led away in cuffs, she took in the placement and order. This cell had two stacked beds attached to the wall, one higher, unoccupied, and the lower with the comatose body of the other inmate strewn across it facedown. She stepped over to kneel down and assess the man, but another officer put his hand in front of her, and without touching her, held her back, while he handcuffed each of the man's hands to the bedframe before letting Jillian near him.

Checking him over, she took his blood pressure and respiratory count, wondering even then why she was doing it. They all knew what he had, and they all knew what would happen.

The men down this row were quiet. They knew they were being stalked, only not in any rational way that any of these men of aggression could deal with. Sanity was slipping here. And Jillian could read it on the faces of the officers, too. How much longer before they realized they weren't getting paid enough? Before they jumped ship?

The CDC's ass would be in a sling then. There would be no stopping the news cameras. No way to hold back the wave of panic it would surely generate. So Jillian set about solving the problem the only way she knew how.

She stepped up to the warden and explained. “This man needs an ICU. He’s comatose, and his ability to breathe on his own may be compromised soon.” Then she turned away and went to the next patient. Taking the charts handed to her by the prison physician and his assistant. Both the doctor and his young apprentice had the sense to not ask questions.

But Jillian asked questions. She asked every one in the book, and a few that weren’t. Inside fifteen minutes time she knew that Landerly had been right to pull them out of Lake James and send them here. It’s where he would have been if his arthritis hadn’t effectively shut him down. The trip to McCann had been more than he could handle. She could tell in the way he walked, in his dry humor that waxed and waned with the amount of medication and rest he got. He would wish he was here, in the thick of it.

And while she was wishing that she wasn’t here, she decided to make the best of it. What would Landerly do? She almost chuckled to herself. Then she decided that Landerly would get a history on every single one of them and start sorting the furthest gone. He would plot the locations, including the sleeping arrangements of the sickest patients.

And in another two hours, when she and Jordan pooled their data, she realized that Landerly would call the CDC mobile team, already stretched to its limit, and have them set up a temporary camp here. She called for quarantine.

• • • •

JORDAN LED THE THREE of them out of the head warden’s office about fifteen minutes after they entered it. The man wanted a few minutes alone to call his wife and explain to her that there had been a ‘serious situation’ at work and that he may not be home for a week or more. Joshua Frank had taken some reassurance that they weren’t all simply lining up and waiting to die.

David seemed to know where he was headed, and he strode down the hall in front of both of them, this time with a purpose. The inmates were supposed to have been moved from all the cells where anyone had gotten sick, and David was already rummaging through his briefcase looking for his fancy compasses. He was ready to weigh and measure, and Jordan could see now that he had been from the moment they had set foot in this place.

So he followed behind and took the opportunity to sneak a look at Jilly - she practically glowed. That was just damned annoying. She should be haggard; she hadn’t slept enough; she was in the middle of a high pressure situation. And she *glowed*.

Calling the CDC in front of the inmates and the cops had been a truly stupid move, and even now Jordan couldn’t figure out why Jillian hadn’t thought just a little further ahead on that one. But he had glared at her, twice, mouthed the words to her to either shut-up or leave the room, and she either hadn’t seen him at all or was putting in an Oscar-worthy performance of ignoring him. Since he was certain she wasn’t that caliber of an actress he truly believed she hadn’t seen him. And here he was dealing with the flak, while she glowed. Bitch.

David was inside one of the cells, crawling around on his hands and knees and no longer looking anything like the physician he was dressed up as. His scrubs were blackened in long smears down the top, one knee was actually sporting a small tear, and both were ground deep with . . . well, Jordan couldn’t identify the source of the dark stains and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He decided to catch up with Jillian and see if she had seen anything worthwhile yet.

She smiled a brilliant smile, out of proportion to her surroundings, as he walked up. “What have you got?”

“Nothing.” His files were tucked under his arm, as inactive as they were useless. “You?”

She shook her head, her ponytail moving from side to side as if to second what she was saying. "It's all here, but there's nothing new."

Jordan stretched his neck one way then the other, and left Jillian behind, not that she even noticed, as he went off to wind his way back to the warden's office. He found the warden with the framed photograph from his desk propped across his knees. "Sir, it's not that bad."

Frank smiled. "I know it's not. You've done a good job of putting all our minds at ease. But I can't help think about them. You know . . . when something like this comes up . . ."

"Yeah, I do know." For just a moment he paused. Then, decision made, he plowed ahead. "My father is in the same situation. I do understand."

The warden simply smiled, and asked what he could do to help. Jordan got to make his day by asking to use the phone, then booking the entire staff in the wing at the hotel they were staying in. The CDC could ride his ass for expenditures, if and when he survived this thing.

He left the office and wound through the long hallway yet again to find Jillian standing still in one of the cell rows watching David's backside as he crawled from corner to corner, measuring, mapping, and muttering the whole time. The arrogant bastard might have been happy to know Jillian was staring at his butt, but Jordan wasn't about to give him the pleasure. He touched her sleeve and she slowly pulled her gaze away from the ass molded in green cotton. "What?"

"Anything left to do?" *Besides stare at David?*

She shook her head. "I've got vitals on all of them, and blood draws. That's already boxed and waiting."

"Call for pickup?" He kept his voice low, but David wasn't listening anyway. He was lost in the world of his rocks. Jordan wondered if concrete and cinderblock qualified igneous or sedimentary, but he didn't dare ask.

"No pickup. The mobile lab will run it when they get here in 12 hours. Our one live patient is already at the hospital on a ventilator."

"Robert Willins?" The man she had rushed to as he was passed out on his bunk. Jordan already knew that was the man's name, and maybe he felt just a little facetious because he knew Jillian wouldn't.

Jillian simply ignored the question. It passed like light through glass, and left no feeling of satisfaction for having asked it. As though he had never spoken she changed the subject, "Shall we head back to the hotel and sleep? We're going to be neck deep when the crew arrives."

He felt the yawn coming only well after it was too late to stop it, and even before he managed to close his mouth Jillian was biting off her own yawn.

"David said not to wait for him. He'll catch a ride later."

"Sweet." He turned away from her face at her last glance back to David. Allowing her to make their goodbyes to Carter, he simply headed down the long hallway toward the exit, only barely cataloguing a muttered response and wondering if the blond geologist might look up later and wonder where they were. Well, he'd figure it out fast enough.

The adrenaline that had been fueling him barely held while he drove back to the hotel. When they arrived she shuffled along behind him, until he slid the magnetic key card into his door and was surprised when she followed him in.

There was only the one king-sized bed, and Jilly bee-lined for it.

The foolish words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "This is my room."

"Haven't you noticed? I always sleep in with you."

“All right.” He didn’t want to change things, but his mouth again got ahead of his brain. *Why? When she was ogling David’s ass? Whispering with him on the flights?* “Why?”

“Can’t you tell?”

He was almost afraid of the answer. A small part of him sprung with hope, but the rest of him tamped that part down, and Jordan just shook his head.

“Ever since McCann, I’ve been afraid to sleep alone.”

He nodded. It was the best he was going to get. Although that had to have been the last answer he would have expected. “Climb in.”

• • • •

THE PRISON WAS SWARMING with them. The bubbles were here, they were all growing, and they were all over. David almost grinned. This was a hot spot among hot spots. And, in a new phenomena that hadn’t let him get any sleep, they were growing fast enough that he could come back to one end of the hall and start all over getting new reads on almost every one. Previous growth rates had been on the order of a few feet a week. These guys were showing growth in a matter of hours.

And, as he came back down the hall, he couldn’t suppress a grin. Some of the reversals were fusing. And damn if that wasn’t the hot news of the millennium. His Dad would sit back in his chair and have a heart attack. In fact he just might call the old man and personally deliver a little comeuppance to Mister Superiority.

Just then a person, man or woman he couldn’t tell, fully decked in the yellow hazmat suit, walked in at the far end of the hall. It waved, but whether or not it smiled was lost in the slight reflection off the surface of the protective face shield it wore. David made what he estimated was a friendly face and waved back before turning and rolling his eyes. Those suits wouldn’t protect against magnetic fields. Anyone who wore them was just kidding themselves.

So here he was in his torn green scrubs crawling the dirty floors and ignoring the human smell that was here, and about to be overrun by the highly trained idiots in the yellow suits.

The suit approached him and the face shield’s technology finally made itself useful, the glare disappearing as the man got closer. “You Dr. Carter the second?”

“Yup.” *The second, of course, as always.* He was certain that his getting out of their way was exactly what the suits wanted, since this one even pointed to where one of the guys had volunteered to drive him back to the hotel.

David nodded and began the arduous task of gathering all his equipment together. Another suit, this one female, and beautiful - a shame he was too exhausted to care - offered to help him. He didn’t want anyone touching his things, even without the clumsy thick gloves.

Almost thirty minutes later, he had gathered all the stuff he needed and left the meters that would continue to record in his absence. But they had been roped off with the CDC's own *stand back* tape, and signs, hand printed *Touch Me and Die* on sheets of yellow legal paper. They swung just a little in air currents that they could feel even though he couldn’t.

He pushed a weary and very dirty hand through his hair, noticing again that there was just a little less of it than last month.

Flipping open his cell phone he saw the hour for the first time that morning. Already nine thirty. Damn. He dialed his father. His personal cell, the number that only David and every important scientist in the world had. His father had told him point blank once that David didn’t have the number because he was a good scientist, but because he was the senior Carter’s nearest blood relation. With a sour smile he decided that this call could only feel better if he had actually roused the bastard from

sleep. And while he waited for the ringing to stop, he suffered the brief moment of weight in his chest like he always did before his father's voice said, "Hello, David." He never said the words, but the tone clearly begged the question of why he was being bothered.

"Dad." He didn't say anything more, knowing that the term was bothersome in itself and knowing that his father knew he couldn't escape it. Of course, the great irony being that no one had ever been farther from being a 'dad' than this world-renowned scientist.

"What do you want, David?"

And he just started speaking, letting all the events of the past few days spill out. He broke about fifteen federal and contract laws that the CDC had specifically reviewed with him, but he didn't care. He came awake to the sound of surprise in his old man's voice. Though even the fact that he was surprised by his son's success was irksome.

David held the conversation as he rode back to the hotel and wandered through the lobby. The elevator dinged but David walked in and just kept talking. Let the line get cut off. He arrived at his room and tried the key, but it didn't open. He tried again. Then, wrapped up in the conversation with his father, he tried a third time. This time the door opened, although not from his key. The door handle practically flew from his fingers, startling him just long enough to realize that Jordan had opened it from the other side. He looked like death warmed over and David said so.

"Thanks." Jordan ran a hand through his hair, although he only proceeded in making it stick up more than before. His face was as ruffled as his t-shirt and boxers, and he didn't seem to come fully awake.

"Guess I got the wrong room." David said, turning his key card over, already knowing that the answer wasn't there. His attention, at last, turned back to the phone conversation with his father. "No, I'm trying to get into my hotel room. Anyway, the reversals are melding. What do you think of that?" Not like he gave a crap in hell what the old man thought of it. He should have just said, *How do you like them apples?*

"What!" This time it was Jordan, looking more awake in his eyes if not the rest of his appearance. "Who are you talking to?"

"My father." He said, and then into the phone. "No, I'm talking to one of the doctors here."

"You can't talk to anyone about this!" Jordan shook his head, although he made no motion to grab the phone away from David.

He just covered the mouthpiece. "Trust me, my old man will be too livid that I found it first to tell anyone what he knows. He'll take it to the grave, and that ain't that far away."

The look on Jordan's face was the look of good little boys and girls who were not only taught to respect their elders, but actually did.

A soft voice came from back in the room. "Jordan?" It was feminine and groggy with sleep and David smiled, making a fist for a mock punch on the arm. The good doc had gotten himself some Nevada ass. The only question was, did he have to pay for it?

His father was speaking into the cell phone, the age in his voice telling of the distance the sound traveled, even though the phone itself told no such truths. "Yeah, Dad. I've got to go." And with that he hung up on his father, the sole purpose for the call already achieved.

With a smile, he turned to congratulate Jordan, but as he opened his mouth the voice came again. "Who is it?" And this time, as she came more awake, he recognized the cadence.

Jillian.

Oh well, she'd tire of Abellard soon enough, right? "By the way, your team showed up in their yellow suits about an hour ago. 'Night." He went down the hall enjoying the brief sounds of "oh

shit!” and “the pager!”, before the door clicked closed on the cozy scene gone awry.

• • • •

JORDAN WAS VERY AFRAID of the gnawing in his gut. His father had mentioned that Lindsey and Kelly were ill, but changed the topic as soon as he knew that Jordan had already been notified. It was Sunday again, and Jordan had heard the hiss of the waffle iron in the background of the call, making the Nevada heat all that much more unbearable.

There were eight more prisoners sick this morning, even though they had removed everyone from the bubbles. Maybe they had just been in for too long. Maybe David’s numbers, which Jordan had leaned his head across the tapes to read, were indicating that this was another phase.

A voice shouted from off to his right and Jordan began to jog to the zippered tent where the metallic voice was coming from. When he arrived, a yellow suit was standing over a prisoner, the man’s arm cuffed to the gurney he was on.

The voice came again, filtered through a microphone inside the head piece and a polarizing layer of fear. “He’s down!”

“Back off!” Jordan shoved the nurse aside, wishing he could claw the suit off of her and make her be human, make her participate in this. But he couldn’t and he knew he had no right. Even through the refraction of the plexi-paned face plate he could see her perturbed expression. But he didn’t care.

His left hand grabbed for the wrist not cuffed to the bed, already feeling for a pulse, even as his right hand grabbed the stethoscope from around his neck and with nimble fingers spread the earpieces, popping them into his ears. By the time he had the bell of the scope on the prisoner’s slow moving chest, he had found the pulse, and was counting it. Although far too slowly. In another second he had ascertained that the man’s breath sounds were as weak as his pulse and he was slipping.

Another practiced action put the stethoscope back where it had begun, draped around his neck, and brought the flashlight from his right pocket. A quick move had the light snapped on and shining into dull green eyes held open only by his own fingers.

He sighed, knowing that it was too late. But he practiced his Jillian maneuver and shoved it to the furthest corner of his mind swearing it wouldn’t bother him, and dove back into the task at hand.

He turned to check the other two sleeping patients in this tent, realizing that they, too, were barely responsive. They weren’t categorized as comatose yet, but their pupils were slow to respond to his flashlight, their respirations depressed, their pulses slower, indicating a heart that was overburdened and giving up. *Son of a bitch.*

Ducking through the zippered entrance, opposite the one the nurse had left through, Jordan walked out away from the soft burr of the fans and into the light, feeling the heat start to suck at him again. But he gathered his voice and called for portable ventilators and oxygen tubing.

In just a few minutes mechanics showed, his voice having carried easily in the still desert air, unencumbered by the electronics of a microphone. But they carried none of the equipment that was their job. “We got almost nothing.”

“You’re kidding.” Jordan snapped, biting back the words that in a few weeks it might be their families that would need the ventilators and tubing. “I don’t care what you have to do. There has to be a hospital or a company with the machinery. Find it. Appropriate it if you have to.”

The two men managed to produce one ventilator, and within five minutes their big truck rolled out of the prison yard and cleared the gates without much in the way of a security check, kicking up desert dust on the way into town.

The nurse was called back to help hook up the slowly sinking patient to the last ventilator. All three of the men in the tent got oxygen tubing and prongs delivering the last tanks of O<sub>2</sub> to their lungs. They worked quickly and efficiently, without speaking. You didn't get to be on a CDCP field team without knowing your stuff. And you certainly didn't get snapped at by the doctor and not get pissed at him.

Jordan wanted to conjure up some regret. But he was flat out.

• • • •

JILLIAN HELD THE PAGE out to Jordan. Her back ached and her shoulders couldn't bear the weight of the world any more. Jordan didn't reach out to take it, just gave a little shake of his head as he carelessly peeled first his green cotton scrubs top, then the t-shirt underneath. For a moment her mother's voice popped into her head, warning her about casualness and sex. Somewhere inside Jillian laughed. She was a physician, and a naked male form was nothing other than a body, especially when she could see the bone deep weariness from the outside. Jordan tossed the shirts aside and met her eyes, a motion without words to read the fax page to him.

But Jillian shook her head. She was ready to cry, and losing ground every day. Only David seemed to still be enjoying plowing headlong into whatever hell awaited them. In the half hour she had napped while Jordan added to the charts in the room next door, she had been plagued and finally jolted awake in a cold sweat by the nightmares that found her whenever she slept alone.

Yet right now she wasn't asleep. And this nightmare in print wouldn't give up. But Jordan would have to read this with his own two eyes, and those eyes peered at her from above dark smudges, read her face, and saw her refusal with the stiffening of her arm again motioning the paper to him before finally he took it.

Jillian followed where his vision tracked on the page, saw his features contract on the first few smeared words from the archaic fax machine. Then she saw him twist, and she knew. His gaze didn't trace the rest of the paper, he just looked up, piercing her with his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

The words took the remaining starch from him, and he collapsed, doll-like, laid out on the bed. For a moment she sat and watched the even movements of his chest, listening as the air passed through his mouth, in a far too perfect rhythm to be anything but forced.

The minutes stretched, and the room was quiet enough to reveal the creaks and ticks of an older building as it shifted. All the sounds normally masked by human conversation and motion, none of which existed in this room. Finally, knowing it was the right thing to do, she stood and walked the five steps to the edge of the bed. His eyes stared at the ceiling and leaked tears from the corners. Though she looked him up and down, he never made eye contact with her, effectively shutting her out.

The aching bones turned to ice. Jordan was in a space she couldn't get into. Her own family was safe. She slid and crawled onto the bed next to him, sitting against the headboard, waiting. It was all of a second before he rotated to her, her arms automatically opening in a maternal gesture she didn't realize she knew.

Still without making any eye contact he curled into her embrace like a hurt child. Her arms closed on smooth skin as his head sank to her shoulder. She felt his hair against her cheek, not realizing that she had cocooned around him until she found herself there. "I'm so sorry." The raw whispering sound of her voice started her own eyes watering. But she couldn't distinguish if she was crying for him or for herself or simply from the abrasions her eyes had taken from seven days of desert air.



It started in soft confessional tones with his unmistakable timbre, “I left them all behind for school.”

She wanted to say that she understood, that she too had left her family, had left their ideals to pursue her dreams. But she didn't think she really did understand. And in a moment he explained. “No one else there went off to college. My Dad worked in the factory. My mother ran a daycare when she was alive. Eddie was the most successful, starting his own construction business. But I was educated and no one knew what to make of me. No one knew what to say or how to speak to me, so no one really did.”

His breath sucked in, and as he shifted she felt the wetness that soaked so easily through the shoulder of her scrubs. It dawned that the awkwardness she felt was due to the fact that she herself had cried to no one since she was small and no one had come crying to her.

“Eddie was my best friend growing up. . . and we got so far apart. I feel like I'm trained to be the hero here and I'm failing.” A soft intake of air was all that revealed the depth of his regret, the pain as he saw his family falling away from him. “I left so I could save people, and I can't save them.”

As he turned his face back into her shoulder, she could feel the muscles of his cheeks and mouth, biting his lip or such, and her hands slowly moved down the hot expanse of his back. Wrapping themselves around her waist, his arms stood out in muscled, bronze relief against the green of her scrubs, but the fabric blended from fold to fold making their legs virtually indistinguishable where they were tangled on the covers.

She felt and heard the two deep breaths at the same time, the only harbinger before he stood and turned quickly away, hiding the streaks that marked his face. But he didn't bring his hands up to wipe them away. Jillian saw one more deep breath before he announced that he would be on the next flight to Minneapolis.

Her legs curled under her of their own will, perhaps her body unconsciously seeking a more protected position before she told him what she knew. “You didn't read the whole thing.”

Jordan slowly turned to face her, no longer ashamed of the tracks on his face, his hands on his hips and his eyes steady.

“Landerly forbade you to go back. He wants you to stay here.” She felt the cringe before she realized she was doing it.

But he didn't flinch at the news at all. And she knew before she heard it what his decision was. “Then I quit. I'm going back.” He calmly walked into the bathroom where she heard the water running for a few moments before it shut off and was replaced by the sounds of zippers and the small clunks of things thrown into bags.

That galvanized her and she sprang from the bed, to find him in the bathroom doing exactly what she had expected. “Wait!”

That stopped him. Cold as stone he turned to her, “Do you want me to not go?”

“No. That's not what I'm saying.” Jillian felt the desperation rising inside her in a tidal panic she hadn't felt before this. “You should go. Let me make the arrangements through the CDC-”

“Maybe you didn't hear me. I'm quitting.”

With a ferocity she hadn't applied in way too long, she stood up to both Jordan and the encroaching hysteria. “No you're not. I'm getting on the phone and talking Landerly into this. He'll pay for it out of his own pocket by the time I'm through. Keep packing.”

She didn't wait for an answer because she didn't want to hear it. Too afraid he would disagree, she fled to the phone and began pushing buttons, unsure what she was going to say to change

Landerly's mind and send them to Lake James. Her fingers dialed of their own accord, her brain having long ago memorized all five of Landerly's numbers, and while she got her thoughts together Landerly answered. "Hello, Dr. Brookwood."

It would have been nice, to have such a distinguished colleague address her so formally, if he hadn't followed the first phrase with "I figured it would be you to call. So did you talk Abellard out of quitting or are you talking me into sending you both to Lake James?"

Surprised, she choked on the words, "The latter, sir."

"Well, this had better be a good argument." He sounded a trifle annoyed, and she would have shot something rude back, except that she was about to launch into an argument that had 'better be good' and she had no idea what that argument was.

"It is, sir."

Ten minutes later she hung up, and finally turned to face Jordan who had moved from the bathroom into the main room and was gathering his shoes, stuffing them into the bottom of the barely serviceable duffle he always carried. "Anne will call in less than fifteen minutes with your arrangements."

"*My* arrangements?"

"Yeah, just you." She smiled the turned-in grin that confessed she was at the end of her rope, too.

He crossed the six feet of space between them, relief showing on every plane of his face, and embraced her, breathing out in one long sigh, that let her know he was glad he didn't have to quit. Her face was inextricably buried in the white t-shirt he had thrown on, and the fake-fresh smell of laundry detergent assailed her, as did the fear of going it alone.



Lake James wasn't what she expected. In the coffee shop the waitress had answered her question with a 'ya' then laughed hysterically at 'y'all'. Becky was used to feeling backwoods, but this made her feel like a big city girl. And that was just uncomfortable.

The people looked like they stepped from a book she had read. And it reminded her too much of McCann: small stores, no chains, and everyone knew everyone else's business. And just like in McCann, they greeted her and John with a "you guys aren't from round here." In their weird clipped, partially swallowed accent. It was never a question, just a statement of fact.

Unable to speak in public about their work, she and John quietly sipped coffee that came only in regular and decaf, at a table with blue vinyl seats ripped in a handful of places, stuffing slowly escaping where it could. They both refused the breakfast menus, and drank in a noisy silence as the diner swirled around them.

John got a call halfway through the awkward breakfast, and the entire diner turned as one to see who was answering a cell phone in the middle of their pastiche. He ignored the looks, and snapped the phone shut. "Dr. Abellard is on his way, he's already in the air."

Becky only nodded and drained the last slightly darker bits from the bottom of her cup. She already knew that Jordan's cousin Lindsay had slipped into a coma yesterday. From the fax John had pulled from the machine before they left this morning, they knew that her mother Kelly had slipped under just hours ago - a fact even Dr. Abellard was unaware of as he flew in from Vegas.

"Are you two ready? We are." Leon Peppersmith approached them from the booth behind where she and John sat in clear distinction between the animal handlers and the PhDs.

Becky and John both nodded and got up together, in tandem reaching for their wallets and dropping a few bills on the table. Silently Becky tucked herself at the end of the line behind the four animal wranglers. Leon had his team: his brother as large and lean as himself; his sister, midsized but everything about her said she was determined to keep up with the big boys, including her brown ponytail; and a good friend of theirs who had worked for the first Peppersmith, when he had started in the animal wrangling business.

They were after medium-to-big sized game, and while the Peppersmith operation did a lot of for-hire work, they were contracted with the CDCP as needed. And John wanted good sized mammals. He wanted to see what was happening in other populations they hadn't happened to stumble across yet.

Though the coffee was warming her from the inside out, Becky turned up the neck on her jacket against the chill in the air. There were rumors that blizzards sometimes happened this early in the season up here. With a small shiver, Becky became a believer. She reached up to grab the handle at the back of the truck bed, but Leon stretched down to clasp her wrist and lift her in as though she was no more than a housecat.

He didn't speak, but motioned her to sit next to John, and moving his index finger in a circle in the air signaled Linda in the driver's seat to start up. Two smaller pickups with wide, tricked-out flatbeds followed close behind, and Becky wondered if it was legal to be sitting in the back of a truck like this. They were strapped into small seats that had been bolted in, her and John. But Leon was free within the confines of the bouncing bed of the quadcab, and he moved like the panthers he was known to catch. He ran a brief lesson, showing them modern lassoes and tranquilizer guns and cages while they rumbled along. When he asked if they knew how to shoot a rifle, he barely suppressed his

surprise that it was Becky who said yes. It was the only emotion that had flitted across his face in the whole five hours she had known him.

His dark blond hair was pulled back in a low ponytail that looked to be held by a classic red office rubberband, and his ball cap, emblazoned with the letters "P.A.W.", was well worn and molded to him, as did the PAW coveralls he wore. He quickly went through his efficient explanations and demonstrations, and before Becky realized it they had pulled off the back road they had wandered onto.

They passed a road block that looked like anything the city might erect, even with the city name painted across the scrapboard barricades. It was a trick Becky had learned recently that the CDC did when they really didn't want anyone to know of their presence. They made it look like they weren't even there, not until you were well within the borders, and by then you'd have had to pass some sort of security check. It all seemed very 'Area 51' to her, but she was becoming accustomed to it, a fact that scared her more than just a little.

They stopped in a small clearing next to a wide expanse of trees, and like back home, the trees seemed to go on forever. Mountains loomed up beyond the vast forest, and who knew what lived back there where homes and people hadn't encroached and destroyed?

Fish and fowl. Amphibs by the thousands. Insects she was sure she had never seen before. But John had set them here for bigger catches. Cougar. Wolves. Bears.

And Peppersmith Animal Wrangling had a cage for anything they caught, trucks whose beds unfolded to act as trailers to carry it all back. With disturbing efficiency and a disconcerting lack of language, each of them was outfitted with a food pack and water bottle, a thinsulate blanket, and flare gun, and Becky was handed a rifle on a plain brown strap and several boxes of ammo - tranquilizers of many shapes and sizes. Becky slung the rifle over her shoulder in the lithe motion of someone who had done this a hundred times before, but unease gripped her that they expected her to size up and mentally weigh her prey before loading and taking it out. She was certain that if things went down she would shoot first, and second, and third, before stopping to check dosages and weights.

The yellow suits had been here before, leaving droppings of little Day-Glo flags, indicating areas where they had found reversals. These animals had been exposed, and they would all be, too. But they wouldn't be able to stalk game in hazmat suits. Becky didn't even know if the Peppersmith operation had been informed of what they were walking into.

Their quiet became infinitely reasonable as she was engulfed by the deep stillness of the forest broken only by the obnoxiously human sounds of her and John's boots crunching through the undergrowth. The Peppersmiths moved like the animals they hunted: quietly, stealthily, in a pack.

They kept their rifles firmly in hand, and so Becky decided that she would follow their lead and, as silently as she could, unslung the firearm from her shoulder. They had walked for half an hour, John and her bringing up the rear, when the line abruptly stopped. Leon's left hand was held up in a fist and he turned to look at John. With his two fingers in a V, he motioned for John to look beyond his left shoulder.

Looking back at all of them was a female cougar, showing her grace and stability across a fallen tree.

With hushed tones that didn't seem to disturb the cat anywhere near as much as John staring at her, the wranglers divvied themselves up. Lincoln and Linda taking John off to try to follow the cougar hopefully to her cubs. Becky was motioned to trail behind Leon and his friend, whose embroidery read 'Jess'.

They hooked wide around the cat and hiked further, leaving Becky to spend her time gazing around her, and making feeble attempts to categorize the birdcalls she heard. What a crazy place to think of the overzealous Marshall Harfield, but what a help he would be right now.

They asked her about three white-tailed deer, all of whom she refused to have captured. Even though it made the Peppersmiths shake their heads like kids told to clean their rooms. But the deer were juveniles. And Becky wasn't going to take them, not while she was making the decisions.

Her eyes spotted several species of frogs and lizards. And why were all the deer juveniles? Had something happened to the adults?

The frogs looked fairly normal. But she stopped and went to get a closer look, twice plunging her hand into water that made the icy creek back home feel like a hot spring. The cold was enough that it altered her physiology, keeping her fingers from grasping at their normal speed, letting these ice-adapted frogs get away from her. Knowing what was happening to the neural connections and muscular responses in her hands only bothered her, it sure didn't stop her from trying again and again until she finally came up with a salamander.

She counted all its toes and checked its eyes, before popping it into a plastic container she pulled from her backpack. She was pulling the pack back on when she spotted the two men staring at her.

It was Leon who opened his mouth and demanded a response. "What was that?"

"Salamander." She looked at them through narrowed eyes. She was the doctor, she was supposed to be making the decisions about what to catch and they were looking at her like she had a cracked head.

"Well, I hope you learn a damn lot from that guy." Jess had a southern drawl as long as the day, and a scowl to match.

Leon had his pack off and was pulling random things out of it, a spare pair of socks, a roll of thick blue tape. A wicked looking pair of scissors came from their own sheath on his leg.

He pointed them at her, scaring the wits out of her for a brief moment. Her mind flooded with horror movie scenes and she momentarily considered fleeing, back through the woods she didn't know, chased by a madman with his scissors and an uncanny awareness of the wilderness.

"Your sleeve's wet."

She jerked her arm back. "You going to cut it off?"

"I should, but I suspect you like that jacket." He pulled one long tube sock, emblazoned with the letter P, and snipped the toe end off. He unceremoniously yanked her sleeve up, allowing her to feel for the first time the frigid water that had seeped in even though she had been certain she had pushed it far enough back. Yanking the dry sleeve of her turtleneck down, he pulled his glove off in one smooth motion with his teeth, and ran his hand over her arm in a reverent and nearly sexual way. She wanted her skin back. She wanted the crazy guy with the scissors and tranq gun to step back. But she didn't quite have it in her to look him in the eyes and say so.

He pulled the sock over her arm, over her sleeve, and began wrapping the tape around and around. Allowing only the letter P to peek out near her elbow. "What is this? Some kind of scarlet letter?" As soon as the words were out she regretted the reference, wondering if two men who'd spent their lives 'rassling 'gators' would have heard of Hester Prynne.

"No," He cocked a look that was almost a smile. "This is a P, not an A. Your arm is now waterproof and will not freeze from where you dipped your sleeve in the pond. And maybe your jacket will dry out." He pulled the sleeve down over the tape, where it could no longer chill her wrist, nor soak into any of her other clothing. She turned her hand over, thinking it looked a bit odd, but was fairly ingenious.

“Thank you.” It was the least she could say to a man she had considered a possible serial killer just a few moments before.

Without a word, he slipped the items back into their various sheaths and pockets, and pulled his pack on even as he started walking away. Becky followed, flexing her hand to re-warm the muscles, grateful that the sleeve wasn't wet against her wrist. Cataloging everything she saw, she wished that she had Melanie's memory, and wished Mel could be here now to see these things.

It was then that she noticed Leon and Jess looking at each other and making faces even as she felt the odd odor trickle past her senses. She knew it was familiar, but not like this. Consciously keeping her voice low she asked without slowing her pace, “What is that?”

“Blood.” Both men replied simultaneously.

Wanting to ask more, but knowing that they were headed straight for the smell, Becky held her tongue. It took fifteen more minutes to get there. In that time she felt the smell change from weak to pungent with a mild overlay of rotting flesh, a smell she hadn't detected ten minutes further back on the trail.

They made their way off the paths, finally coming to a clearing, silent as mice, until Becky gasped. A whole herd of moose lay dead, the river rushing by them as though nothing were wrong, even though a member of the herd had fallen in and gotten tangled in a fallen tree. Water rushed around it on all sides, the animal bobbing like a swollen cork. The bulk of the herd lay along the shores, feet curled under them like they were asleep.

But they weren't asleep. Wolves and cougars, even some Canada Lynx chewed greedily on the haunches of the fallen animals. The closest ones looked up and growled in response to the gasp that had escaped Becky's mouth. Cubs and pups were there as well, there was no infighting over pieces. There was enough moose for all.

The stench assailed her now that she had a visual to go with it. Bloody muzzles came up and chewed before burying themselves deep in the torn open sides of the larger hooved animals. Juveniles tugged at loose flesh, trying to rip pieces free, unconcerned about their human visitors.

It was Jess who spoke first. “Damnedest thing. Usually they won't eat something that dies of its own accord.”

Becky nodded. “What do they know that we don't?”

• • • •

THE WATER BUBBLED AROUND her, the chlorine churning into a smell that was certainly unpleasant, but her brain ignored it in order to appreciate the joys of the foaming water and heat. She had a coke with a big red straw sitting on the edge of the tub.

The season being what it was, they were the only ones out here. A few of the prison officers had been in the casino, gambling at blackjack or playing nickel slots. Something pretty much all of them had sworn at one time or another they never did.

“You look sad.”

David's voice broke through the shell she had locked herself in since Jordan's call. His cousin had joined her daughter in a coma, and his father had complained of a stomach ache. Jordan was staying with his Dad at the house, as his father's exposure to the reversals had come at the factory where he worked, which had since been shut down by the CDC. And that had prompted the news crews to come out. Jordan had explained how they'd held a small press conference and stalled, stating that they didn't know what it was yet. Which was true.

“I am sad.” She just took a sip of the coke, enjoying it, even though she knew it was full of caffeine and would act in conjunction with the hot tub to dehydrate her even faster than the desert air could. But she figured dehydration was the least of her worries.

David pulled his arms out of the water, stretching them across the tiles and leaning his head back like she did. Her own arms felt cool from the contact with the tile, in the dark it had finally lost much of the heat it had retained from the day. The night sky was big and black and disappointingly empty. There were no stars visible above her; they were all blocked out by the pinprick of blinding light that was the state line.

“Do you miss him? Abellard?”

“Yeah.” She said it with a force she didn’t know she felt, the words falling out of her mouth. “None of these people will talk to me like they talk to him. They’re getting worse by the day, and there’s nothing medical to do. I may have something, but it isn’t statistically significant yet.”

“What do you think you have?” David was leaning forward, carefully holding his brown longneck bottle out of the water.

“The glycosylated hemoglobin spikes ever so slightly before a person goes under. And I wouldn’t have found it if I didn’t have a whole pond of sitting ducks and nothing better to do than run blood draws on everyone all day long.”

David nodded and so the words kept falling out of her mouth in useless rivers. “I swear I had a patient take a step back when I came to him. He looked like he had a heroin problem, we’d taken his blood so many times.” She sighed, more to herself than to him, more out of exasperation than weariness.

Her bones were rubber, and her coke was gone, and suddenly she was tired. Dead tired.

Jillian bent her elbows and, flattening her hands against the tiles, lifted herself out of the tub, dripping water across the ceramic squares, and she made a brief note to watch where she stepped. She could see the headlines: CDC doctor kills herself in deadly cola/hot tub/water-slick incident. She’d already warned David about the alcohol he was drinking, but he was a big boy and he could call his own shots.

He followed her up, sitting for a moment on the edge of the rim, rubbing his hand up and down his face. “Wow. That beer does affect you more in the hot tub.”

David didn’t say much more, just followed her silent bare feet down the hall with his less than silent large ones. He waited while she got her door open, standing back and not crowding her, but being gentlemanly. “Need any help getting ready for bed?”

She mentally rescinded the *gentlemanly* idea. “No thanks.” With a small smile meant to say goodnight and nothing more, she stepped past and into the frigid room.

She had hoped it would be warm, or at least not sub-arctic. Given the time she had been here and her high IQ she had thought she would have figured out what to leave the AC set at so that the room would be the right temperature when she returned. But, no.

Inside of five minutes she was ready for bed, having swallowed eight giant pills for the third time today. She dreaded the short walk to the king sized bed; it had gotten just a little larger since Jordan had left. And with a deep breath she walked over and pushed herself beneath the covers, flicking off the last bedside lamp letting darkness infest the room.

Feeling her eyelids pull closed, Jillian waited for sleep to overtake her, but her fear held it at bay. She’d been hopeful that she would climb into the bed and smell him on the sheets. But the maids had changed the sheets and it had all been destroyed with one easy stroke of efficiency.



Eventually she got bored with lying in bed and not sleeping, so she threw back the covers and began turning on lights. The room was boring in its simplicity, too neat, too dull, and she decided to make use of her time by checking out the charts in the other room; she could at least update the hemoglobin numbers she was getting.

As she pulled the conjoining door open to total darkness, her brows knit together. The light behind her didn't penetrate, and a deep unease walked through her. She tucked her hand around the wall feeling for the switch, to no avail. She tested with her foot, sneaking it across as it was almost swallowed by the darkness, but no floor rose up to meet her toes. Flailing wildly, her hands grasped at the door frame, stopping her just in time from plunging into the abyss beyond the door.

The darkness breathed.

The deep space at the door pulsed in a slow even rhythm. Jillian considered reaching out to catch the doorknob so she could close off the menace, but even as she leaned out over the yawning gap beneath her, into the darkness, hanging only by her left hand firmly grasped on the frame, she heard something.

Something familiar.

So she pulled back, clung to the door frame, and waited.

She wasn't sure how long it was before the sound came again.

"Jilly?" This time it came from behind her. Whirling into the sound of him, she knew everything would be all right.

"Jordan!"

But he didn't hug her. She didn't even see his face, just his strong hands coming up to plant across her collarbone and shove her backwards until she fell into the endless space beyond the doorway.

With a deep gasp, Jillian jerked herself from the clutches of the black, coming awake and gulping air in the hotel room. She lay alone, twisted in the covers, in the middle of her own bed.

• • • •

YESTERDAY JILLIAN HAD finally given him the keys to the car. He had needed it and she hadn't. And David simply hadn't handed them back over. He figured the car practically went from the hotel to the prison and back by itself at this point.

This morning Jillian didn't even make a motion for the driver side door, just slipped limply into the passenger seat and buckled up without a word.

"Is everything all right?" He wasn't normally one to pry but the girl looked like someone had showed up last night and decked her, blacking both eyes. He knew that wasn't the case, since he'd seen the color forming for several days now. "You miss your boyfriend?"

That, at least, startled her. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Friend with benefits?" If you dug with a little trowel you could get pretty deep before anyone noticed what you were doing. Or decided they didn't want to answer your question.

She laughed. "Yeah, benefits. Like I can sleep."

"Huh?" Digging with his little trowel only worked when he was prepared.

"Since McCann, I have nightmares when I sleep alone."

"Jesus, Jillian, all you had to do was knock. You know you can stay with me."

Her eyebrows went up, making the fatigue look almost delicate across her fine features. All of it was clear across her face, left unhindered by the deep mahogany hair pulled up into her ponytail. He could easily read the distrust and the laughter.

"I don't think I would get any more sleep with you than I do by myself."

“Hey. I’d let you sleep.” *What the hell? Was he defending his own honor?* Even he knew he didn’t have any.

“Right.”

Twenty minutes of silence later they arrived at the penitentiary. He pulled the tires onto the soft sand lot where they parked with a slew of other cars, but Jillian was out of the car before he flipped the key. She almost closed the door, but then was across the lot like a streak of green, her hair flying behind her.

David looked beyond her fleeing form to see what she was running to. The only thing his brain processed at first was that something was wrong. He wanted to yell, to tell her to come back. But she was gone before he could call out. And all he knew was that something was dreadfully not right.

Canvas fluttered in the air. Fans and machinery could be heard. But nothing human moved.

Except for Jillian, who disappeared between the tents, running toward whatever was so wrong.

Grabbing his briefcase, David took off after her. Even as he ran, he tucked one hand down in the side pocket to pull out a small electronic compass. He clicked the power button and was rewarded with a screen full of dashes followed by a blinking error light.

The reversal. That was the only explanation. He pulled out an old needle compass his father had given him back in his days as a boy scout. Even now, the feel of his hand around the metal case brought back the warning that he had better not lose it. But he slipped it out to watch the classic red arrow sway like a drunken sailor.

“Jillian!”

His heart was ready to pound its way out of his chest, and his breathing seared his lungs it was so deep and ragged. Jesus, had he just been talking about sex? And now . . .

“Past the computer tent!”

Or, at least, that’s what he thought he heard, the wind ate portions of her words like a staticky broadcast. So he ran to his best guess, stopping short when he did finally see her.

Jillian was on her knees, working the hood off of a fallen suit. Another lay behind her, his head lolled to the side, mouth open, his helmet lying a foot away in the sand.

He heard the precious compass hit the dirt, and instantly his knees bent, his body’s immediate reaction to protect its treasure. Her face turned up to his, her stethoscope hung from her ears, her penlight clung to her fingertips. “They’re all under.” Her eyes tracked wildly to either side of him.

“Jillian—” He grabbed her arm to pull her to her feet. Thinking to embrace her in a hug, and comfort her. But she jerked her arm out of his reach.

Before he snapped out of it, Jillian was on her feet, racing away. Her standard uniform of running shoes carrying her well from one tent to another. He raked his fingers through the sandy earth, sifting out the round silver compass and he followed, watching as she lifted flaps and peered inside each one. He checked the needle periodically, noting where it went from the wild swinging to pointing due south.

This whole shanty town the CDC had erected was now in the reversal.

Jillian dove into one tent and David ran the distance to join her. Not knowing what he could do, but that he would do whatever was needed. They were in a maximum security prison made of loose canvas. There was no telling when or how the prisoners would get loose. Or what they would do to the cute little doctor if they did.

The tent was darker than he expected and his eyes took several seconds more than he felt was reasonable to adjust. When he finally was able to focus on Jillian, she was kneeling on the floor where a CDC employee, not in a hazmat suit, had curled up between the patient gurneys.

Jillian put her stethoscope on the woman's chest, rolling her from her side onto her back even as she checked the prone woman. The badge hanging around her neck flashed as the woman rolled over, revealing that she was an RN.

He didn't really want to know, but he asked anyway. "The others?"

She made eye contact finally, but he almost wished she hadn't, her vivid blue eyes were bright with a gloss of unshed tears. "All the same."

He reached down for her with his right hand, having shifted the compass to his pocket and the briefcase into his left. "Jillian, we're standing in a reversal. We have to get out."

"What?" She focused on him. *In* him, somewhere inside his soul.

"We're deep in the reversal right now. Everywhere you ran is backwards." He tugged her to her feet, whether she wanted it or not. All of it made him uncomfortable: her gaze, the polarity. "And judging by what's happened, it's pretty powerful. We have to get out."

He simply turned and yanked her along, brooking no protests. He kept going until they had arrived at an untouched cluster of cactus, well beyond the tents, opposite the parking lot where they had come in. It had been the fastest way out. Finally, when it seemed she wouldn't protest, or just dash back in to save some chart or blood sample, he dropped her hand and plucked the compass from his shirt pocket.

North.

True north.

He breathed out.

But while he gathered himself together, Jillian fell apart. Her legs gave way and she sank onto the sand beneath her, gathering her knees in her arms and burying her face in the space between.

It took a few moments with him standing there, looking out over the desert while she cried at his feet before she spoke. "Why didn't they call?"

He shook his head, but mentally he flipped through image after image of what he'd just emerged from. "You know, it looked like people just fell wherever they stood."

She started to uncurl. And David knew he'd handed her something for that brain of hers to chew on. She'd come back around for that.

"No." She looked up into the sky and he waited for what she'd reveal. "They didn't fall. There were no broken bones, or bumps to the head. It was like they curled up or lay down where they were. They had at least a few moments."

He nodded for her to continue.

"That would mean they got sick very quickly. . . even the RN didn't get out of the tent to tell anyone. But she didn't fall. Not the way she was lying." He thought he saw a ghost of a smile pass her lips. "That nurse was smart. She even thought it through and lay down on her side. In case she vomited. So she wouldn't choke on it."

*Pleasant*, he thought to himself. But he'd have to remember that, in case he came to needing it.

"Help!"

It cut through the air. A human voice that wasn't theirs, calling from the other side of the camp.

Jillian was on her feet in an instant, dashing back in towards the tents, until David caught her arm and hauled her off her feet, nearly yanking her shoulder from its socket. "You can't go back through there. We have to go around."

So she pulled him at a breakneck speed. He wouldn't let go and she wouldn't slow down. David wouldn't abandon his briefcase, so it slapped against his leg a few times until he learned to hold it

out of the way. He ran with the compass in front of him, watching for the shift and pulling Jillian off to the side more than once as the needle jerked too much for his taste.

It wasn't reliable, this running and reading. The compass was meant to be used by a camper who had a moment to stop and let the needle settle, not running at high speeds around fatal pole reversals.

Just then Jillian stopped short and, without any warning, he crashed into her back, eliciting a grunt from her and a quick save as she managed to keep them both on their feet.

Five county cars were sitting in the lot where they hadn't been before.

"Shift change."

Her voice caused a swell of nausea to rise in him. Twenty officers had just arrived to relieve their friends, only to find them comatose, scattered across the ground like forgotten toys.

The sound came again, from off to their right. But this time it wasn't a cry for help. It was a muffled noise, a grunt, a groan, or somewhere in between.

And she was just too fast for him to catch. Jillian jumped into the fray, dashing between two tents and disappearing from his view. *What the hell, he was going to die anyway. He might as well go out chasing a hot doctor.*

When he arrived, she was leaning over an officer who was curled on the ground with his arms wrapped tight around his stomach. "Ahhhhh." It was soft. Not so much in pain as it was a release. And even as David stood there dumbfounded, the arms slackened. The officer's face lost its tension and his head eased to the ground.

The officer looked like he had suddenly gone to sleep.

Jillian looked over her shoulders at another man who was standing over a fallen colleague. A quick sweep revealed that almost all of the officers were already down. Only a few remained, clutching their stomachs, and one had his hands clasped over his ears, as though the eerie desert silence was the loudest feedback.

As David watched Jillian rushed, helpless, from one man to another. Not able to help any of them without sacrificing the others. Not able to help any of them anyway. And one by one they dropped. Creating a pattern of fallen bodies in grey-green uniforms, aligned in small clusters, attesting to how they had tried to help each other.

The whole shift down.

"Jillian!" He paced up to her in several hard steps, again grabbing her behind the elbow and dragging her along. "We have to get out of here. Look at what it's doing to people."

He thought of nothing else but reaching the edge of this freak of nature and walking beyond it. He hauled her with him, completely unconcerned for her well-being. Mostly he figured he should take the only other standing person out of the reversal with him.

When he felt he was far enough beyond, probably way further than necessary, he pulled out the old boy scout compass again. This time he was able to use it in its intended style, standing still. Although his hand shook like Richter seven.

North.

Again the needle direction freed his lungs of their breath.

Jillian just stood next to him, a statue in kelly green, her eyes blinking on and off azure blue. He wanted to lean over and put his hands on his knees and breathe like he had just finished wind sprints. Feeling his lungs contract so rapidly and painfully was almost a relief.

"Why are we still standing? Why did they collapse and we didn't?"

He looked up to see her eyes connect with his. He felt it like a hit, square in the chest, as the words absorbed.

Those officers hadn't been inside anywhere near as long as they had, and yet the wardens had all fallen, most even before they could ask for help. They were rapidly affected by the reversal, the symptoms showing instantaneous onset to a man.

As his own eyes focused on Jillian he saw the thought pattern in her head change. Her eyes averted and she grabbed for her stomach. Tumbling to her knees, Jillian lost the contents of her breakfast in the hot sand.



His father's hand was slack and lifeless. Not warm, not cold. Not dead, but not the house of a living soul. Mr. Abellard's eyes didn't open, didn't show the telltale movements of tracking a dream. Nor would they. Jordan knew that, and felt the sharp stab somewhere untouched.

Eddie's death had been tough. Hearing about Lindsay and Kelly slipping away had hurt. Opened old wounds. Rubbed areas already raw. But when his father took one last look at him, before his eyes pulled closed and his breathing pattern changed, Jordan felt the world undergo some subtle shift.

In that moment Lake James had ceased to be his home. It was simply a cluster of people he knew, or knew of, and a house that he had grown up in. The promise of waffles on Sunday was forever rescinded. The smile his father would get when thinking of his mother. The last person who remembered her as Jordan did. All of it was gone.

Now he waited. Until his father took his last breath and died. Or until Landerly called his number and drafted him into service again. But now he would only fight for others. So they wouldn't lose like he had.

Another man lay comatose in the second bed against the window. Jordan didn't know him, but his Dad had once referred to him as Albert, and Jordan got the feeling that the two men had worked together.

As he often did, he squeezed his father's hand. Just enough to send pressure signals to the dormant brain, in hopes that Jackson Abellard was only sleeping, that his son's hand would get even the slightest squeeze back. But it didn't. Not any of the tries before, and not this time either.

The smell blanketed the room, not just with the odor of 'hospital' but of death. The whole room was waiting - the chairs, the window, the light that didn't quite filter in. Why should it bother? It was all just a matter of time.

Jordan stood and stretched, needing to get out where things lived and breathed, even if they didn't really connect with him. The cafeteria seemed like a logical choice - the eating of food being the road to sustaining a body. He put his feet in a rhythmic pattern on the floor, moving himself out the door and down the hallway, even though it required far too much thought. He was halfway there when his cell phone went off. Tugging it from the waistband of his blue scrubs, he checked the caller ID.

Landerly.

*Well, that didn't take long.* He flipped the phone open. "Yes?"

"We have two new cities near McCann that are losing people, and very rapidly. I want you there."

Jordan blinked twice. Thinking through . . . nothing. He would leave his father here, because there was nothing more he could do. And did he need to sit here for the two more days it would take, and simply wait? No. He could be helpful.

"Abellard? Anne will call you back with your arrangements." With a few more short sentences, Landerly conveyed the seriousness of the issue. These were *cities*, they were on the maps and had populations in the tens of thousands. Huge compared to what they had seen in McCann or even Lake James. Jillian and David had seen everyone at the prison go under, and they would meet him in Nashville and fly into Knoxville together on a small charter.

With only a click and no real closing words, Jordan was left holding the cell phone. Staring at it like an alien in his grasp as the staff in the hall flowed around him in a sea of blues and greens.

He turned and headed back to his father's room, he hadn't really been hungry anyway. And in a minute he had re-perched himself at the side of the mechanical gurney. Again he held his father's hand, but this time he spoke. With gentle words he explained that he'd be back after he packed, but only briefly, before he was off again to East Tennessee, to pursue his place as a physician. Something he had only in the past few days understood that his father admired him for.

"I'll be back in a bit, Dad." Taking a deep breath he forced himself to stand and let go of the shell that had housed his father.

On lead feet he made the turns down the corridor, waited at the elevator, and walked through the chill air to the physician's parking lot. His father's beat-up Ford Falcon took the turns like a steamer, slow and wide, heavy and solid feeling. Like his father, the car was from a different era, and with a slight smile he decided he would come back to claim the antique as his own.

Within minutes he was pulling up to the house where his father had spent his whole adult life. The house was emptier than it had ever been. The souls had vacated it a while ago it seemed. With quick leaps Jordan took the stairs two at a time and raided his drawers for what he had brought - so much for settling in and staying a while.

The duffle was packed and slung over his shoulder without a second thought. He was, by now, too used to picking up and fleeing with only his bag to let sentimentality rule him. Key in hand, he bolted the front door behind him, and sank into the driver's seat of the car.

He pulled out, driving in the exact reverse order to get back to the clinic where his Dad lay. He managed to get another fifteen minutes of time with his father. Not that that time made any difference to either of them. Jordan didn't speak, didn't think, didn't cast silent wishes. When the cell finally rang again, he took the call where he sat, Anne's dulcet tones telling him that his flight was leaving in just barely enough time to get himself to the airport, and maybe not even that. She mentioned the charter terminal in Nashville and how to get to it.

He hung up, and waved the phone at his Dad, thinking to make a little joke. "Stop me now Dad, or I'm off to Tennessee."

His father made no response. No shift or hitch in his breathing, no twitch of a finger. Jordan watched for all of it and saw none of it. So he stood, stretched, and after a brief hesitation he leaned over and gently pressed a kiss to his father's forehead. "I love you, Dad. I'll see you on the other side."

• • • •

"WHAT!?" BECKY SHOUTED into the cell phone. John had called her three times while she was out trekking with Leon and Jess. Not that her super CDC phone had picked up anything in the back wilds of Minnesota.

"Clinton, Oak Ridge-" *static*. She wanted to throw the phone, but upon recognizing towns just beyond her parents' land she knew she couldn't lose it over a cell phone. There were far better things to lose it for these days.

Like Leon and Jess making angry faces at her. Here she was yelling on a cell phone in the middle of their pristine wilderness. Well they could stuff it.

"Come . . . back . . . in . . . w- . . . -eed . . . talk."

"I'm coming." She practically shouted it, again knowing it was useless. Louder only worked when you were yelling to a person far away, but Becky was beginning to wonder if maybe that wouldn't be a better method of communication. John said something else, even more



indistinguishable than the previous sentences, so she yelled “Good-bye!” and hung up. Only to turn and face the Peppersmith guys and their angry glares.

With a sigh, she ignored their expressions, just as she had learned to ignore the menacing way they held their tranq guns. That was for her protection, she had found out the other day when a wolf had come too close. “We have to go in, guys. John called me back. Something about other towns.”

“Other towns?” That from Leon, his deep voice and blue eyes not hiding his surprise or concern.

*Crap.* She had no idea what kind of clearance these guys held. But she also knew her place. And her place was not to give information out. So she weaseled. Another *great* skill she had learned since hiring on at the CDC. Telling the truth to lie. “I don’t know what it is. I really couldn’t hear much of anything except that I had to come back in.”

But she had heard a whole lot more. John sounded not scared exactly, but disturbed. Oak Ridge and Clinton were just beyond the boundaries of the little acreage her folks held. And she knew what the reversals were doing. More than she wanted to know.

She was under contract to *not* tell her family anything, even though death might be at their doorstep. Literally.

That thought set an ulcer to forming. She could feel the hydrochloric acid in her stomach pinching and wearing away at the delicate tissue even as she hiked back toward their base. The trucks stood ready, cages open and waiting for animals stupid or unlucky enough to get in their way, or to catch John’s eye. It seemed that John, who had never held a gun in his life, who had always excelled at science and never sports, enjoyed having the raw power of the Peppersmiths at his command. Becky on the other hand felt guilty every time she gave the word to bring a creature down, to haul it in. She kept telling herself it was a necessary evil.

The hike seemed much longer this way, even though she knew for certain that they were taking a more direct route and walking at a faster pace. Pines passed by with a speed that was likely to have her wind up with a twisted ankle. But she was fueled by adrenaline, her brain not acknowledging the sounds of birds. Even though it categorized that the aviary itself was changing here, day by day.

The Nevada prison scared the living daylights out of her. According to what she read, it was very lucky that Jillian and David were alive. They had actually run into the reversal, several times. Dr. Abellard was supposed to be monitoring them for signs of turning to the worse. That was enough to give her the willies.

From what she and John had gleaned that morning, it sounded like the suits were standing at the edge of the reversal and jumping back as it got bigger. They were using ultrasound and heat sensors to detect who was still alive. It seemed most of them were. They were looking to see who was moving. At last count that was no one.

Becky chewed her lip. The sharp retort of the rifle just behind her made her jump and nearly bite through it. She turned to glare at Leon who was holding his gun still aimed and practically smoking. But it was Jess who pointed just a few feet to her left where a lynx was teetering on its feet and falling with a soft thud to the forest floor. Becky closed her eyes, wondering whether she should thank Leon or yell at John for this crazy adventure.

As casually as if it was a discarded towel on his living room floor, Leon picked up the lynx and slung it over his shoulder. He motioned for Becky to keep trudging forward. Her ankles were sore from three days of this. Her nerves were stretched. And the ground was giving way beneath her feet. But she slid down the small incline, touching her hand to various branches to stay upright, sending small rocks skittering in front of her. Leon and Jesse brought up a tight watch behind her as she picked her way back with very little grace. At least compared to the two men whose big booted feet

were no more than cat's paws in the thick pine wilderness. But she tried to breathe clean air and pretend it was all okay.

Becky knew it wouldn't last long. If she ran, the clean smell would give way to the bloody scene they had twice visited at the riverside. The deer would be only juveniles, and unless she could turn her brain off, she would worry that thought in her head forever. Then there was also the promise of the maniacal gleam that would light John's eyes when he sent the Peppersmiths off after her to bring her down with their tranq guns. She, too, could come back to camp unconscious and slung across Leon's wide shoulder, arms hanging limp, flapping with the rhythm of his gait.

Her two low ponytails stirred in the wind that reached them as they neared the edge of the clearing. John approached, carelessly picking his way through the brush, branches snapping back behind him. "Oak Ridge is losing people and so is Clinton."

He held up a map in front of her asking what she knew. All Becky could think was that the whole of Anderson County was going under and the two Peppersmiths behind her were getting a serious education in what was happening. She could feel Leon approach even though she couldn't see or hear him. Her instincts were the best detection for him, probably the only one.

John circled the map area, pointing with his pen. "People are going down fast! One hundred since our update this morning."

She watched as the tip of his capped red pen passed right through her parents' property as he made generous circles around the affected area.

She simply nodded, and waited.

"I want you on the next plane back down there." He turned at last to acknowledge Leon. "Can you drive her?"

Becky's mouth almost hung slack. Like a dog with a bone, John's manners had gotten just as canine. She was turning to apologize for her boss when John spoke again. "I'd like you to fly down there with her. See what you can check out. Catch what you can. I just have to stay here. It's way too interesting."

He half handed, half shoved a page at Becky. She recognized it as a species list, just as John spoke. "It's a list of all the species we're losing." His eyes were almost bright with anticipation. As though it were just a game, that the paper she held in her hand listed imaginary armies from a too serious game of 'Risk', not Bengal Tigers and Canada Moose and Elk and, of course, Georgia Warblers.

• • • •

JORDAN TOOK IN THE scene before him. They had come in on the promised charter. Only this was no Lear jet, it was a wobbly Cessna, that had wound its way down to a field in the open space between Clinton and Oak Ridge. After a touchdown that had felt as though the earth had risen up to them and the plane had stayed stationary, they cranked open the doors and tumbled out.

He let Jillian go first, being gentlemanly, and instantly regretted it. She stumbled a little as her feet hit ground. Her soft blue scrubs showing the buckling of her knees, her hands tucking into her stomach as she folded over. He felt the raw stab of fear that knifed him in the gut every time she wavered. Again he came up with an excuse, it was just the plane ride. He was nauseous, too.

*She didn't have 'it'.*

With an ungraceful thump, he landed beside her and took her elbow, seeing David come out the other side, compasses already in hand, briefcase and leather bag hanging from his arms. He looked

ready to walk into the hotel and spend his workweek. Jordan's gaze naturally pulled back to Jillian, his hands encircling her upper arms, his eyes finding hers. "Are you all right?"

Even as he asked it, he told himself the pain was just because he had already lost everyone. Not because anything was so special about *her*.

She pushed at his chest. "I'm okay. Just need to get my feet under me." With that, she straightened. Shoved her hair out of her face. The dark strands, for once loose, had bothered her on the whole flight over. Wet and hanging limp when they entered the plane, they had a gentle wave to them now that rubbed beneath his fingers as he let her stand on her own.

He felt and heard her take a deep breath, and he grabbed both their bags as had become his custom. David had already planted himself behind the wheel of the midsized, mid-aged gold sedan. Why they didn't have grey or even a black hearse was beyond him. For the thousandth time Jordan felt like they were walking blind. Only this time they were walking into a serious tragedy.

Holding the passenger door for Jillian he waited while she situated herself, most of the green color having faded from her features. Then he let himself into the backseat while David gunned the engine, testing the feel of the car and his own level of testosterone.

With the map Anne had provided they wound an uncertain way through the countryside. It looked much like the area outside McCann. The Appalachian Mountains cradled the sides of the small road, only this time they nestled ATV shops, car dealerships, and the occasional small windowless strip joint up along the sides of the two lane highway.

The shops gave way to churches, hillsides dotted with houses, and at last a storage unit of long gray buildings fronted by rows of garage doors. The chain link fence was a good fifteen feet high, winding its way around the property and then across the road in front of them. That made Jordan frown.

A uniformed security guard stood sentry at the gate that spanned the street, on the outside of the town, and David pulled up even as the guard approached them. But David was already whipping out his compass, and making Jordan wish someone else had driven.

The rent-a-cop tipped his hat and spoke to all of them through David's open window. "Sorry folks. City's closed."

*The City is CLOSED?* How does one even close a city? But Jordan could see the answer to his question looming fifteen feet in front of him. The chain link was old and looked unused, but the razor wire gleamed in the afternoon light, obviously a fresh addition to the precautions.

David pulled out his temporary badge, flashing it as though he were the president's guard. "We're with the CDCP." He didn't add that they needed to get inside. Or that they had clearance. He didn't need to. His confidence, that may have already passed well into arrogance, spoke all that for him.

The guard stepped back slowly, nodded again, and spoke into the police style walkie-talkie tacked to his shoulder. His movements all yielded to the slow drawl of the south. And Jordan could see where it was often perceived as laziness, but could also see that it clearly wasn't. It was bred into these people who hadn't seen a Minnesota blizzard, or had to do more to keep the cold at bay than turn up the collar on their coats.

But they also were possessed of a certainty that speeding up wasn't critical - a belief that clearly didn't run in Jillian's blood, southern cheerleader that she may be. She fidgeted in the seat, squirming this way and that, trying to look calm but not quite pulling it off. Jordan would have bet his life savings her right foot was crossed over the other, keeping to a silent rhythm.

The guard sauntered back to them, gave a brief nod and told them it'd be just a minute.

It was more like four, Jordan realized as Jillian fidgeted away the time and David sat calmly beside her, pulling instrument after instrument from the briefcase, recalibrating it or something, and then quietly putting it back. Jordan leaned back, trying to stay relaxed. He thought he was achieving it well. He kept the hyperventilation and the terror at bay, tucking his hands behind his head, and leaning back as though he were on the beach and not sitting in the back of a government car about to gain security clearance through the gates of hell.

The guard stood stationary at the side of the fence, looking exactly as he had long before they were parked there, engine idling. Jordan wondered what the guard would do to get the gates open, or if he was waiting for a code or such.

It turned out the guard would do nothing.

A black sedan, filled with men in identical suits and haircuts, pulled up on the inside of the gate, looking like something out of an FBI movie. But then again this was *The Town That Built The Bomb*, Jordan thought as the four men undid a thick padlock and wheeled the gate back by hand. They threw their weight at the task, creaking it back foot by foot, before waving the car through. David pulled in and kept on driving, but Jordan turned around to see that they men in suits never acknowledged the guard outside and that they secured the gate with the large padlock set with something that looked like a magnetic key. Jordan fought off thoughts of having to climb the gate and throw himself over the razor wire with thousands of citizens when the lock failed.

David pushed the small map at Jillian and set her to navigating. She instantaneously spouted off directions.

“My god,” Jillian shook her head and she spoke again before Jordan could finish the thought of wondering what pattern her brain had found within two minutes of entering the city. “The streets are alphabetized.” She looked from side to side, and while David seemed to have his eyes on both the road and his compasses, Jordan followed her gaze to see that it certainly appeared that she was right.

“Good lord, who are these people?” He heard it from his mouth before he realized he had let it slip. This was Jillian’s South and he didn’t want to offend.

But she supplied an answer with a quirk of her mouth. “The government.”

“That’s right . . .” The town had only become public after world war two when the government had opened the city to the families of the scientists who were working on the top-secret Hiroshima project. The place was fuckin’ nuts. As best as he could see the gates encircled the entire city. Whether that was to keep people out or secrets in, he was unsure. The streets were not only alphabetized, they stacked the road signs. So you would turn down a side street that bore four perfectly ambiguous street names.

There were a few people on the streets. Of course all the activity was on the outside of the sawhorse barricades. The people who had lived inside the reversal’s radius had already been moved to temporary housing. But the people who were out looked fairly normal in spite of the presence of the men in big dark suits, with small sharp haircuts.

The townspeople put gas in their cars and drove through the McDonalds. The Home Depot lot was empty, and Jordan hazarded a guess that food and gas ranked higher than repairs. Maybe this town full of scientists was smart enough to realize that barricading their doors would only trap them inside and keep nothing out.

“Shit!” David’s voice cut through the air.

“What?” Jillian turned to him, and from her color, just that quick motion was enough to make her green. Or maybe it was the same thought that Jordan was having. David swore all the time, but not in a surprised way, and if something here had surprised him it would have to be bad. Really bad.

“We’re either on the fuzzy edge of a very large reversal and we’re going to hit it any second, or we’ve been riding the edge since three lights back.”

“But the road is straight. It’s not following an arc at all.” Jordan didn’t understand any of the magnetics of it, he knew just enough to pass the physics section of the MCAT years ago when he went into med school. Beyond that he was a slave to what David chose to share with him. But he knew that what they had been finding was that the bubbles were circular. Probably how they had gotten dubbed that way in the first place.

“Exactly, Sherlock.”

Jordan almost popped him upside the head, which would have been really easy to from the back seat. Instead, he fought the urge while David began explaining, “Which makes me think it’s a really big bubble. . . . shiiiiiiiit.”

Jordan didn’t put voice to it. David would tell him or not and there wasn’t much he could do about it. Jillian however seemed to believe she could hold some sort of sway over David. Jordan’s first thought was that she was lying to herself. Then he realized there was every good chance it was him lying to himself. She might very well hold sway with David. Who knew what had been going on between them while he was in Lake James watching his family slip away one by one?

He tamped down the images, thinking that the news David had preceded with *shiiiiiiiit* was going to be happier thoughts than the ones he was having.

“We’re in.”

Jordan’s back snapped straight. “Well then, get out!”

But David kept driving, not noticing Jillian turning green with fear or illness on the seat next to him. Neither option was acceptable to Jordan.

“Jillian,” At the sound of his voice she turned to face him and Jordan was unable to read all the emotions running stampede across her features. “Find another path on the map. Take us far left or right . . . or . . .”

David set down the black palm-pilot-looking-thing, that was a serious navigational compass as best as Jordan could tell, and picked up the old boy scout version, complete with red needle and N E S W markings. “David, which way is out?”

“We’ll just drive straight through.” The blond head never really glanced up from the small hammered silver fob in front of him. He would have caused a serious pile-up if anyone had been on the road. But these people were organized.

“Get out of the bubble.” Jordan didn’t realize that he was unbuckled and hanging over the front seat. “You and Jillian have already been exposed to these for too long.” He didn’t add that he was giving less and less of a crap if David fell into a serious coma right this instant. Except that he’d prefer the asshole put the car in ‘park’ first.

David said nothing, just kept driving, occasionally glancing up to check the flow of traffic against the whispered directions Jillian was giving him. It seemed he was taking them into the heart of the reversal. The man had no concern for his own safety. Jordan couldn’t care less. David had no concern for Jordan’s safety. That was because he was a son of a bitch. But having no concern for Jillian’s was beyond Jordan’s limits. If he’d had a gun, he would have pulled it and tucked it right at the base of David’s head, right up the foramen magnum. The hole there would make certain that a bullet couldn’t glance off that thick head. Guaranteed death.

“We’re fuzzy.” The words came after long minutes waiting for a response. Long minutes of almost leisurely driving down a small town turnpike with the sun overhead and greenery that made both the Nevada desert and Lake James look like they were constructed from brown bags.

Jillian started to take deeper breaths and with shaky motions pointed out the cross street they were looking for, then the white tents gently breathing with the breeze. It was a high school soccer field from the looks of the sign posted just under the snarling wildcat. In running red light letters it read 'no school until further notice'.

David made a hard right into the lot and stopped the car at the edge. With a quick look at his compass he shoved it into his pocket and pulled the black high-tech contraption from his briefcase and started to unfold himself from the car.

Jordan threw himself out of the backseat and hustled up to one of the suits who was approaching with a manila envelope. With the way the past three days had been going, if he was lucky, it would be full of anthrax and he could inhale deeply and die a slow and painful death. Which would, of course, be far more humane than what he was suffering now.

What he was suffering was only compounded by David walking around the front of the car and offering Jillian his arm, "Baby, are you okay?"

Thoughts warred in Jordan's brain. *Now he asks how she's doing? And Baby?*

But the man was saying the envelope was from Landerly. And Jordan saw his own hands in front of him, only now aware that he was shaking far worse than he could detect through his own senses, even now that he knew he was doing it.

The pages came out neat and crisp, far better looking than anything they had pulled off the little traveling fax machine. He scanned the notes taking in the news. The churning of Landerly's brain, gathered into understandable English by some tech or junior MD now that he and Jillian weren't there to do the job.

"David!" He yelled but didn't look up. Didn't want to see what was going on, didn't care. "Landerly says the magnetics of the reversals are getting stronger in the centers. There's a graph here, almost like regular concentric rings."

David approached and snapped the pages from his hands. It wasn't even an asshole move, just the unthoughtfulness of a man who had always gotten what he wanted. But Jordan continued. "The Nevada site maps like a target. But it's even stronger than here or McCann. Landerly thinks that's why it took everyone out. McCann's getting stronger, too."

Jillian peeked over David's shoulder. "That doesn't make sense. The wildlife is returning to normal. Becky Sorenson said the frogs were looking more normal as were the insects and the other animals she tagged." Her brows knit together in frustration and there was almost a chugging sound as her brain ratcheted up a notch.

Jordan shrugged, simply grateful that the churning of her mental gears was a good indicator that she hadn't suffered permanently from David driving them straight through the last reversal. He felt his temper abate, even if the anger didn't.

Still David frowned, flipping one page and then the next. He rotated the papers and Jordan almost chuckled at the sight. As though this whole stinking pile of crap would look better upside down. But he didn't laugh. He couldn't fault the geologist for trying.

It wasn't like he had any better ideas.



Jillian sat on the edge of the cold cot. It was green army issue fabric slung and stitched to a metal frame, and it had either seen better days or had recently been the recipient of a very large occupant. It hadn't held her heat, and she hadn't been smart enough to line the bed with the blanket before she lay down, so she had lost temperature while she slept.

And slept fitfully at that. There was no way to get Jordan onto that thing with her without it looking like something more and she wasn't anywhere near brave enough to climb into a bed with David, not that either man would really fit on a cot with her. And she certainly wasn't stupid enough to climb into any bed with David when what she wanted was *sleep*.

Jordan was still out cold, his arm hanging peacefully out from under the covers he had partially kicked off. His fingers were mere inches from the ground but they didn't seem to notice. His face was soft in sleep; clearly he wasn't having her problems. The only thing that betrayed his state was the dark circles under his eyes and the two day growth of beard that aged him considerably, making him look more like the man he was and not just the friend she considered him.

With a sigh, she just gave up, sinking bare toes into the rough dark carpet of the classroom they were staying in. Desks had been pushed back and stacked against the walls. The whiteboard left clean for the scientists to use. They hadn't. She felt like all the churning in her stomach had prevented all the churning in her skull from producing a single useful thought for quite a while now.

Her head felt like it was swaying at the top of a tall post, and so she nixed her original idea of wandering down to find the cafeteria. The CDC was supposed to have set up their own food supply there, but she was too shaky to go it alone.

Jillian turned back to the bed; if she was already out of it then at least she was going to do this right this time. She deluded herself into thinking that maybe if she could retain her body heat she could sleep. With her mind focused on that singular thought, she rearranged the blanket and crawled back in. Pulling the free half of the blanket tightly across her, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to fight the bright gray light streaming through the fairly useless blinds.

She relaxed her entire body, muscle by muscle. When she was a resident, she'd been able to pass out at the drop of a hat, anywhere, anytime. But now sleep eluded her in the most painful of ways.

After a while she gave up, thankful that she was at least starting to get warm, and opened her eyes.

Jordan was watching her. "Morning."

"It's not morning." Her voice creaked like old hinges. "Morning implies that there was a night. I don't recall one."

"Still not sleeping?"

"What do you think?" She regretted it as soon as the words left her mouth.

But she sank into a solid portion of shame when Jordan asked her if she wanted to join him. Completely spoken with sympathy and none of the venom she had thrown at him.

"That can't be comfortable."

"What will you care? You'll be asleep."

Jillian almost laughed, and almost wondered how she could in the middle of all this. "But you won't be."

His mouth quirked behind the chestnut stubble that was a full shade darker than the sun-lightened length on his head. "Trust me, I'll fall back asleep quickly enough."



She couldn't very well say yes - there was no way they'd both fit unless she just climbed right on top of him, so she changed the subject. "Do you think the reversal has gotten this far since yesterday? They grow pretty fast now, and it was really close when we drove in. We could be in it right now."

"Don't change the subject on me." He lifted the blanket and made every attempt to scoot back to one side of the cot. But he was thwarted at every motion, sliding back into the center of the sling. Jillian raised one eyebrow at him, never making even the first motion to leave the confines of her finally warm cocoon.

"Fine."

But he didn't say anything more than just the one word. He simply stood to full length, stretching his tall form and revealing sun-brown skin where his t-shirt lifted from the edge of his boxers for just a moment. His eyes scanned the room and settled in the corner on a pile of two spare blankets. He turned his cot on its side and motioned for Jillian to do the same.

With great reluctance she stood up, her bare feet draining their heat into the cold carpet again. She pushed the cot out of the way as she saw that he was layering the blankets on the floor. He put his own blanket as the top layer then kneeled down on it. "Come on."

It was only slightly softer than a rock slab, but she sank onto it willingly, letting Jordan pull the blanket from her shoulders, and trusting that she'd be heated again within moments.

Stretching out along the rough blankets, Jillian had only long enough to shove her hair back out of her face, before Jordan was there and the covers were pulled over them. Lord, the man was better than a space heater. Suddenly she understood why women married men they didn't even love. God, the sleep!

"Jordan?"

"Shh."

Her stomach rolled and her jaw clamped to stop the sensation, but she didn't even get that far. She was falling backward into the black abyss.

• • • •

DAVID WALKED THE HALLWAY, lined with ugly green lockers, looking like the fresh paint hid layers of abuse. The worn linoleum on the floor had not yet been replaced, the black scuffs still not erasable. His own high school had been so much more pristine than this. The lockers and carpeting replaced if they had worn even slightly. Even the children had been removed if they were too frayed, not quite up to snuff. He wondered what other differences his father's money had bought him.

Jordan and Jillian were sleeping in a classroom further down this hall. He didn't know which one, but relied on the handwritten pages taped beside each door, designating the CDC's purpose for each.

He almost walked past the one that read: Abellard, Brookwood, Carter. For a moment he smirked at the irony, that even in print Jillian was caught between the two of them, but then he turned the knob, pushing open the heavy door, the wired glass lined with a shade so he couldn't see in.

As the dim room slowly came into focus he was caught up in the cozy scene - Jillian snuggled into the grasp of Abellard's arms. Both of them sleeping like babies.

*Son of a bitch.*

The thought took him by surprise in its vehemence. He'd been telling himself that it didn't matter. But maybe it did.

He knelt on her side of the makeshift lover's nest and reached out, taking just a moment to be sure that he only touched her. "Jillian. Baby. Time to wake up." He nudged her shoulder a little, thinking

that this was a first even for him. He'd slept with married women. He'd broken up more than one couple along the way. But he'd never, until just now, called a woman 'baby' while she was literally in another man's arms.

His thoughts stopped as she stirred, rolling away from Abellard to face him. "Whhaaat?" The word was soft and low.

"We're wanted out front."

He could see her chest move with a long sigh as she blinked and carelessly shoved the hair from her face. She rolled back into the space she had vacated, and for a moment David was certain he'd been given the ultimate brush off. But she grabbed Jordan's shoulder and gave a gently shake. "Jordan. Wake up. We have to go."

David cut her off. "No. Let him sleep. They want you and me."

"Huh?" She rolled again to look at him, but her job had already been accomplished. And Jordan was looking at him, too, through clear eyes.

"They want you two? Why?"

"We're going to go in."

Abellard shot upright, revealing a t-shirt, and letting David's brain breathe a sigh of relief that it wasn't even cozier than it had looked. "No."

David rocked back on his heels. Why was Jordan fighting back? He slung what he had. "Not your decision."

Abellard's eyes turned to ice. "Then whose?"

David wanted to smile. Jordan and Jillian were Landerly's babies, lackeys, peons, whatever. But the word had wound up in his hands. And that felt good. "Landerly's."

David watched while Jordan put a hand on Jillian's shoulder, gently holding her back. "Don't go. We'll talk to Landerly first. I'm not sure I believe this." He rolled up and off the floor on the other side, diving into his pants pocket for the cell phone.

Surprisingly it was Jillian who came to David's rescue. She sat with a slight shake to remove the last of the sleep from her head. "Jordan, Landerly ordered it."

David wanted to grin, but schooled his features the way he always did. Better to give away nothing. It hadn't been any great importance to him. But David knew himself well enough to know that he was a Carter through and through. And if the challenge was issued it was always answered. And as his father had said, *it had damned well better be won, too.*

Abellard had thrown down the gauntlet. And in David's mind that meant it was just a matter of time before Jillian was his.

He watched while Jillian did his work for him and he bottled the pleasure at it.

"What do you mean Landerly ordered it?"

She sighed, leaning out to Jordan. But bless him, Abellard wasn't having it. "When we were in Nevada, all the wardens and officers walked right into the reversal and fell under. But not us. We had been in for longer than any of them and had no effects. We're fairly certain that we're immune."

"You're *what*?"

Jillian shook her head again, but continued, while David sat back and enjoyed watching the distance between them grow. "Immune."

Abellard's eyes narrowed and Jillian warily slid back at the menace. "You're willing to risk your lives because you did it once before and were okay?!?"

She was on her heels by now, too, and fighting back.

*That's it Jillian, give him hell.*

“No, I’m *not*. But we have to stop this or we’ll all die from it. Landerly ordered it. And I have to admit that I don’t know what else to do.”

Jordan raked a hand through his hair, thinking hard and fast for a few seconds. “Then I’m going, too. Whatever immunity you got, it’s likely I got it, too. It’s probably because of the way we’ve been exposed to the reversals.”

David thought that was a reasonable argument, and was cursing himself for not foreseeing it, when Jillian again solved his problems.

“No, you have to stay out here. David and I were together the whole time. We know we got the same exposure. We don’t know that for certain about you.”

Abellard’s jaw clenched. David wasn’t even sure if the good Dr. Brookwood noticed. But he sure did. She just kept talking. “We need you out here, in case . . . in case anything happens.”

“What!?” He was on his feet, furious at her and adding distance. *Bless the powers that be*. “I’m supposed to sit out here and wait by the sidelines in case you slip into a coma and die? While I watch?”

“Jordan-”

But he cut her off before she could begin. “Do you know what I did in Minnesota? . . .” He didn’t wait long enough, just barreled ahead, “I watched every last member of my family go under. And I’m supposed to sit here and watch you purposefully throw yourself into it? No way in hell!”

With an angry snap of his arms he whipped the pants off the floor, stepping into them and buttoning the fly as he stalked out the door.

Jillian’s mouth hung open, but that was okay. David stepped up to fill in the void. “He’ll get over it. He’ll have to. We don’t even know if he can survive going in.”

She turned slowly to him. “We don’t know if *we* can.”

“But who else can go?”

God, he had never been one to play the hero. But hey, there was always a first time, right? The way he figured it they were all radiated toast anyway. He might as well get the girl before he bit the big one. It wouldn’t matter. If there was a hell it likely already had a parking spot with an engraved nameplate for him.

She didn’t answer. So he smiled. “Well, then let’s get ready to go.”

Two hours later, they had swallowed a complement of horse pills. And Abellard was still nowhere to be seen. Good.

David was in full gear, compasses and magnetic field readers strapped to and stuffed in a toolbelt around his waist. He’d never felt so working-class before. Jillian had cell phones, and paper and pencils, a stethoscope hung around her neck. David wasn’t sure if that was because she thought she might need it, or if it was just as much a part of her as the scrubs. He peeled his eyes away from her and looked out at the town in front of him. It looked enough like any other. But he knew it wasn’t.

They stood at the new edge of the reversal, twenty feet closer than it had been last evening. The fuzzy edges were wide and getting wider. They shouldn’t encounter any people in here. Everyone should have been evacuated. And if they did find anyone, well, then, that would be Jillian’s problem.

Jillian took deep breaths, as though she were preparing to walk underwater. It was all he could do not to do the same. But his job here was to be a calming rock for her, let her think he was unaffected.

“Ready?” He asked it nonchalantly. Or he tried to, not that Jillian even left her mental space to notice.

“As I’ll ever be.” She sucked in a lungful of air. “But I’m warning you, I’m not that ready.”

He stepped in, waiting, as he always did, for the feeling of getting kicked in the gut. Of having all the air sucked out of him. Or maybe tingling in his fingers. But his stomach didn’t even roll.

But he was past the yellow flags, delineating the new boundaries. He was in the wide edge. Without looking back for Jillian he took another few tentative steps, then started walking. Jillian skipped to catch up, like a swimmer who knows that the water is cold and it’s better to just dive right in.

She slipped a small street map from the back of her notebook, showing him the highlighted line. He took the page from her and frowned at it. “How far is this?”

“About three miles.” He could see her throat work, but resisted the urge to ask if she was okay. “They recalculated the center this morning. The edges keep shifting.”

“Hm.” Not really in the mood for conversation, he felt around the things at his waist. The weights hanging from his belt took him back to his digs, back to fist-sized rock chips in tough Ziploc baggies and midnight runs down the grid to see if the idiots had fucked up another orientation. That’s what had started this whole mess, too.

He picked out the old school compass, shaking off fantasies of the days when he could swear at everyone around him. When they were all associate faculty, not physicians. Or better yet, students - students whose degrees depended on his good graces. David looked at the houses they were wandering past, just a few blocks beyond the high school. Some with pretty flowers in pots and window boxes. Some with peeling paint. And some with both. It was eerie with the absence of people.

He feared seeing the faces of the dead peering at him, as transparent as the windowpanes of the empty houses. He pulled his gaze to the needle which had stopped jumping although he wasn’t sure when. With a snort at himself for forgetting, he tossed a flag back a handful of yards. Close enough.

“You know, the paperwork this morning showed another bubble.” Jillian didn’t look at him, so he simply grunted, staying focused on his compass.

“It’s up toward the north side of town. And it’s growing pretty quickly.”

He grunted again, then decided that if he was going to shut her up interrupting was really the way to go. He didn’t need chitchat. “What street are we on?”

She looked up, not pointing out that he could easily have tilted his own head and read the sign his damn self. “Pomona.”

He made her write it down, pulled out another meter and read the strength of the field off to her. But it didn’t shut her up.

“The bubble at the edge of town is really near the fence.” Her mouth moved as fast as the pencil recording everything he spouted at her. “They’re afraid it won’t respect the city’s boundaries. That it will cross the gate. We’re not sure what to do then.”

“Hm.” He tried to leave it at that.

“There were fifty people reported down this morning. New since last night. And another hundred with stomach upset.” She paused to inhale and let it out, and it still didn’t sound like natural breathing to his ears, but he decided not to mention that. The compass needle in front of him jumped a little. He checked the field strength. Stepped into a front yard and popped a meter that looked remarkably like a meat thermometer into the ground.

He didn’t even get to read it before Jillian started babbling again. “You know, our numbers have shown that of those hundred down, ninety to ninety-five percent of them will actually have it. The other five plus percent are just your standard G I trouble with a dose of panic.”

David flattened the sigh before it escaped him. His eyes narrowed on the meter, but Jillian's voice cut through again.

"David?"

• • • •

BECKY DIDN'T EVEN LOOK at the greenery around her, just jumped ship off the tiny Cessna and ignored the pilot as he pointed the way to Oak Ridge. The blue sedan waited, parked casually just off to the left of the three mid-sized hangars that made up the Clinton Airport. If it could be called that. Trees scraped the bottoms of the planes at each end of the runway. Grass grew up through cracks in the barely paved 'landing strip'. And nothing bigger than a tour plane had ever come through to the best of her knowledge.

But Becky just smiled and waved a thank-you to the pilot and waited barely long enough for Leon to close the sedan's passenger door behind himself. From the looks of him he had been hoping to drive, but she ignored that and hit the gas before he even had the seat adjusted. With a grunt he pulled his seatbelt across him and slapped it into the buckle. Becky wasn't sure if that was meant as an insult, but she didn't care.

Since they were driving to her house, she didn't see where she needed to sit in the passenger seat and give directions and be polite about missed turn-offs and that squinting and head-shaking thing people always did when driving in an unfamiliar area. She was through with being polite and worrying about other people's feelings.

She ran two stop signs, ignoring Leon's outstretched finger both times. There weren't even police out this way, just the County Sheriff Office. And the deputies would just smile at her and nod if they wound up pulling her over. She knew them all.

Finally she came to a complete stop at a red light that was collecting cars waiting on the empty crosslane. Her fingers tapped impatiently on the wheel. Her foot hovered, barely holding the brake down, itching to ride the non-existent clutch. Her right hand grabbed for the gearshift hoping to slam it into second. But she consciously pulled her fingers away, knowing that throwing an automatic into low gear wouldn't help her one bit.

Her lip took some abuse from her teeth, and just as she squealed the tires out into the crossing she heard the distinctive synthetic music of her cell phone. Grabbing for it at the clip on her belt she tossed it to Leon. "Check the ID, would you?"

With one hand making a graceful pass, he swiped the phone from the air before it arced in the careless direction it had been sent and saved it from colliding with the dash. Nimble fingers he oriented the slick silver thing and he read off the name, "Dr. Overton."

"Don't answer." She took a hard left at the next light and out of the corner of her eye, Becky saw Leon's fingers reach for purchase then tuck themselves away out of sight. She didn't say anything and he didn't either. He simply sat, huge and silent, and looking very uncomfortable, never mentioning that he was surely aware that they were going the opposite direction from where they were supposed to be. Or that they were going the wrong way like a bat out of hell.

She was grateful when, at last, she hit the old road that led to her parent's house. But it was too narrow and full of cracks from winter and grass from summer. She was forced to slow down too many times. But Becky couldn't really get mad. She knew all the people going by. They waved and she waved and drove on before they could get the windows down and tell her how nice it was to see her back from school.

The barbed wire fences gave way at last to the old sagging split rail that lined her yard. Melanie was out front with a spoon digging under the old tire swing, the first thing that had brought a smile to Becky's face this whole day. She was probably digging up worms or such to dissect. The little geek.

"That your-" Leon started the question then cut himself off.

"What?" Becky finally looked him in the face, taking in his long blond hair, again pulled back away from his sharp jaw, somehow always bearing about two days worth of stubble. His blue eyes matched the early winter sky in understanding and bleakness.

"Nothing." He looked the house up and down. "I'm sure this is a required stop on our way to Oak Ridge." He finished his sentence and sealed his lips not once making eye contact.

Becky nodded. "I'll just be a few minutes."

Melanie was already running toward the car, having recognized her sister only after raising her hand to her red bangs to see who was driving the strange car that had pulled so boldly onto the gravel driveway. Becky caught the imp in her arms and swung her around a few times. She sucked in the air, knowing full well that it might already be in the reversal. Even though, by her own calculations it shouldn't have come this far. Not yet anyway. But she knew she had to stop and take deep breaths. To smell her yard and the air, and really look at it, because it may very well be the last time.

In a practiced move, she swung Mel with a quick change of grasp that both sisters were familiar with. Melanie was riding piggyback by the time they passed through the front door, spoon and worms forgotten momentarily. She yelled right next to Becky's ear. "Mom! Look who I found!"

Her mother rounded the corner from the laundry room. "Hey, Baby." Her face lit up at seeing her oldest daughter so unexpectedly.

She slid Mel down her back until her sister's small sneakered feet hit the hard wood floor and Becky rushed to hug her mother.

Her mother hugged back just as fiercely before pulling away and looking Becky in the eyes. "What's wrong?"

With a deep breath that took in the pine cleaner and open country, and a quick look at the old furniture, covered with throws and battered pillows, she turned to deliver the news. "I can't tell you what's happening. Just that it's bigger than me."

Her mother's brows knit together. "Are you in some sort of trouble?"

Becky shook her head. "But I am with the CDC now, so you figure it out." Another frown from her mother and another deep breath of the smell that was her home. "I can tell you this: you need to pack up the kids and Dad and go visit Aaron for at least a week. Call me before you return."

Her mother leaned back, a hand absently reaching for the washer to steady herself. "Is Aaron in trouble?"

"No. But *you* need to go visit him." Becky stared at her mother, hoping she would take the message and quit.

"Is something happening here?" Her mother's voice shook, just a little, but she straightened up, standing firm on her own two feet.

Becky did the only thing she could do: she nodded her head while speaking. "I can't tell you that. All I can say is that this would be a great time to go visit Aaron. Maybe get out of the house by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Her mother leaned forward looking for one last out. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." She reached forward giving her mother a hug. "I'm not supposed to be here. I have to go."

Turning, she spied Melanie wide-eyed behind her, having heard the whole conversation. She scooped her sister up even as the words began flowing out of that little mouth. “This is about those frogs isn’t it?”

So Becky did it again. She nodded, contradicting her voice. “I don’t know.”

“Something is wrong there.” Melanie paused, leaning back, “and it’s coming here.”

“I always knew you were a very smart girl. And Mom’s going to listen to whatever ideas you have. Because you’re probably right!” She yelled for Brandon, hoping he would make his way out to see her. She could hear the time ticking away in heartbeats.

With a last thought she turned back. “You don’t tell *anyone* about this. Do you both understand me? If you start a panic there’s no telling what will happen.”

Both the Sorenson women nodded back at her and she turned to go. “I love you.”

Brandon showed his face in the hall right as she reached the front door. She tried to scoop him up but he was too heavy, and from the looks of it, three inches taller than the last time she had seen him. Blinking back tears, she kissed his cheek and went out the front door.

The wood planks of the porch showed wear at the front door and down the steps. The grass had disappeared in a trail to the end of the drive, where the CDC sedan sat - with one very nonchalant Leon squeezed into the passenger side seat, looking anywhere but at her.

Becky walked up to his side and tapped on the window, startling him from his glazed over look. He opened the door to her and she smiled, holding out the keys. “Do you want to drive?”

“Hell, yes.” He didn’t look at her mother or her sister in the front doorway. He didn’t acknowledge her brother’s whoops that they were going to go visit Aaron. Just calmly walked around and situated himself in the driver’s side, lifting the lever and sliding the seat back as far as it would go, which to Becky still looked a little shy of comfortable. He threw the car in gear and backed out of the driveway as though he had never been there.

Without needing directions he took them back the way they had come, leaving Becky to her thoughts in the passenger seat, until he startled her by asking what she wanted.

Only then did she look up to realize that it wasn’t a philosophical query, but they were about three feet from the Burger King drive thru. She rattled off an order, cringing as she realized that she was way too familiar with Burger King’s menu, and listened while Leon ordered himself two large-sized value meals.

As they pulled away Leon pointedly looked at his watch. “Gee,” even to her ears it sounded odd coming from him, “That sure did take a long time. And I’m sorry I got us lost back there.”

Becky smiled, letting out the breath she had kept in. “Thank you.”

Leon smiled, still looking straight at the long, bare, two lane road ahead of them. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. Now, am I headed toward Oak Ridge this time?”

“Yes, you are.”

• • • •

JORDAN PACED THE EDGE of the bubble.

Three hours since they had left. And nothing.

He had heard phone contact, crackles of the walkie-talkies Jillian and David had carried in, spurts of conversation between them and the suits in the tent behind him. He stuffed down the wry thought that they would have to move the tent another twenty feet further before tomorrow morning.

The air bit at his legs through the blue scrub pants that didn’t keep out the chill. He zipped his jacket a little higher up under his chin, not wanting to take the time to go back to the room to put on

heavier pants. And not wanting to lose the instant recognition the blue cotton afforded him. The others all knew exactly what to look for when they needed him. Right now that was very important.

He shoved his hands deep in his pockets, looking up at tall pines and oaks. Hills crowded up on either side of him. The city had purposefully been laid out in a hard-to-reach area. The roads had been contoured to the Appalachians, making it hard to predict where and when to turn. One of the local scientists had said something about making the city difficult to invade, as he had pointed on the map to crossing roads, circles off of circles, and even avenues that continued but changed names, the original name taking off at a ninety degree angle on a different street.

Jordan breathed in, the cold air chilling his lungs. In front of him the place was a ghost town. Everyone evacuated from neat homes. The landscape looked like a handful of miniature houses had been tossed across the hills and rooted wherever they landed. Behind him the city went on as normal. The library and town Civic Center had plenty of traffic. The gymnasium housed some of the displaced families. They held activities for the out-of-school kids while their parents continued to go to work, many at the nuclear labs further down the turnpike. Jordan shuddered to himself at the thought of the magnetics reaching the power plants.

“Dr. Abellard!”

He turned to see a young tech, complete with acne, old jeans, and Converse sneakers under the labcoat, come running up to him. “Dr. Sorenson is here. She wants to see you.”

With a nod, he turned and followed the kid back into the tents, the grass growing strong beneath his feet and the smell of trees and green the only real distinguishing factors between here and Nevada. They wound their way through tent after tent, gathering papers as they went. Jordan was handed lab results on the people who had gone down this morning. He had read each individual report earlier, but now held compiled statistics on the group, on how many were down, who had died from the alpha group and who still clung to life and maybe even hope.

Lucy Whitman, one of the techs, approached with another handful of papers and a broad smile, her blond curls bouncing and looking overdone for a scientific endeavor of this magnitude and tragedy. Jordan couldn't abide the twinkle in her eyes or the makeup that was always perfect, even as the pieces of the world fell down around her. He faked a smile back at her, only earning her shoulder pressed to his as she held out the pages to him. “I know I'm not supposed to read these, but there was no cover sheet, and *look!*”

He did, but saw only black type on white pages. Until her perfectly polished red nail skimmed across some of the words. “Fifteen of the Nevada patients have woken up!”

His head slammed hard to the right to look at her.

“What!?”

But she was serious. The grin was genuine, and the sparkle contagious.

He jumped at the simultaneous digital ring and buzz of his phone going off. He simply opened the phone and answered it without thinking. “Hello?”

“Abellard!” Landerly's voice had a smile in it. “We've caught a break, boy! I trust you're holding the pages I just faxed?”

“Yes, sir. But I haven't read them all yet.” He shoved the pages back at Lucy and turned away from her, putting his fingers over his left ear to block any noises. But perhaps the pounding of his heartbeat in his fingertips was louder than what was around him.

“Fifteen Nevada patients are out of the coma. There are a few stats in there, but not enough. The docs there are helping them and taking vital signs. I want you sitting near the fax machine. I've got a



tech there assigned to record and fax everything they get to you and me simultaneously. This is the break and we have to be on it.”

“Yessir.” His heart pounded and he spit out the thing that sprang immediately to his mind. “What about Lake James?”

Landerly paused for just a moment, and Jordan knew what was coming. “I haven’t heard anything, but I already put in an inquiry.”

“Of course.” His breathing had sped up there for a moment and now his shoulders and chest sank, heavy as granite. The murderers and rapists would wake up, but not the good people of a small Minnesota town.

Landerly’s voice sliced through his self pity, bringing back the five senses of reality with it: the phone pressed against his ear, the taste of metal in his mouth where he had bit down, the throbbing in his tongue further evidence. “Remember, the Nevada site fell first. So on this time scale we should know something within two days about Lake James.”

“Of course.” And just like that his heart rate accelerated again. His breathing went shallow and he would become hypoxic and pass out if he didn’t get a grip.

“I hear Dr. Sorenson and one of the animal wranglers arrived. They’re going after some local wildlife. You need to read their Minnesota data and report in to me what you can make of it.”

“Of course sir, but Jillian’s in the reversal now. We’ll get back to you when -”

“Here’s an idea: try thinking for yourself, Abellard. Or I *will* name this shit after you.”

Jordan would have laughed if not for the three successive digital notes signaling that Landerly had already hung up on him. He stared at the phone for a moment before he realized that Lucy was watching his every move, and the tech in the converse sneakers was watching hers, even though he was way too young for Lucy to be anything but a farfetched fantasy. Jordan sympathized. *We all need our pipe dreams.*

He took the papers out of Lucy’s outstretched and manicured hand as Becky Sorenson approached and clasped his hand in a warm grip. “Good to see you again, Jordan.” She motioned to the blond giant behind her, “This is Leon Peppersmith. He’s a CDC wrangler.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Peppersmith’s voice was modulated if not cultured. And contrary to fears, he didn’t grind Jordan’s bones to meal with his handshake, even though the man would easily make Jillian look like she belonged in Oz.

Becky pulled the haversack she was wearing a little higher on her shoulders. “We’re heading to the edges to capture what we can.”

Jordan took a step back. “Don’t go in. Not until we know what we’re dealing with.” He shook his head, waiting for a piece of the sky to break free and crash in flames inches from his feet. But it didn’t happen.

“How will we know what we’re dealing with if we don’t go in?” Becky, too, shook her head, shrugging, at a loss for the words to express what was happening around them. Like Jillian, she saw no alternative. “It’s the right thing to do.”

But Jordan plowed on ahead, giving his best effort at stopping them. “Some of them are waking up at the Nevada site.”

“Really?!” Becky’s face lit up. “That’s great! How many?”

“Fifteen. So far.” It was so hopeful and yet such a small number. He clung to the belief that he could get Becky and Peppersmith to change their minds before he cracked from it all. “And you have data from Minnesota, so why—“

Becky shrugged him off again. “Just more questions. We need to find the links.”

Jordan motioned them into a tent that was being used as one of the lab stations. There was only one tech in there, and both Jordan and Peppersmith gave him a look that did more than just request privacy. The tech shrugged as he pocketed his wrench and a small meter. Hew spoke over his shoulder as he exited, “Damned UV-vis is down. All of them are. Don’t use it.”

Then they were alone, except for the centrifuges, whirring and stopping, settling the contents in the blood samples everyone had been collecting. Lowering himself into a chair, Jordan motioned for Becky and Leon to do the same, and set about stalling them. “What did you find?”

“Moose.” It was Peppersmith. “Canada Moose. A whole herd - looks like they all just laid down and died. Wolves and Lynx side by side, tearing at the carcasses.”

*Laid down and died?*

Becky chimed in as Jordan felt his face pull further and further into a knot. “The white tailed deer there were only juveniles. There wasn’t an adult to be found. Nothing over three point.”

He felt the back of the chair support him before he realized he had slid back. He had started to open his mouth again, but Becky pulled a list from her pocket. “Photocopy this.” She held it up to Lucy, who Jordan only then realized was hovering at the open tent flap. But Becky pulled it back, away from Lucy’s reaching grasp, shoving it at Jordan, “Here, look at it first.”

Species were listed to halfway down the page. And Becky’s voice derailed his train of thought. “They’re all missing or dead.”

“Whole species?” He handed the page up to Lucy who fled from sight, hopefully for the nearest copier.

Becky and Peppersmith both nodded.

“Holy shit.” Jordan blinked, wondering if the day could get any more surreal.

Peppersmith shrugged. “We have to go in. The animals’ survival depends on it.”

Before Jordan could argue, Lucy had returned with Becky’s weathered original and a crisp copy for him, and the biologists were out of the tent, following a new tech who was showing them the way to the west side of the reversal.

With deep, even breaths that he had to count out, he stumbled his way to the fax machine, already piling high with printed pages. His butt smacked the chair and he began scanning the documents, quickly realizing there was an individual chart on each of the men who had woken from coma.

Men. Every last one of them, because it was a men’s facility with male guards.

“Paper!” He shouted it to whomever would listen, grateful when two different techs showed, one with blank white pages and the other holding out a legal pad and retractable pen. “Thank you.” He took the yellow-lined paper but didn’t look up.

In seconds the pad was spread across his knees and his hand went automatically to the pen in his breast pocket, carefully engraved with the words *Jordan Abellard, M.D.* It had been a graduation gift, unaccompanied by a tag or even words, from his father. He began writing furiously.

*Men.*

*All prisoners. No guards.*

*White counts. Prior: normal. In coma: Low. Awake: high*

*All wing 3*

*Down date: 12, 14, 12, 11, 12, 12, 13, 14, 13, 12, 12, 12, 12, 14, 14.*

*All 12s down in pm, all 14s down in am.*

He grabbed at his cell phone and hit Landerly on speed dial.

“What do you have boy?”

“There’s a 53 hour window from when the first of these men fell to the last one. The down times correlate loosely to the waking times.”

“What else?”

Landerly was seeing the same things he was, he knew. “There are no guards. Just prisoners. All from the same wing. These are the guys who went down before the reversal swept the CDC set-up. So it makes sense that there aren’t any guards awake. . . Yet.” He rattled off what he saw about the white counts, probably still not giving Landerly anything new.

“Abellard!” It came from far off. And in that instant Jordan recognized the voice. David.

“Gotta go.” He closed the phone, left the pages where they were and took off at a run, not realizing that it was the first time he had hung up on Landerly.

He arrived at the flag line marking the edge of the reversal as David pulled into view. The figure sagging at his side was Jillian. Her left arm was slung over David’s shoulder which was far too high to be comfortable, and her right arm wrapped ominously across her stomach.

Once he recognized what he was seeing, he moved without thinking, crossing the unseen boundary into the reversal. He ran toward the two figures, who came into sharper focus as he approached. “Jillian!”

“I’m fine!” Her voice snapped, but lacked true conviction. David’s face appeared grim, although if he was suffering any nausea it didn’t show. Jordan didn’t care.

With one hand he lifted Jillian’s arm from where it clung fiercely to David’s jacket, and in the same motion pulled her feet from the ground, lifting her to settle in his arms. His only thought was getting her the hell out of the reversal, even as she curled both arms around her stomach and rolled even tighter into a ball within his grip.

It was David’s voice that cut through to him. “Don’t run with her. I tried it, it just makes her worse.”

Jordan clenched his jaw with the effort it took to maintain a reasonable pace. The whole time he wondered if it was better to let her get more nauseated and get her out faster, or keep her feeling better, even though the yellow flag line didn’t approach as quickly as he’d like.

He bit down on his tongue to keep from flinging out insults, to not yell at David. *This is what you get for taking her into the heart of darkness.*

Her brows pulled tighter, and he could see the pain even though half her face was obscured by the neck of her jacket zipped all the way up and over her mouth. “Come on, Jilly, hang in there.”

At last he made it, and even though he couldn’t detect it with any of his usual senses, he felt his whole body react the moment he crossed the boundary. He got her to the nearest triage tent and laid her out on a gurney. But that only lasted a second. She was sitting up before he had his stethoscope in his ears, her palm out to him.

“My heart rate is eighty-eight. My resps are twenty-two, and I need a GI cocktail, *now.*”

It would have made him smile at any other time. But the stethoscope was folded back around his neck in one fluid movement as he pulled a plastic cup from a makeshift shelf next to him. All the ingredients were there, and he felt like a bartender, measuring out Donnatal, then peeling back the foil lid on the dose of viscous lidocaine, revealing the eerily green goo. He poured it into the cup, not watching it sink under the Donnatal, his hands already grabbing for the Mylanta bottle. He added the antacid, almost topping off the cup and ignoring a century of medical procedure as he stirred quickly with his finger. He handed her the concoction licking his finger clean as he watched her toss her head and shoot it back.

It would numb her stomach and settle what she was feeling. At least at this stage in the game she didn't have to play guinea pig, suffering through all of it because they didn't know how to treat it, or if what they did would make her worse. He could at least offer a little relief.

His hand found her hair; she'd worn it down to give warmth from the wind, and his chest eased a little feeling her solid within his grasp. He prayed out loud, "It's just something you ate."

But she denied him. "I have ear pain."

*Son of a bitch.*



Jordan heard David walk into the tent behind him, a little out of breath. That fact revealing that he must have carried, or helped haul Jillian, a good long way. “We didn’t make it to the center.”

Jordan almost exploded with *who gives a flying fuck?!* But he held it in check by the barest of glimmers.

Jillian started speaking. “No one was in there. We found a few bodies, though. The smell was enough to explain the nausea.” She almost smiled. “The field is stronger as we got closer in.”

Leave it to Jillian to be in mortal danger and worry about rattling off statistics.

Ignoring David, he put his forehead against hers, easy enough to do since she was still sitting on the gurney, hunched over, guarded against the pain that pulled her down. “They’re waking from the comas in Nevada.”

“What!” She sat upright, almost forgetting her own discomfort.

He nodded. Not mentioning that they were all men. All prisoners. That there were only fifteen of them. Less than a percent.

Lucy Whitman appeared at the doorway just then, nudging David further inside in the process. “I just got off the phone with Dr. Landerly at the CDC. He said to give you these.” She held out a sheaf of papers, still slightly warm from the fax machine.

It was Jillian who reached out for them, taking the folder from the perfect hand, “Are these the stats on the prisoners who woke up?”

Lucy shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I just gather the papers.”

Jordan almost called her on her lie, but Jillian was already reading. Sitting straighter, looking like the lidocaine had numbed her from the inside out. “They’re all men. All prisoners. The white counts are high when they wake.” She thumbed through a little further. Noting how long they’d been under, when they’d fallen, asking how many had fallen in that time, and what percentage of those men did these represent. She asked all the same questions, noticed all the same things in minutes that he and Landerly had spent the morning working through.

Her fingers shuffled quickly through the papers. “Murder, murder, . . . murder, . . . arson and murder. . .”

“What?”

“They’re all murderers.” She looked up finally. “Is that because they’re all from the same wing?”

Jordan pulled out the cell and called Landerly even as she was talking.

“No, the wing that fell first wasn’t this one. It wasn’t maximum security.” She paused and looked blankly at the canvas top of the tent, seeing something far beyond it. “But none of these are maximum security prisoners.” She read again. “Single murders. Wife’s boyfriend. Boss. Father . . .”

“Landerly, listen to this. . .” Jordan held the phone up to catch her thinking out loud, even though she didn’t realize he was doing it.

“All one time murders. . . . Other prisoners fell at the same time. But they aren’t awake.” She paused long enough for Jordan to hear Landerly swear in the space she left.

“Oh, shit.”

Holding the phone to his ear, Jordan initiated the conversation again. “Sir?”

“We have three more awake, since two hours ago.” He heard the shuffling of paper through the line as Landerly looked to connect Jilly’s ideas. “All murderers. No first degree. No longer

considered a threat to society.”

Jillian tilted her head. “Who’s dead?”

Another question he and Landerly hadn’t posed, so hung up on their break that they hadn’t stopped to look. He passed the question on to his boss, even as he heard his name hollered out from somewhere out in the tents.

“Bye.” Again, he hung up on Landerly. Not even telling him that the brilliant idea of sending Jillian and David into the reversal had backfired. David had emerged unscathed with Jillian at death’s door. Landerly could call Jillian directly if he wanted. And surely she would fill him in on all the stats she had collected, along with her own vitals.

Jordan figured she had a few more hours at the least. And maybe a day at most, before she slipped away. If he was going to help her he had to gather what information he could. So, without a word, he turned and ran from the tent, leaving her to her musings and the paperwork on the prisoners in Nevada. He followed the voice that was calling out to him.

He didn’t recognize it, although whoever it was knew him enough to boom his name at decibels high enough to shake the tents. He paused a few times, at last emerging on the north side of the field.

No one was there. Just the school stood silent in front of him, the long staircase off to his right was busy with scientists climbing up and down the four story flight that hugged the hillside. The classrooms had been put to use for containment and as dormitories. The chem lab was probably seeing the best action it had since its inception.

The voice called again, this time coming from his right, as his head turned he realized the windows were open down the enclosed stairs. He recognized the figures before the voice.

Peppersmith and Becky Sorenson traipsed down the stairs, arms linked, neither of them looking up at him. Until Leon opened his mouth to shout out Jordan’s name again.

“Here!” He yelled back.

His pace picked up as he realized the two were not in a friendly embrace after all, but that Becky was supported on Leon’s arm. Her right hand snaked up to rub her ear.

*Shit!*

He raced back and slammed through the doors just as Peppersmith hit the bottom of the stairs, bellowing as he came. “What’s wrong with her?”

Jordan ignored the man, whipping off his stethoscope he unsnapped the front of Becky’s heavy jacket and placed the bell at the top right side of her sternum. Her heart raced. “Becky, what’s wrong?” But he already knew.

“My ears hurt. It started after we found this dead cat. . . . I-” But she didn’t finish. She just rolled a little, curling into a ball while Leon fought to keep her upright.

He didn’t ask - didn’t bother to look in her throat or her ears. The answers were in her eyes. She had *it*, and she knew it.

Lacking the will to lift her himself, Jordan looked to Leon, “Just pick her up, would you? I have a spare gurney in the triage tent if you can carry her that far.”

Becky protested, and it looked like it wasn’t for the first time. But this time Leon quoted doctor’s orders and hauled her up. She didn’t appear to have it in her to fight her way down. And Peppersmith looked like he could carry a sleeping hippo through the jungle without breaking a sweat. Becky wouldn’t be any trouble for him.

Inside three minutes they were back at the tent where he’d left Jillian and David.

Even before he saw her, Jordan knew she was on the phone with Landerly. He could hear her side of the conversation, the short spurts when she rattled off whatever her brain was clicking

together. She sounded more alert, and as he rounded the tent flap she came into view proving him entirely right. “Feeling better?”

Even as she answered, “Yup,” he set about making the next GI cocktail. Leon laid Becky out on the bed, and Jillian interrupted her own conversation to say nothing other than, “you’ll feel better in about five minutes,” then launched back into it with Landerly.

Handing Becky the mix, Jordan waited while she eyed it. He didn’t blame the biologist. He wouldn’t drink it either if he hadn’t known what was in it. It was a milky, lime colored substance with a faint sharp odor, and the lidocaine lent it some sort of almost-glow, even after it was mixed in. But she tipped it back, her face contorting at the texture if not the taste, and her mouth working even after she had finished swallowing it.

They stood there, the five of them, looking at each other, and wondering. The two women sitting on the gurneys, Becky starting to perk back up. None of them deluded themselves, and none of them talked. Except Jillian, who chattered to Landerly, making little sense to anyone around her.

Jordan wasn’t sure how long it lasted, the wild silence in the tent, punctuated by people passing by outside, Jillian updating Landerly on what was happening.

He heard someone’s name being shouted, and didn’t think much of it, until he heard another name, then in rapid succession a third and a fourth. He was poking his head out of the flap when Lucy appeared there in front of him.

The last person he really wanted to see, but she was there in his face. Her own expression was less than chipper for the first time he had ever seen. And he was about to comment on it when she spoke.

“Jordan, I feel weird.” Her hands went to the sides of her face, tracing the flush as it spread up her skin. Her mouth worked like she had a bad taste in it, and her shoulders hunched forward as her eyes squeezed shut.

*Oh, crap.*

He touched her hands, pulling them away from her face, just as her eyes went wide. Only because he was looking at her so intently did he realize that she had focused over his shoulder.

With a snap he turned to see Becky, as she swayed from her sitting position, her eyes rolling back into her head, eyelids fluttering. She sank forward, a victim of gravity, and missed hitting the ground only because Leon had exhibited some lightning reflexes.

The giant man laid her back down on the gurney, lifting her eyelids, but finding nothing. Jordan was about to help, all else aside, except that Lucy pulled at his arm, turning him away from the shocked expression on Jillian’s face. The intern looked markedly worse than she had just a few seconds ago, her color changing rapidly from the pink flush to a creeping gray tone. Her eyes lost focus and she grabbed her stomach.

With a quick step Jordan moved closer to keep her from collapsing into the ground just feet in front of him. But as he grabbed her he realized that he had cleared the entrance of the tent and he could see in several directions down the evenly placed rows. Doctors, techs, and suits were stumbling out of the tents, reaching to others. Covering their ears. Opening mouths. Holding stomachs.

And his brain clicked.

*They were all women.*

Still holding Lucy partially upright with one arm, he turned to face Jillian as his adrenaline kicked in and the world began to slow on its axis. But Jillian just looked at him, having figured out some portion of what he had seen from the expression on his face.



But before he could tell her what was happening a voice cleared its way through the pandemonium. Jordan couldn't see him, but heard his words as the man ran past. "It moved! The edge moved! We're in it!"

But Jordan and Jillian had both guessed that for themselves already. He turned to see that David and Leon had, too.

The voice was joined by others, or maybe his brain just cleared to hear them all. Urging everyone who was upright to run. To get out, to clear the edge.

Within their tent it was Leon who took action. He grabbed the limp Becky, lifting her into his arms. Jordan's brain cranked overtime, realizing even as he watched it, that Leon had chosen Becky because she was limp and he had the most experience hauling dead weight. Peppersmith motioned to Jordan and David to grab the other two women, and even as Jordan yelled at him not to, Leon was out the door with Becky hanging from his arms.

Jordan watched as he followed the exodus, some of the men stopping to attempt to scoop up their fallen colleagues, none of them as agile as Leon with the spare weight. As Jordan watched, some of them gave up trying and simply stepped over whomever they crossed.

It was David who yelled out the open doorway. "Don't run! You can't outrun it. The whole world's going to snap any day now!" His fatalistic cries falling on deaf or disbelieving ears.

As Jordan watched, Lucy slipped from his grasp, her eyes going blank as she gave up her last hold on consciousness. Jordan bent to lift her, thinking to put her on the gurney that Leon had vacated when he left with Becky, when a second set of hands slid under her from the other side to help him lift.

He looked up into the face of a local physician whom he had seen a few times, drawing blood and helping out with the people whose homes had been in the early parts of the reversals. With a slight tip of his head he gestured to David, "Is that true what he said, about the whole world 'snapping'?"

Jordan didn't know what to make of it. The pace was slowing, but the adrenaline was still ringing in his ears, still bringing the false endorphin high. He shrugged. "Probably."

The other doctor bore Lucy's weight and Jordan let him. In silence, the doctor wandered off with the limp woman, her feet dangling, one red leather shoe missing, her nails sparkling at the ends of loose hands.

"Jordan?" Jillian's voice broke through to him.

He'd have known if she'd fallen. But he hadn't quite catalogued that she'd stayed upright.

But why?

She thought it, too, and her thoughts came in fragments. "I thought I was immune. . . . then I didn't. . . now? . . ."

But he shook his head, unable to answer.

It was David who said, "I guess maybe it is something you ate." His face contorted in a weird, what-about-that kind of way. But as he finished the sentence Jillian squinted her eyes, and rocked her head from side to side, as though fighting off a bad memory.

Jordan saw the flush creeping up her neck even as she felt it, her facial expression changing. He could see her stomach roll. "Jordan?"

It was her last word, and as she looked at him, her eyes went heavenward, and in slow motion she slumped backward and started to slide off the gurney.



WHILE DAVID WATCHED, Abellard sprung forward barely catching Jillian's weight. Well, he didn't so much catch her as take the fall for her, cushioning her limp limbs from the hard ground she sped toward. He struggled to right her, and somewhere in the back of his brain David heard Jordan's voice asking for help. But he ignored it.

In a moment, the doctor had her spread out on the gurney, looking like she had simply had too rough of a day and decided that now was as good a time as any for a balls-to-the-wall nap.

David knew his brain wasn't processing correctly. That she might be dead. That she looked like a doll, reposed on the bed, because he couldn't handle the truth. But that was okay, because Abellard was here to handle both Jillian and the truth.

Creeping to the back corner of the tent, and molding himself to the canvas wall, didn't allow him to escape the serious gaze Jordan pinned him with. "You stay here with her. *Don't move*. I'll be right back."

David's brain inserted a sleek "*I'm Batman*" as the tent flap shifted in the wake of Jordan's path. But he didn't laugh. He bit his cheek to keep the sound from overflowing. Because he knew if he did that the laugh would evolve into hysterics, and when Jordan returned he would haul back and deliver a stinging slap. David did not want to be on the receiving end of Jordan's wrath. Certainly not when it was disguised as medical care.

Sliding into a chair he waited the long minutes for Abellard to return. His eyes wandering to Jillian, one leg dangling precariously off the edge of the gurney. His thoughts turning to his father, and wondering when the old man's place would experience the 'snap'. It was all David had been able to think while Jillian had been explaining to him what indicated who would fall and who wouldn't. If his father would bite it right away, as his vital signs indicated he would. Or maybe it would turn out he was just a son of a bitch, and instead of slipping neatly into a coma, he'd hang out and fuck up all of Jillian's numbers. Put a cog in that gear head she had.

Abellard interrupted his morbidly fun thoughts, returning with his hands overflowing. A clear jellyfish thing dangled from his fingertips, until David realized it was a fluid bag for an IV and the remaining hermetically sealed pouches were all the fixings to run it. Jordan didn't say hello, or anything, just let his gatherings roll across the countertop, and he searched them through, peeling back layers and lining them up.

In fluid movements he pulled off one of Jillian's jacket sleeves, then rocked her from side to side, passing the jacket behind her before tossing it on the ground. Deft fingers raised a metal pigtail on a pole, tied Jillian's arm in a white rubber band, and began pressing at the back of her hand. In the doctor's actions David could see the practiced swing of a chipping pick, the glance to assess for layer and slope. Abellard was in his element, and out of a grudging respect David didn't want to disturb him.

Before he could have said anything, the IV bag was hanging from the pigtail, dripping faithfully into Jillian's veins.

Another doctor came by, and waited patiently for a moment before finding a break in the rhythm and asking Jordan what to do with the big box of IV jellyfish in front of him. "How do we triage them?"

Jordan just grabbed three extra bags, speaking only when the other doctor raised his eyebrows. "She discovered this - we make sure she has enough saline. You can triage the rest of the patients as you see fit." He turned away, essentially ending the conversation.

David, too, turned to check out Jillian, and was startled by Peppersmith's voice coming from behind them. "Is it true what you said? That we can't outrun the edge?"

The man looked weary, like Paul Bunyon about to fall, but David nodded. “All the previous data shows that the whole earth will reverse, and if this is what happens when it does, then no, there’s no outrunning it.”

The thought passed briefly before it cleared enough for David to ask it. “Where’s Sorenson?”

Jordan snapped around at that, but before he could put in his pissed-off two cents, Peppersmith spoke up. “All the women were dropping. I tried to help, and I just finally laid her down on a gurney in one of the tents. . . . she’s alive.”

Abellard nodded, pulling one of the clear IV bags from the pile he had carefully hoarded for Jillian. He slapped it into Leon’s palm, surprising the giant, but following it with a sleek plastic sealed kit. “Take these back to her and find somebody to run a line.”

“I can.” Leon looked at the items now dwarfed in his thick hands, and disappeared from the tent on little cat’s feet. Far too quiet for the size he was forced to wield.

Abellard went back to doctoring his patient. As though he could help Jillian by taking her pulse and blood pressure. Like sticking her with a needle and sucking a vial of her blood would help her live through this shit.

David wanted to ignore the whole problem. Walking from the tent he felt the ground beneath his feet. Below the grass and dark soil were layers of limestone and shale with stories to tell. There were oil pockets here. Not the size of the ones in Texas or Alaska, but enough to put a pump in your back yard and food on your family’s table for all your years to come. David wanted to be under his own feet, down with the rocks and the strata.

So why was he here? Stuck with the CDC and sick people falling around him everywhere? Oh, and not just sick people, sick *women*. Just as a final insult, it was Abellard’s pretty mug he was stuck looking at.

He shook his head, trying to look beyond the tent city. The mountains pushed up around him on every side. Caves were back there. Exposed surfaces, waiting for a man with a pick, a plan, and something to prove. Strip mining had ruined the beauty of the hills. But beauty was for crap, and the exposed layers and angles were far more interesting than any damn trees could be.

His fingers itched to pick at something, to clip himself to a rope and slide down a rock face stealing little pieces of it as he went. All this compass and magnetic field stuff was interesting, but he wanted to break something. Instead people were pushing by him, *talking* to him.

He didn’t answer. They looked sick, and he had had just about enough of this vomit-and-fall-down-half-dead crap. Their faces looked uncomfortable, so he turned away. Only to be confronted by men, everywhere, coming out of tents, walking the straight lines between, all rubbing at their bellies, the sides of their faces, their ears.

*Son of a bitch.*

For the briefest of moments David wondered if he was getting it too, and just wasn’t medical enough to know it was happening. But when he checked his stomach the only thing he felt was hungry. Suddenly ravenous. He hadn’t eaten since before he and Jillian had tried that hike to the center of God’s green beyond. And he’d had to haul her sick ass out of there, too.

He grabbed the arm of a passing physician, “Hey, where can I get food down here? Or do I have to go back into the school?”

The man’s facial expression questioned David’s intelligence even as his finger was pointing at the double doors at the bottom of the staircase. The doctor greened up another shade before turning away. But David ambled off toward the low building. Better get some before all the damn cafeteria staff fell ill.

“David!”

*Shit.*

It was Abellard. “I need you!”

With a sigh as heavy as granite, he turned to help out the doctor. There was a knot of people at the front of the tent. At least David was pretty sure it was the right tent - they were all identical: four poles, white canvas, the only differences being where the flaps were open and how.

Pushing through the men clustered at the door, he found Abellard inside, tending bar, and making the Day-Glo shots he had fed to Jillian and Sorenson. Peppersmith stood by his side, looking green around the gills, but his hands were full of whatever Jordan was handing him. Leon handed them out, one by one, then turned back to the makeshift counter, “My turn.” And he sucked down the next lime green mixer.

Men walked away from the tent flaps, slamming back the shots even as they pushed beyond the crowd.

Jordan turned around and pinned him with a glare. “So show me this immunity that got Jillian in trouble.”

David shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“Good.”

Some of the others looked at him in surprise, or awe. A few even glared, but it only took one, grabbing his arm and asking “Immunity?” to start the ripple of murmurs through the crowd. David shrugged him off.

Jordan, too, ignored it and sent David with a list and a box, bare except for empty bottles so David would know when he found the right stuff. He hit the supply tent and pillaged it, haphazardly piling in what looked like individual lunchbox applesauce containers. He added industrial sized bottles of Mylanta, and carefully read the vial labels searching for Donnatal.

With his box full, and his brain in pissed-off mode, he made his way back to the tent, still crowded with sick men. Hadn’t he gone to college and even grad school to avoid being a manual labor peon? With less than no ceremony he plopped the box on the counter beside Abellard who looked relieved at the quantities David had discovered.

He looked even more haggard than most of the men outside, and Peppersmith held one of the cups out to him, but Abellard waved it away. He motioned for it to be handed to one of those who were waiting, always the hero.

David hung back, then eventually began pulling cups off the end of the assembly line and passing them out to the crowd. He wasn’t human and he knew it. His helping was just a matter of not having all the doctors glare at him.

The clusterfuck at the door thinned and David looked beyond the canvas walls to see that they were falling where they stood. A lot of good the medicine was doing if you asked him.

“I have no idea, but the bastard does seem to be immune.” Jordan spoke to the wall, having finally lost his mind completely.

Or so David thought until he saw the cell phone propped open on the countertop, the name “Landerly” in bold letters across the face.

When the last hand had snaked in for a dose of GI cocktail, Jordan downed one himself. His color had turned gray as steel and he worked his mouth without speaking. Finally, he produced sound. But it wasn’t for David, or even Leon Peppersmith, it was to the cell phone. “Bye Landerly. Thanks for the -.”

His eyes rolled and with his last shred of consciousness he made sure he fell forward, cradling his head even as all his limbs went perfectly slack.

“Oh, shit!” It was the only real surprise David had ever heard from the wrangler.

But Peppersmith acted. And from the looks of it, Jordan was just a big catch to him. He unceremoniously draped the doctor over his shoulder, turning until he spotted the empty gurney. He slapped Jordan down on it hard enough to make David think it was a good thing the doc wasn't awake to experience the humiliation of being hauled around by another man like a sack of flour.

“Abellard!” It was just a sound through some static.

David looked around for the source. But since it wasn't Leon, and it was inside the tent-

“Dr. Landerly?” Picking up the cell phone he got a good look at the face plate. The time read 20:24. That was a long call. “It's Dr. David Carter.”

“I know. Abellard's down?”

“Yup.” He held the phone at a distance, eyeing it as though it might bite him.

“Is Peppersmith still standing?”

“Yup. He's fine, too.”

Leon Peppersmith nodded and gave David the thumbs up, just before his eyes rolled into his head and he dropped like a stone. He went over straight backward, cracking his head on the gurney railing and jostling Jillian, loosening one of her arms so it slipped over the edge of the bed and hung like dead weight.

“Let me take that back, we just lost him.”

Landerly's voice growled through the line at him. “Just like that? No warning?”

“Yup.”

With a quick glance down at Leon he turned back to the phone to concentrate on something Landerly was saying. But even as he turned away from the downed giant his brain processed what he had seen.

A crimson pool was spreading in the grass beneath Leon's head.

“Shit!”

“What?” Landerly's voice crackled from the ground where David had automatically tossed the phone.

“He cracked his head!” He knelt beside the big man, thinking that he should touch the wound to know what to do. His hand pressed through the blond hair, and as he did he could feel the tiny fluctuations in pressure signaling that something important had been hit. Using his fingers to follow the flow backward, David was shocked to find the cut wide and gaping.

Jerking his hand back and not even noting the blood, he leaned into the shove, rolling the big man over. As he did it he suffered a thought about spinal cord injuries and paralysis. Leaving bloody handprints as he went, he checked the hair, and felt the inward dent in the skull.

With an unconscious jerk, David sprang back, landing on his butt, watching in fear as the wound fountained and fell, fountained and fell. Peppersmith lay unconscious, still as a rock, while both the timing and size of the rhythm slid off to nothing.

With dry blinking eyes, David stood, leaving the fallen giant facedown on the ground inside the tent. Unaware of where he was stepping, he crushed the phone beneath the heel of his shoe as he left, silencing Landerly's voice while it hissed through the bad connection.

He needed a sink to wash his hands. It was just beyond the cafeteria. He *was* still hungry. David didn't worry about the stains on his shirt. Just washed up and headed up the long flight of stairs to change into something clean.

He found his doorway in the eerie stillness; the lack of noise breaking through his protective denial. He looked around, and nothing moved.

A laugh almost bubbled out of him. Of course *nothing moved*. He was in a hallway in an empty high school. But there was something else. A lack of any human sound that was far more powerful than any lie his brain could concoct. And for the first time, his stomach rolled over in fear.

He unbuttoned his shirt, avoiding the bloody smears and prints, and threw it in the trash. He climbed into fresh everything. Boxers, socks, pants, t-shirt.

But his stomach rolled again.

And he was tired. With a hand in his hair he decided that the cot was the way to go. The food would still be there when he woke up. Then he'd pack up and get the hell out of town.

He stretched out, not comfortable even though the cot was long enough.

All the energy left his limbs.

Only at the last minute did he understand what was happening.

He tried to open his eyes, and wasn't sure if he accomplished it.

The black was bringing the sparkles with it at the borders of his vision. It crept in, closer and closer. Taking over his brain.

*Oh shit.*



Jillian blinked. White showed above her and all around.  
Clouds.

Heaven.

The pounding in her head drove out thoughts of any such luck. She blinked with eyelids made of sandpaper. Her brain knew she was awake, but she didn't know where.

And why couldn't she move?

Another grainy blink revealed shadows in the endless white, lines coming to a crosspoint just up and to her right.

The metal structure draped in the white canvas that formed the gazebo top came into focus.

As she lifted her arm she felt a tug at the skin covering her hand, and figured it out just before she waved her arm into her line of sight.

An IV meant someone was here.

The memories swept quickly through her mind. Jordan putting her up on the gurney, after David hauled her out of the reversal. Becky being laid on the gurney next to hers.

With a shove and a groan, Jillian brought herself to her elbows. Only now beginning to catalog and question the eerie silence.

Extreme effort brought her to sitting, only to slump down quickly as she realized that she would pass right back out again. If not from lack of blood to her brain, then from the hideous pounding inside her skull. She recognized it as the cadence of her heart and for a few moments she counted, stopping only when she was confident she was at a nice stable seventy-two beats per minute.

She yanked her arm, forgetting why she had moved the moment the IV tugged at the back of her left hand, painfully taking tape and a little bit of precious skin. But the needle stayed put. Whoever had done it had done a good job.

While she took deep breaths and waited for her equilibrium to be restored, Jillian held the taped-up hand into her visual field.

Jordan had done it.

It was the first smile that cracked her face. She could feel the unused muscles as she stretched them, grinning as she recognized the careful pattern he always made securing IVs. Wide white paper tape. With three pieces neatly laid in rows holding the whole thing down. So you couldn't rip it out. So it wouldn't hurt so much.

She had to find Jordan.

Turning onto her stomach, Jillian paid careful attention to the tubing that fed her normal saline from the looks of it. But it wasn't Becky Sorenson on the gurney that shared the corner with hers.

It was Jordan. Flat on his back. For a few heart-stopping moments she waited, seeing if his chest would rise of its own accord. And when it did, her unfettered right hand snaked out to rest on his sternum, to buy reassurance that the one breath wasn't a fluke. After riding several swells and troughs of his breathing, Jillian tried to jostle him awake.

"Jordan?"

It was nothing but a movement of her mouth; no sound escaped her vocal cords. Not even the whisper of a voice. It took three tries before she produced something akin to the hiss of a steampipe. And several more before she could recognize her own voice.

"Jordan?"



But he still didn't respond. His chest kept rising and falling, but nothing else about him showed life. Her hand went to her front scrubs pocket out of habit, without her brain even being aware that it was there, until it grasped her penlight.

Jillian turned herself to the single-minded task of lifting his lids and watching the pupils focus automatically before she allowed herself the sigh of relief that let out the tension and allowed a flood of thoughts of so many things that were not comforting.

Like the throb in her leg.

Like, where had Becky Sorenson gone? Was she awake?

How long had she been out?

Four days, like the guys in Nevada?

Her lips pressed a thin line. She had no idea.

But she was smart enough to put together the facts. Jordan was out cold beside her. There were no human sounds beyond the tent that she could distinguish. She had a slow dripping IV but Jordan didn't even have a line. Surely he would have run one on himself if he could have. There were two plastic IV drip bags, lying like dead urchins on the counter. So he had enough saline, but maybe not enough time. But he was on the gurney. So he had enough time to get there, or someone had put him up there. But why hadn't they run a line? Unless they couldn't.

*David!*

"David!"

It was meant to be a yell, but it sounded like steam being released from a pan. With a deep breath she tried again, her eyes still square on Jordan's face, waiting for any flicker of movement.

Her voice was loud enough the second time.

But David wasn't around.

And apparently neither was anyone else. *Someone* should have answered that call. As inhuman as it might have sounded.

She tried a third and even fourth time before deciding that she was just wasting her throat. And that she needed a drink and clearly no one was going to show up and hand her one.

Long slow moments passed before she positioned herself to sitting, feeling her muscles stretch and react from their silent time on the gurney. She was guessing she'd been out well more than a day.

Her sneakered feet dangled over the side, swishing in time to the rhythmic pounding of her heart. The desire to find something positive was enough incentive. With eyes staring ahead she took deep breaths, getting her blood flowing again, her heart working a little harder to feed fluid to all the corners of a body that was no longer stationary but becoming fully mobilized.

Jillian inhaled deeply and thanked God that she had survived this . . . whatever it was. She knew already that many hadn't, and many more wouldn't.

She also gathered strength for the jump to the ground. Her legs would need to hold her when she hit bottom, and it wasn't standard operating procedure at all to try this completely alone first time out of a coma. But she had no options. No one had come when she called.

Which meant they were all under.

Or dead.

Or incapacitated to the point where they couldn't answer back.

It was a shame that the last thought was about the most cheerful.

Jillian gathered the IV tubing, draping it to let out enough line in case her legs failed and she slipped all the way to the ground. Without looking down she moved her butt off the edge, feeling for the ground with her toe, but she didn't find it. When her arms got too tired, she fell, her legs taking

the brunt of the impact, and not well because she hadn't been sure when it was coming. She crumpled, her feet slipping easily through the grass to splay out in front of her. Leaving her sitting with a sore butt, growing wet from the dew on the cold ground.

But she smelled something. Her eyes registered it before her brain matched the smell, her hand flying to her mouth.

Leon Peppersmith lay beside her, facedown and unmoving, with flies swarming in small patches. Her hand automatically made a brushing motion through the air, scattering them from their prey. And her fingers settled at his neck just under his jaw.

He was cold. He didn't move, didn't breathe. And the flies.

All of it told her he was dead, but her brain wouldn't believe until she checked for herself.

But after a full minute of not finding a pulse she resigned to defeat, if not tears.

And her brain turned over.

The flies weren't hatching on him. But there were plenty there, settling on him again from the moment she had abandoned her task of shooing them. She registered the handprints on him, marked in blood, the splay of long thick fingers.

Not Jordan's.

Jordan had artist's hands. He also would never have handled a man that way. The pattern suggested Leon was rolled and checked by a complete amateur; the handprints violated even the basics of any Red Cross first aid training.

The size, shape, and carelessness were David's. Which meant he'd survived beyond Leon's fall, long enough to roll him and check him. If David was truly immune, then where was he?

Jillian realized that she couldn't just wait here gleaning tiny fragments of data from Peppersmith, that she had sat long enough to gather her legs and push herself to the standing position she had aimed for in the first place.

She rolled to her knees, using her hands splayed out on the grass to stabilize herself, and only as she grabbed the railing did she realize that it wasn't just dew on the ground. The moisture had combined with Leon's blood and congealed to a thick red mess that she was leaving all over the side of the gurney as she hauled herself up. A task made much more difficult by the fact that her hands were covered in the slimy sludge that had once fed Leon's heart.

She wiped long red smears on her scrub pants, knowing without looking that the wetness on her butt wasn't clear dew, but more of the same. With steady hands she lowered the IV pole and unwound the flattened bag from its holder at the top. Briefly she noted the masking tape and markings indicating the dose of Raglan that had been added for nausea. Jordan had thought ahead to when she would wake up. Carrying it with her, she went in search of a clean pair of scrubs.

As she cleared the front flap of the tent, she left its man-made heat and was smacked by the chill of the air, and the smears of white across the ground. Upon closer inspection they were what she had known all along, fallen doctors, techs, lab assistants.

Harder to see, but visible when her eyes cleared, were the black slashes – the suits.

There was no rank or privilege here. No one was spared. Unless maybe you counted the absent David.

Her feet began to work, her heart racing. There was no telling how many of them were alive, but they had been left out in the cold overnight. Probably over two nights. Maybe even three. In their comatose state, they might survive. Especially with IVs.

With the clarity afforded by a fresh rush of adrenaline, Jillian headed back into the tent. Her eyes scanning, taking in the IV bags and her jacket tossed over the back of a chair.

She slipped into the jacket, knowing every second she was on her feet would be helpful to those outside. Unfortunately the IV tubing traced neatly up her sleeve and out the back of the jacket, at the base. At the neck it would receive the gravitational tug necessary to keep it dripping.

After a rapid search she found a safety pin and stared at it a second before shedding her jacket and pulling the tubing apart, shoving in the connection to a new, fuller, heavier bag. She pushed the pin through the wide hole at the top and attached it to the base of her jacket collar. Shrugging back into it, she felt the IV bag tugging slightly at the neckline, but it wasn't much of a bother, knowing what it would help her accomplish. She loaded her pockets with supplies and went to work, Leon's blood already crusting on her pants, forgotten.

Expanding her ribcage, she sucked in as much air as she could. Certain that the same place that had been so toxic to everyone no longer was to her.

Jordan was her first order of business. In short work, she propped him on his side, using the pillows from her bed and his. She used the same rubber tourniquet that he had used on her, and popped open a sterile needle and tubing. It had been months since she had run a line, she'd been so busy taking notes and trying to figure out botulism cases. But she had a motor memory, and once she got started her hands remembered even if her brain didn't.

The pattern worked its whole way through. So Jordan's IV bag was hung before she realized that he deserved the same dose of Raglan she'd been fed. And she carefully drew up the dose, injected it into the bag, and quickly slapped on a piece of tape jotted with the medication, time, and her initials.

Jillian shook her head even as she did it. Who the hell was she writing it for? It wasn't like there was another soul around here. And she wouldn't forget when she gave Jordan the dose.

But it was procedure, and hopefully someone would turn up.

She was halfway out the door before realizing there was another problem in the tent. Leon.

With a grim set to her mouth, and knowing full well that she didn't have the strength required to do it, she did it anyway. Slowly and surely. Grabbing at his ankles, she pulled him through the opening. Leaving a smear of his blood behind, his hands trailing, she wished that she had the means and supplies to treat his body in accordance with the laws of God and civilized man. But she had to clear the tent. She and Jordan had already been in there for several days with a rotting corpse.

She wondered why he didn't smell more, before coming to the conclusion that he must not have died right away. But he didn't have an IV either, so that would mean that Jordan couldn't get to him before he fell.

When she cleared the tent, she stopped. Breathing too heavily, Jillian leaned over, her hands pressed to her bent knees. She couldn't walk, didn't have the energy to start IVs for those who needed them. But she could survey.

There were two techs nearby who appeared to have run IVs on each other. They got just inside a tent but didn't get the flap closed. They were losing heat, but they were easy to fix.

Plastic cups adorned the ground, looking like there had been a party. Some crumpled, some just tossed - the GI cocktails. It would seem Jordan had been handing them out like Halloween candy. The fallen men and women were scattered like the cups. They looked tossed and forgotten. The only pattern was that they seemed to have collapsed on the west side of the campus, indicating that perhaps they had deluded themselves into thinking they could outrun the symptoms.

A few deep breaths tugged at the muscles in her ribs, stopping her and forcing her to do nothing more than look around for a few more moments. This time she saw brown dots beyond the tent lines and turned to look more closely. Chipmunks. Unlike the people, they had flies. She blinked as she realized one of the slashes of white was much smaller than the others.

Her brain was caught in the question, and her feet moved slowly until she stood over what was clearly a fluffy white housecat. Its mouth hung open and all four legs stretched straight out in front of him. Her breath caught, jerking at her ribs again. Unused for quite a while, the extended movement hurt them. But Jillian tamped down the thought and the vision of the cat. She couldn't help it. She had to get these people into the tents. And although Leon was by far the biggest of any of them, she didn't possess the strength to drag them all, even just the few feet required in most cases.

She glanced up at the clear sky for the first time. It was morning. So she had a good portion of the day to work. And the people she left out would be getting warmer, at least for a while.

She needed a rolling gurney system.

There was a dolly and some rope in the supply tent.

A wheelchair would be nice but was too high – she'd spend too much time lifting people, *if* she even could.

She picked her way around, making promises to do something as quickly as possible as she stepped over the fallen. In the tent entry, she contemplated the scene in front of her. Then began loading the pieces she needed. Rope, several roll boards, Velcro straps, IVs, needles, tape . . . a box to haul the little pieces in.

She wound her way to the next patient tent, stealing the first empty gurney she could find and leaving the mattress propped against the support pole. She wheeled the frame back to the supply tent and went after her first . . . *victim*, she thought to herself.

She encountered him not twelve feet beyond the opening, lying on the ground, head back. She systematically checked his pulse, felt for broken bones, and shined her penlight in his eyes. She wasn't moving him if he wasn't worth moving, she thought grimly. And more time had passed gathering stuff than she had planned. But she would save as many as she could, and that meant staying upright, not wasting effort.

After a few moments she decided he was worth it. She rolled him, before realizing she'd never been taught how to do this procedure by herself. And with good cause, *Who could have predicted this?* She stared at the bodies all around her.

This time she put the board in place first, then rocked her patient, quickly shoving it behind him. She propped the two spare roll boards like ramps up the eight inches to the collapsed, mattressless gurney. With rope, she leaned back and dragged him up the slope, by far the most exerting of the activities.

But he was there, unaware of the abuse she had caused him and herself in the process. She popped him up and wheeled him to the nearest free patient space. Trying so hard to be careful, but having neither the time nor the strength to do much more than plop him onto the bed, she got her breath while she ran a line on him.

She injected a dose of Raglan for him, too. Then took a moment to gather her thoughts and her energy. Trying to be useful while she waited for her oxygen to catch up to her, she wrote the dosing repeatedly across the tape and stuck the tabs methodically up her jacket sleeve. Ready to grab when she needed them. The only question was, would her strength find her or would she just get weaker?

Only one way to find out.

• • • •

DAVID WOKE FROM A SOLID sleep to the cadence of army boots on a wooden bridge. Or a woodpecker in slow motion, each peck echoing forever.

“Ehhhh.” It was a sound carried on a breath that rang in the hollowness around him. And he remembered. Climbing up here. Going to sleep. Being certain that *it* had found him.

He blinked by force of will, the light blinding as he pried open his eyeballs. At last they focused on the floor near him, on the thing least painful to his vision. *Wouldn't you know it?* The things he saw first were the army blankets made into the love nest where Jillian had curled into Abellard that morning.

Or maybe it had been longer.

He had been hungry when he came, but now it seemed his stomach had turned almost inside out. He knew he needed to eat, but it didn't hurt, wasn't even a bother. He imagined this was the way that people starved to death, knowing they needed food, but knowing there wasn't much they could do about it.

He flexed his toes, his knees, his ankles, worked his stiff fingers, and elbows - all of it painful, but necessary.

Last, he remembered not a soul had been awake. And from the sound of it, or lack thereof, it remained the same.

He slowly pitched himself to sitting. The pounding lessened now, he pushed to his feet, swaying like the tall trees, a state he despised. Only then did he realize how much of his pride was embedded in his nature - that he was solid, unchanging, predictable - readable if you knew the signs. A David Carter the Second who wavered on his feet was none of those things and he fought for balance.

But he didn't really find all of it. He lurched toward the door, throwing it open, not admitting to himself how much weight the doorknob bore while he turned it and swung it back.

He walked the few steps forward, unaided, until his shoulder banged into a locker he hadn't realized he was so close to. With a grunt, he massaged his muscles, and walked again, this time trailing his fingers along the cool paint, the texture changing as lockers passed by under his fingerpads. The wall told him which way was up, and he stayed vertical this time.

His brain didn't know what to do about it. Balance came naturally, it was like farting, you just did it. Conscious thought about walking was virtually impossible to a man who had left that up to his brainstem for decades.

The hallway down to the field was in front of him. There were windows lining each side, and from this height he would be able to see the white tops of the tents looking like Arlington Cemetery as they made neat rows across the soccer field. If he could get to the other side of the damn hall.

A deep breath.

Another.

And he started putting one foot in front of the other, stunned by knowledge that this was what it felt like to be an astronaut in space - no bearings, just sightlines. How did it work so well most of the time? David knew then that he had caught a glimpse into Jillian's brain, her fascination with the human form and function.

At last his fingers caught the smooth surface of the windows. Cold to the touch, he realized that the school had kept functioning even without its people, the heater making a huge difference.

Under the guise of making a visual sweep of the tent town, he rested his forehead against the window, enjoying the temperature difference that felt almost like wetness. While he breathed, he scanned.

Nothing.

He sighed, realizing he wasn't quite ready to move yet. And told himself that he should look a little longer. But the people were down there, and the food was down there. He would only get

weaker while he waited.

*Why the hell had he come back up here in the first place?*

The cot didn't seem like such a bargain now.

His feet followed a line, one arm stayed out from his side, at ninety degrees, trailing fingertips across the cool windows as he walked, leaving fingerprints he didn't care about. The stairs got closer and closer, and David admitted to himself that he needed the railing. *Son of a bitch.* He wished this on his old man as he aged - this feeling of helplessness. And he wasn't sure if it was worse that there was no one around to help, or better.

With slow even steps he took on the first flight. It seemed, as he looked down, that it had gotten steeper. Every time his foot hit flat against the concrete step, the impact rang through his leg bones. His going was slow and he had to stop at the landing, his hand pressed flat against the cool window, supporting his weight. And for the first time he began to wonder what it would be like when he hit the bottom.

Would anyone be alive?

Clearly no one was awake yet.

His stomach pinched, the tiny reminder that he should be on a mission for food. It wasn't like the people were going to go anywhere while he ate.

He walked the level part between flights, one hand pressing against the small stitch in his side, a dogged reminder of his weakness. Then he faced the next set of stairs.

Again, he slapped his way down, lacking the control necessary for a smooth gait. Thinking that food would help, but knowing there wasn't likely to be a fruit basket waiting for him at the next landing, he just kept going.

Breathing heavier, he paused again at the level section, his ribs heaving, his harsh intakes and expulsions the only sound in the hollow stairwell. This time both hands rested on the window. His leg stretched out behind him in a mock calf stretch, as though a good warm-up would cure him.

When he got halfway down, the tent town came into clearer view. He could see down a few of the paths, not just skim across the tops. Now he could see the fallen doctors and nurses, in their white jackets and blue scrubs. Suits were down too, their black making them look sinister compared the angelic coloring of the medical staff.

"Holy shit!"

He heard his own voice before he absorbed the movement he had seen. A team of people had grabbed one of the doctors in the aisleway and was rolling him onto a board and a gurney.

He could only see one active person because the tents blocked his view but there appeared to be more than one. He could see better if he went down a few steps, all the way to the end of the row . . .

Taking it sideways and never peeling his eyes from the scene, he spent excruciating minutes gaining a few steps. And his view got clearer if not his brain.

There was only one doctor, and it was Jillian. Out there hauling some hapless med onto a metal bed. She popped it up and pushed it into the nearest tent disappearing from view.

David took a few more steps. Feeling his way, hands plastered to the windows that trailed the staircase. He was about to lose the sightline, the tents on the left would obscure the view. And he had to get Jillian's attention.

He waited where he stood, contemplating the fact that it was possibly just the two of them awake. Maybe there really had been something to that immunity theory.

She reemerged, oblivious to him standing there in the staircase.

"Jillian!" His lungs burned from the effort and she didn't glance up.

“Jillian!”

Again nothing.

He took two more steps down, to where a window was pushed an inch open to ventilate the place, keeping her in his sights the whole time. She was out there, rocking and strapping up another fallen doc, looking like one of the seven dwarves had gotten lost and decided to go it alone. He wouldn't have been surprised to find her whistling.

But he put his mouth to the space and yelled her name again.

She started, as though she had heard something, but shook off the sound. No doubt having no idea what the Herculean effort was costing him.

But he yelled again.

This time she looked up before turning back.

And he yelled yet again.

His ribs ached. His throat burned. His legs were weak.

But she was looking around for the source of the noise she had heard. With no more voice to spare, he did the only thing he could think of. He made a fist and banged on the window.

He would have cursed out loud if he'd had the voice to do it. The damned plexiglass absorbed his tender fist and released only a gentle thud. The noise nowhere near worthy of the pain it had inflicted.

But he had nothing else to hit it with.

He was wearing borrowed scrubs or he would have had a belt buckle. He was soft, and he was weak, and it was a bad combination. But he banged again and screamed her name one last time.

“Jillian!”

This time he moved to the left, plopping down a step, and waved frantically, feeling like a lost child watching the search party go by.

Finally she saw him and waved.

From here it was hard to tell, but he thought she smiled.

Then she went back to her patient, finished hauling him onto the gurney, popped the bed up, and disappeared into the tent.

*That bitch!*

David took a few more steps. Still traveling sideways, watching the tent town for other signs of life. But there were none. None at all now that Jillian was out of view.

He hit the next landing, his line of sight down the tents gone, obscured by the first row, he was barely above them, and this last flight would bring his feet even with the ground outside.

His heart hitched, his breath released, when he saw her coming out at a near jog. Hell, she was in much better shape than he was. But he'd never been so happy to see her, to see anyone.

He faced the last steps. His energy renewed in a surge of hope, and he squared up to the flight, thinking to take it head on.

His eyes lifted as he saw the door swing open and heard her voice, breathless, “David!”

He felt the concrete corner of the first step bite into his arch, barely grabbing the treads on his expensive sneakers. The tenuous balance he registered in his fingers fled, and he tilted to the right, taking the hard metal rail in his lower ribs. His hands flailed, but the rapid bloom of adrenaline only made him think faster, not act faster, and in horrifying slow motion he watched his hands miss their grip, and the cold gray stairs come straight for his face.





Jillian had no time to react, she had no more called his name and registered the rare smile that lit up his whole face, than he was at her feet in an inhuman crumple.

Stifling a scream, she compartmentalized that this was her friend, and let her brain go into ER mode. He was unconscious, so without moving him or speaking, she checked for a pulse, and found it, going strong if erratic. She pulled her stethoscope free of her neck and listened to his breath sounds. Again, no fluid, no hissing, just normal sounds sped up a little by the fall and the adrenaline.

Carefully she felt along several of his limbs. His right leg she didn't touch, it was already swelling and bent at such an angle that she didn't have to feel it to know that it was broken, a tib-fib for sure. His hip also wasn't placed right, and his pelvic girdle was wrong, although what the problem was she couldn't tell just by looking. His right arm flayed out to his side where it had been thrown by the fall. But it was facing the wrong way. Dislocated. A few touches and palpations confirmed her suspicion.

He was starting to come around, and she debated what to do. No one else had woken up in the time she had been awake. And it would figure that the one person who did would pitch down the steps to her feet the moment she discovered him. There was nothing she wanted to do less than spend her time setting a broken bone, by herself mind you, and taking care of the person who should have been helping her.

With a self-deriding shake of her head, Jillian put that thought away. She opened the compartment doors; this was David. And he was seriously hurt. But he was coming to.

"Jillian?" It was a harsh whisper, and he tried to turn his head from where she held it firm in her hands. She couldn't risk him moving his neck, not until she knew he checked out.

"David, don't move."

He did just that, trying to lift his dislocated arm and letting out a hoarse scream in the process. He seemed to hear himself, and she could almost see the testosterone working its way through his system. David bucked up and, blinking at her, finally made contact "Good to see you."

She ignored his attempt at humor and told him to stay still, she was going to get the gurney.

Her IV bag flopped inside the back of her jacket as she ran, although she could already tell it weighed less than before, a good half of it had dripped into her veins in the time she had worked today. But for all she had accomplished, there were plenty of people left to move and she could feel the temperature dropping in the late afternoon.

Her energy had improved as she worked, although she could find no scientific explanation for it. Now she wrapped her hands around the gurney bar and, with all the speed she could afford, she raced back into the hallway. Grateful when she could stop fighting the cart for a path over the grass and enjoy the slick feel and easy glide of the wheels moving on the polished floor they were intended for.

She was beside David in a moment, although in the short time she had been gone his eyes had changed from bewildered to wary. He knew he was in bad shape. But Jillian just started to work. She ran the IV with a newfound efficiency, leaving off the Raglan dose, but adding in some morphine sulfate to dull the pain.

She put a neck collar on him next, even though he protested and looked at her with wide eyes. She rocked him onto the rollboard with strong hands and the methods learned from thirty limp patients this afternoon. She had gotten better with every patient and was grateful now. David would be too, as she was uncertain if he had sustained any spinal injuries.

She had him up on the gurney and sprung the bed upward to a workable height before she made eye contact with him. His left hand shot out and grabbed her arm, startling her and keeping her from rolling him out to the lobby area in front of the cafeteria where the light was better.

“David?”

“Jillian, tell me.”

She knew what he wanted to hear. But everything wasn't going to be all right. He'd gone headfirst down concrete steps. He was messed up. His right leg had swollen even more since her initial assessment and she was certain there was internal bleeding. Of course Jordan would have followed all the protocol and briefed David on his condition and options and let David make those decisions.

She wasn't Jordan.

But she tried.

With an awkward motion she took his face in her hands, hindered by the thick plastic neck collar immobilizing him and looked him in the eyes. “You have at least a broken right leg and a dislocated right shoulder. I think something is wrong with your hip as well. I'm going to check you for spinal cord injuries first. Then I'm going to take you out to the tent and fix you up. It's going to hurt. Because I'm the only one awake. But ninety-nine percent says you're going to be okay.” She paused, added, “Later.”

With her penlight she checked his pupils. She was going to pray every night never to have to watch for ‘equal and reactive’ again. Then she prodded him repeatedly. It was a medical test, but Jillian admitted that it was just systematic poking to see if the patient could feel things. She undid the Velcro holding the collar in place before reaching both hands around his neck and feeling the vertebrae. Nothing felt damaged to her trained fingers. So she left the collar off and began what would be a bumpy and excruciating ride for David out to the tent.

He was clenching his jaw by the time they arrived. Wheeling him inside, her eyes darted to Jordan, lying right where she'd left him, not bothered by any of this. Leaving David on the metal gurney, she went about setting up.

Jillian stole bedsheets and cut them into strips. She lined up shots of pain medications and muscle relaxants. She administered the doses and braided sheets while she waited for them to take effect. She ignored all the protocol about asking David what he wanted. She would fix him as best she could.

He could sue her later. Besides there were surely sunshine laws to cover malpractice during mass human extinctions.

When the dosing had done its job, Jillian shifted him to the matted bed pushed into the corner by Jordan's, and warned David what she was doing just moments before she tied him to the frame. She palpated his hip and wished for an x-ray. But with a deep breath of acceptance she diagnosed that the pelvic girdle was broken. Without a team and an anesthesiologist, all she could do was bind it, and they'd have to re-break and re-set it later.

With great care Jillian bound his hip as best she could and she went so far as to tie his knee to the bed, thinking she could stabilize it and still be able to reset the tib-fib. She explained as she went. And David was a good soldier, stoic and cooperative, following all her suggestions no matter how bizarre. So she looped a sheet carefully around his foot and ankle and pulled with all her small might, and accomplished nothing.

“What did you do?”

With lips pressed together in disappointment and thought, she turned back to her patient. “In your language I believe it would be expressed as ‘jack shit’.” She turned away to think.

Then tried again. The third time she applied pressure by hanging back on the sheet, the weight of her borne completely by his lower leg, hoping to stretch it far enough that she could settle the snapped bones back into their rightful places. Her feet climbed, both leaving the floor, and she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to set his bones before she dislocated her own shoulders from the effort. But at last she managed enough pull and she felt her strength overcome the tension of his muscles and let the bones slide.

The hard part was in letting his leg slip back together gently. She couldn’t afford to have them snap back into place and splinter or jam or, god forbid, miss and slide past each other again, causing more muscle tearing and tissue damage as they went. So her strength drained as she fought for control, and with a last sigh she realized the muscles were no longer fighting her. The bones had found each other again. She could let go.

Stopping to breathe for a few minutes, she made a quick makeshift splint then set about replacing Jordan’s IV bag. It was non-exerting work. David’s shoulder would have to wait, she didn’t have even that simple procedure in her right now. Plus he was so doped up, it wasn’t like he would know.

Jillian stayed clinical. She went to the cafeteria and fetched a few bananas, bottles of juice, sandwiches, and even a few cookies. With arms full, she wound her way through the slumbering tents back to David and Jordan.

David asked how the penguins were doing.

“Fine.” She didn’t look up. From the penguins question and the slightly slurred quality of speech the man was either seeing the birds or believed he was at the north pole.

Jordan didn’t say anything. Just quietly submitted to the hand she laid palm down across his chest to be sure that he continued breathing.

Turning back to David, she rolled him, taking advantage of the muscle relaxants. With careful explanations that he ignored, Jillian educated him about the procedure. But the medications were working better than she had expected. He was of no help whatsoever. He agreed to everything, but couldn’t even sit still. Worse, he tried to help - insisting on turning, sitting, and generally being a nuisance.

She promised him a cookie if he stayed still, and that, of all things seemed to work. But it didn’t stop him from mooning at her like a lovesick calf.

“You know you’re beautiful.”

*What do you say to that? If you say ‘no’ he’ll just go on.* “Yes.”

“Can I touch you?”

“You have no idea what you’re saying.” After she popped his shoulder into place she fitted him with a sling and proceeded to adjust it. Leaning over him she added an extra Velcro strap, thinking that goofboy might just do something stupid if he wasn’t tied down.

“I know exactly what I’m saying. This medicine just took away my concerns about saying it.”

*That was interesting.* “What were those concerns, David?”

“That you would slap me.” His tongue sounded thick, but that would pass as he sobered up. As would this.

“You know, I think that was a good concern. – Hey!” She smacked his hand away from her butt, thinking that maybe a good slap was warranted. If she didn’t leave a mark he’d never know better.

“I feel this way about you all the time.” A conspiratorial look on his face, he leaned far enough forward to risk falling off the gurney, which was the last thing she needed. God, the man was a danger to himself.

“Yeah, well why don’t you talk it over with the penguins?”

Confusion. Blessed confusion. He tried to gesture with his disabled arm, and seemed even more perturbed that it didn’t move. “Where did they go?”

“They’re visiting the back of your eyelids, David. You have to lie down and close your eyes for a long time. The penguins will . . .” *This had to be good . . .* “peck you when it’s time to open your eyes.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, in complete agreement before slowly laying himself back. Closing his eyes carefully, he waited for the penguins.

If he hadn’t been the last man on earth, she would have laughed. Instead she went outside looking for another gurney, and hauled it in. Keeping her gaze close to the ground, Jillian ignored the suits and med staff that were still visible in white and black against the grass. Those she hadn’t moved yet. They would have to survive another night. She was exhausted.

• • • •

IT WAS THE INTERROGATION room of nightmares. Borne of too many cop movies. The light shone in his eyes obscuring everything else in the world.

He didn’t even remember the world. Just that there were questions.

Voices were asking him things he couldn’t answer. He pushed his arm up to shield his face, but it wouldn’t come. He was rewarded with a sharp pain every time he tried to lift it. And he couldn’t distinguish who was holding him down, who was speaking. Just the glare flooding his vision to the point of pain.

Jordan squeezed sore eyes tight to stop it, but the red glow permeated his eyelids, and snuck between every time he moved. The voice wouldn’t shut up. He made a noise, the sound was painful to his own ears but it reoriented him.

Gravity was down, behind him. He was on his back, in bed.

With each time he squinted, he recognized more and more in the blobs around him. The light was sunlight, not artificial. The voice was to his left. The pain was in his left hand.

He moved it, snapping it painfully against something metal.

The bedrail.

He moaned.

“Jordan!”

Her voice pierced the haze.

*Jillian.*

It was all he got to think before he felt her hands, soft and cool, on his arm. Her voice was asking for his open eyes. He tried to say her name, and was quite certain that he didn’t achieve it. But she responded like he had. “That’s right, I’m here. It’s good to see you awake. I was getting worried.”

*Don’t worry about me.*

But he couldn’t form single words, let alone the whole thought.

*It.*

He’d had *it*.

And he’d woken up. The realization expanded his lungs to full capacity, to gasp in surprise at his own survival. With the dawning came the idea that he had to get his eyes open no matter the cost. He

fought the burning and the low, shallow sound that accompanied the forced vision. But he waited. And the first blob came into focus.

It was David, on the gurney beside him who had provided the interrogation, and was still at it. “Abellard! You are about the last one up. Don’t worry, I kept our girl here company.”

Jillian’s voice cut through the haze, clearer than anything else around him. “Yeah, you weren’t much good at anything else.”

“Ooh, baby, that hurts.”

As did the banter that they shared when he couldn’t even see. But Jordan forced his eyelids wide, waiting while she became visible. Still a little fuzzy, Jillian’s smile was obvious.

Rapid blinks brought the world into sharp relief one painful frame at a time. The white of the canvas, bleeding in sunlight. The silver of the bed bars, used for children and the elderly. Or the comatose.

He considered asking to have them put down so he could feel human again, but the face that came into view was David’s and in a blink Jordan realized what was wrong. It looked like David had gotten in bad with the mob. “David?”

“Yeah?” David shrugged, with only one shoulder. “In your professional opinion I am fucked-up, huh?”

“What happened?”

Jordan missed the first part of the explanation, simply because he was shocked he had spoken and David had answered. Despite the feeling that his mouth was stuffed with moldy gauze, he was articulate.

“-down the stairs. The rest is pretty obvious.”

“Stairs?” He tried to lift his head, and it took a moment to realize the blue that had settled beside him was Jillian in her scrubs, her palm flat against his forehead holding him immobile.

“Don’t try to sit up yet.”

But he wanted to hear about these mythical stairs that had started wailing on David while he himself had slumbered on.

David pointed with his unslung arm, still dressed in doctors scrubs, although by now Jordan was sure that everyone knew he wasn’t a physician. “The last flight. I’d just woken up and was weak. I was trying to get to Jillian. And I slipped.” His finger gestured beyond the tents and Jordan recalled the long, tall stairwell that led up to the classrooms on top of the hill.

“You fell down the stairs?”

The world was undergoing a phenomenal change, the likes of which had not been witnessed by humans of any kind before. And David *fell down the stairs?*

Jillian’s voice added in. “He was basically useless. Which sucked because he and I were the only ones awake for two days. We came right out of it.”

His gut twisted, although in relief or fear, he was uncertain. “You *were* immune.”

“Well, we went under. I don’t know that I’d call it immunity.” Again she pressed her hand flat to him, this time across his chest, and it was embarrassingly easy for her to push him back down. He hadn’t even realized that he’d been trying to sit up. “I did blood tests out the wazoo. . . we’ve got nothing that I can find.”

The way Jordan figured it, if she couldn’t find the pattern, it didn’t exist.

Licking the roof of his mouth, he tried to ready it to speak again. But Jillian saw him and went into action. Propping the head of his bed slightly she pushed his pillow into place and handed him a small cup of juice.

Positively heavenly, it made up for the abrasion of the invalid treatment. If he'd been strong enough he would have told her to quit. But, well, that was the point wasn't it?

After a second cup, he found his voice and spoke over the questions David was still asking. "Who else?"

Her chest moved visibly. "Well . . ."

He could see the gears. She needed to find a place to start and that meant there was a lot.

"I can't get Landerly on the phone. I think he's under." She busied her hands, drawing a dose of something and injecting it into David's IV. "In fact, we've set a couple of people to calling different places and recording what they report."

"Are we Central Headquarters now? That doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't. But we put ourselves in the path of the swap. So we were one of the first places under, and one of the first to come out. I'll be glad to hand all the data to Atlanta as soon as they come around."

"Nothing from them?" Jordan shook his head. His blood pumping stronger at the mention that Landerly was down. That all of Atlanta was.

"Not yet."

"Here?" He was sitting, having left horizontal behind, his legs dangling over the side down where the baby rail ended. His head would have been swimming from being upright if it hadn't been swimming from the news he was getting.

"We've kept just over a third." Jillian's sigh echoed in the still air.

And Jordan noticed the absence of the sound. "What happened to David?" The geologist's head was back and he'd passed out. A bolt of fear went through Jordan, that David had fallen under again. But Jillian's reaction was nothing if not nonchalant.

"His pain medications knock him out. He gets real chatty when he hurts."

Jordan eyed the blond man, who even in sleep, and looking like he'd seen the hard end of a big stick, maintained his aura of superiority. It covered him like a blanket, and clung to him like his last name.

Jordan turned back to Jillian; she looked fatigued, but stoic.

"When did he fall?"

"Two days ago. Within an hour of waking up. Just down the last flight. Worst of it is the cracked hip girdle."

Jordan winced at the thought. But Jillian just continued with the list. "He also has a tib-fib, dislocated right shoulder, bruised collarbone, two ribs with hairline fractures, and three bruised. And a nasty cut on his head, stitches compliments of me. And a strained ankle."

"Damn." Jordan blinked. It sucked to be David right now.

"Yeah. I was the only one up. I didn't get everyone inside because of him. . . ." Her eyes went to the ground, her breath in uneven expansions.

Jordan waited for her to lift whatever had weighed her down.

"I think some of them went hypothermic. . . . When I saw him I thought he was going to help me. But then . . . he fell . . . he just needed so much care."

"Jilly. It's okay." He wasn't sure what else to say. It wasn't like he had been here to help. "You did the best you could. And you saved David." That fact was clearly important to her, so Jordan tamped down the fiendish little thoughts rising inside him at the idea of David heading to the great beyond and dozens of other lives being saved. But he didn't share those with Jillian.

He also knew there was nothing more he could do for her guilt. Not now. So he tried the fine art of distraction. “Who else is up?”

“I can tell you better who is down. We’re waiting for more to wake.” She rattled off some of the names of techs they had been working with. Some she just described: Steven, one of the guards; the two brothers in the cafeteria, the Sanders’; Mr. Miles and Mr. Moore the two high school science teachers who had helped out. “That cute blonde girl who liked you so much,” Jillian tilted her head, her mouth pulled back on one side, conveying the sorrow she just couldn’t quite hold in. “Lucy?”

He snapped up, “Lucy Whitman?” Not that he knew her well enough to miss her, but . . . he sighed.

Jillian’s face turned even more grim, and he knew what was coming. “The ones you didn’t mention.”

She shook her head, but her voice left a little room for hope. “There are a few still under, but. . . Dr. Sorenson’s animal wrangler friend hit his head when he fell and died fairly quickly. Maybe it was nicer that way. Fast.”

“Leon Peppersmith. What about Becky?”

“Holding on, but faint.” Her hands waved uselessly, sharing with him the knot inside her. That the simple technicalities of life were still beyond her skills. “We’ve learned to recognize the signs that someone is coming out-”

He smiled. Jillian. “Of course you have.”

“-but she doesn’t have any of them. Her breathing is getting weaker and weaker.”

“Ventilator?”

“We don’t have enough to spare. . . . But I got her one anyway. . . . not that it’s doing her any good. You know, it’s just like the beginning. It’s always ahead of us. We can read the signs but we can’t prevent or counteract any of it.” Again the useless gestures. The breaths in.

Then a spark. Her head snapped up, she smiled, making full eye contact and beaming in a way he hadn’t seen before. Good. Something good was coming.

“I got you this.” She pulled several pages from her pocket. He saw the list of names, marching in precise columns.

He blinked. Pages of names. A list of what?

He started to ask but he caught sight of *James Linder Carvell* and *LeAnn Jessica Lee*. The back of his brain tickled. He should know –

They were from his high school.

Lake James.

“Survivors?”

She smiled and nodded. “In the order they woke up, not alphabetical. Kelly and Lindsey aren’t there. But I found ten Abellards. Jackson is your father, right?” Her eyes were wide wondering, waiting.

He nodded, trying to stop the tears that formed.

His Dad.

He flipped two pages, seeing the occasional name highlighted. Jillian had done it. The lines were too precise to be anything other than machine or Jilly. All the highlights were Abellards.

Jackson Stelman Abellard.

It stared up at him in black and white, painting a truth he hadn’t even felt in his heart. Releasing the tears down his face. *Thank you, God.*

Jillian didn’t give him any space, just beamed up at him. “I knew you’d want to see that.”

He nodded, biting his lip. Trying to be more together, less hindered by babyrails and emotions. He used the backs of his hands to wipe at his face.

“Ow!” He had raked the IV needle down his cheek. It hurt enough to make him wonder if he had drawn blood.

But Jillian reached up and wiped his face, her fingers were soft and warm – and demeaning. He brushed her away. “Thank you.” The mumble was all he could muster.

He started again, trying to learn what he had missed. “All of Lake James went under?”

She nodded, forgetting that he had pushed her aside, “Everyone. The whole US, the world. As best as we can tell the poles swapped. That was it. The shift.”

“Really?”

She gestured to the prone form on the gurney next to him. “You’ll have to ask David. But that’s what he believes.”

Jordan couldn’t help but look around the ten-by-ten tent that had been his world for four days. Even the town of Oak Ridge was nothing in the global sense, “How did we learn all this?”

Jilly’s smile was crooked. “Not by me.” She punctuated with a sigh. “I think I’m not human really. It would explain a lot.”

The frown pulled his features central, her phrasing was so strange. *Not human?*

But she stopped him before he could begin. “The women all went under first. Even with me and David, I went first. So, logically, the women started waking up first.

“Apparently when a real woman wakes from a coma the first thing she does is call everyone she knows. Three women woke up first. Within the hour they had made contact with forty different states and seven other countries. That doesn’t even include the ones that didn’t answer.” She looked incredulous for a moment, before that slid away to reveal guilt. “I had been awake a full day and a half by then, and hadn’t even thought to try to contact my own family.”

Her eyes slipped to the ground. Never revealing what, if anything, she had found out about her sisters and parents. Not that he was surprised. That was just Jillian.

The gears slipped into place. Maybe she and David did have a lot in common.

But he didn’t have time to dwell on it.

“Dr. Brookwood!” A tech ran into the tent, clearly out of breath, but pushing the words through anyway. “You said you wanted to be notified if anything happened to Dr. Sorenson.” Jordan could hear her breathing from eight feet away. “She’s slipping.”

Jillian threw one last look at him before darting from the tent, stethoscope and penlight in hand. Looking like an ER doc in full mode. But she must be these days, he reasoned. He still hadn’t figured out how she had taken care of David’s breaks and dislocations all by herself.

He motioned for the tech to come give him a hand. And she caught her breath before reaching out and steadying him so he could slide down to shaky legs. But he stood firm after the first attempt. The IV remained attached, and he began to scratch off the tape at the back of his left hand, but the tech stilled him. “We’ve been leaving them on.”

But then he’d be stuck, tethered to the bed. And he told her so.

She lowered the pole and handed him the half-full bag to hang onto, before turning him around and taking a safety pin to his clothing. Within moments he was strung up with his IV attached at the back of his collar. When he glanced up he saw that the tech was wearing one the same way. “So this is the latest fashion rage?”

“Dr. Brookwood thought it up.” She smiled. *Of course they all loved Jillian. She was brilliant, she saved their lives probably. While he slept.* “She’s very smart you know.”



“Yes, I know.” But he left the tech there to share her remaining praise of Jilly with the sleeping Dr. Carter. Taking off, he followed the little blue streak, full of energy that he didn’t yet have, and brains that he never would. Her dark hair flying loose behind her a beacon he followed through the tents.

• • • •

BECKY SORENSON LOOKED like an angel. At least the kind Jillian had always imagined as a kid - rosy lips, pale skin in peaches and cream, with a cinnamon dusting of freckles. Vibrant hair in shades of red reserved only for the very lucky. Colors she herself would never possess.

Jillian looked at the doctor lying there. She certainly didn’t look like a world class biologist. She looked like another version of Snow White. They ought to get her a bouquet and glass case and let her wait for Prince Charming. In Jillian’s estimation that part should be played by Leon Peppersmith. He was huge and handsome and sharp as a tack. And since Becky wasn’t awake to say what her preferences were, Jillian would decide for her. Although she couldn’t even force a mental image of Leon prancing a horse through the forest, looking for a princess. Possibly wearing tights.

She almost laughed.

And the thought disintegrated. Becky’s knight wouldn’t show. He had died of a blow to the head. Something any one of the handful of CDC docs could have fixed had they been anything other than comatose. Leon had been one of a few who had died, not due to the reversal, but to ‘other’ causes.

At least Becky wouldn’t know that he hadn’t survived.

Jordan nearly plowed into her as he entered the tent. She didn’t have to turn and look. The labored breathing was all his.

It was only then that the nurse hovering over Dr. Sorenson looked up, stethoscope still in hand. “Her blood pressure is still dropping. Her pulse is uneven and fading.” She shook her head, brown curls unruly from all the work. She stepped aside, revealing that the bed next to Becky had the sheet pulled up over the face.

“When did we lose him?” Jillian pointed.

“About two hours ago.” The nurse looked over her shoulder at the body, her distress turning to compassion. “The crew hasn’t found a place to put him, and we need to tag him so his family can find him.”

Jillian’s head spun. Again. Another thing her one track mind had never even been concerned with. She had been trained to do these things. Her checklist included ‘notify family’ and ‘label patient,’ but it just didn’t spring naturally into her mind the way it had for everyone else.

The wedge that had always existed between her and society slipped a little further into the widening crack. With a nod, she checked Dr. Sorenson over for herself. Jordan slipped in beside her, remarkably steady on his feet for having just come around.

With wide eyes Jillian faced him. “It seems the longer they stay under the harder it is to pull out. At first people were waking up left and right. Then it petered off. When you woke up . . . well, no one else has since.” Her shoulders hunched in abject misery. “I’m afraid no one else will.” *And I can’t tell you how glad I am that you did.*

The ventilator provided a steady rhythm and forced the rise and fall of Becky’s chest while Jillian and Jordan worked silently. They ran extra fluid into her.

Becky’s heart still beat, only missing the rhythm occasionally. Mostly it was just slowing down. The powerstroke of the left ventricle had reduced to little more than a squish of fluid. The peach

tones of her skin, already lacking their usual vibrance, were slipping to grays. Jillian pushed medication after medication, until Jordan's hand on her arm stilled her.

She listened to the infrequent *lub-dub* of Becky's heart fade to just a single sound. Her head snapped up as the ventilator gave one last hiss, then stilled. Jordan stood with his hand draped over the switches he had turned to stop the machinery. The heart monitor gave one last beep, and Jordan turned it off too, before it could go into its synthetic whine, letting everyone within earshot know its patient had died.

She felt her shirt get wet before she realized that she was crying. And threw herself at Jordan, the only remaining human being that she *knew*. His arms wrapped around her. "Jillian, you saved so many."

"But all I can do is watch. I can't change anything."

His hand stroked her hair, following it all the way down to the middle of her back. Her eyes squeezed against the visions in her head, and focused where she had buried her face in the front of Jordan's jacket. "I didn't *save* any of them."

"Yes, you did."

"Before they fell, some of the men called their friends, they told them what was coming. Told them to get inside and lie down at the first signs of nausea. They saved people all over the world." She shook her head against his chest, leaving smears of tears darkening the fabric. "Even here, so many were inside, on gurneys, lying on the ground. Some even had IVs run on each other. . . ." A hiccup forced its way up her throat, escaping in an embarrassing giveaway. "But I couldn't get them all inside . . ."

"You saved David."

Her breath let out. That she had done.

His voice flowed over her again like a wave. "I *told* them all to get inside - to lie down."

She sniffed. "*You* saved them."

"But the ones who didn't. . . well, that's what they *chose*. You shouldn't feel guilty about that."

She hadn't saved anyone, really.

She chewed at her lower lip, still not looking up at him. Taking deep breaths, she fought the feeling of being out of control. Something that she hadn't known was so very frightening until just this moment when she admitted it.

And her brain started ticking. Fifty three hours she had been awake. And slept only six. In small shifts, too. She'd eaten only five small meals in that time. Thank God for the IV she had worn up until this morning.

No wonder she was so tired. The world had slipped away, and she was powerless against the changes that had come . . . that were still coming.

So she wasn't surprised to realize that Jordan was carrying her out of the tent, even though she didn't know when she had passed from standing on her own feet to having her weight entirely borne by him. As she looked over his shoulder she saw the curly haired nurse tug at the sheet to Becky Sorenson's bed, and pull it up over her face.

Jillian squeezed her eyes to block the image, but it followed her.

As if in reaction to the unwanted sight, she felt her brain just shut off.



She had been trying to wake up for a long time. Maybe two or three hours. It wasn't her usual sleep. She heard sounds around her. Another person, several maybe.

And the thread snapped - the one that had held her back from consciousness. Even though her eyes wouldn't obey and open, and her fingers wouldn't quite respond to her commands. She was finally truly alert. Inside her own body.

The person next to her spoke in deep tones, but not to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Ehhh." Just a moan from the second voice - whoever the first person was talking to.

"We're glad to see you're awake." Becky could sense or smell the man. She knew that he had shifted, that he was looking down at her. "From this twitching, it looks like your friend will wake up here really soon, too."

Becky tried again to make her fingers move, her toes flex, her eyelids spring open. None of it worked as she intended. But she must have accomplished something, because smooth warm fingers glided into place, holding her hand. The deep voice spoke again. "I know you're coming around. Just relax, it'll come. I remember."

She breathed deeply, then fought pain as sharp light penetrated her vision. Her face pulled tight to counteract the intrusion.

"That's my girl." The hand continued to hold hers, to squeeze occasionally with human contact, but he spoke to the blurry voice. "Would you like some juice?"

A bell rang, and reverberated around her skull. "Aauuuhhh."

She was shocked that the sound had been her own voice.

Another voice joined in, "What can I bring?"

"Juice. Several cups."

"Are these the last of them?"

She felt the vibrations of his body movement through his hand. He had nodded. "Probably."

Becky worked her mouth, the feeling of age-old cotton making her wish she was still under. "Mmmhlllhh."

"Dr. Sorenson, can you squeeze my hand?" The voice was close, she could feel his heat and detect that he was blocking part of the light that was causing her so much pain. She pushed aside the smell of the onions he had eaten recently.

She thought about squeezing. She could feel his fingers, but was unsure if she had actually accomplished the motion until he spoke. "All right, then." Pause. She waited for him to flip up her eyelids and shine a penlight in them. But he didn't. "Can you say your name?"

"Becky." It croaked out of her mouth like frogs escaping flashlights in the night.

"Perfect."

It had been far from it, she knew. Maybe the man was a dentist - that's how he could understand what surely was nothing more than a mumble.

"What are you giggling about?" His voice shook revealing that he, too, was laughing.

"You understand me."

He smiled. A kind, round face, with uneven teeth, and brown eyes.

She blinked slowly, immediately blurring her vision.

"If I sit you up will you drink this for me?"

The cup he held up looked like . . . urine.

She must have cringed. He spoke again. "It's apple juice. It's what we've got."

So she nodded. Her neck releasing loud moose noises within her skull as she moved it.

"I'm Jack. Your RN." He didn't hold out his hand, and Becky figured they'd already done their handshake. In efficient movements she was sitting, the gurney creaking louder than her own bones, and he had pushed her hands around the cup, helping her bring it to her lips.

Heaven.

She hadn't believed apple juice could be so good. She'd hated it since her mother had poured it down her throat day after day as a kid. But now . . . now it was sweet and clear and took her home.

To the living room with the old couches. The wear on the front carpet leading a path out the front door and continuing onto the paint and down the porch steps. The sagging split rail fence that greeted a person as they entered the yard, and asked them to return when they left.

Why had she memorized it so intently when she was there last?

Sitting bolt upright, Becky whacked her head on something.

No.

That wasn't right. Sitting had simply caused a headache the proportions of which matched a good whack upside the head. "My family!"

Did they know about her?

Becky knew the Nevada site had been under for four days before people started waking up. Were they worried about her?

The voice interrupted her worrying. "The lists are coming in as we find things out."

"Lists?" The light was still too bright and she shielded her face from it.

"Survivors. Who's passed."

Looking at her expression, the RN continued with his explanation, "The reversal hit everyone, right after it hit here. It was a few hours behind in some places, in others a whole day. But pretty much everywhere is waking up now."

Becky inhaled. *Pretty much everyone was waking up.* "So the lists of the dead are short?"

His kind smile faltered. "No."

"What?" How could that be? Nevada had lost some, but . . .

"We've lost over half."

"What?!" Again the pain of a baseball bat hitting her head. "Ahhhhh." She leaned herself back, squeezing her eyes against the light and the fire of tears. Again she said the two most important words. "My family?"

"I'll bring you the books."

*Books? They had been 'lists' but now they were 'books'?*

He squeezed her hand again, this time in sympathy and not as a medical check. And then Jack disappeared out the tent door into the bright world beyond.

When she opened her eyes, Becky found her tent mate staring at her in deep sympathy. She tried to change the subject from her tears. "Do you know what day it is?"

"It's Tuesday . . . I'd like to look at the lists, too. I have family all around here. Aunts, uncles, cousins. I already know my friend, Peter Wilson, he was a tech, didn't make it." Tears welled in his own eyes, and he showed no manly concern about hiding them from her, a total stranger. "He ran my IV for me, and made me get in and lie down." She saw and heard the intake of air, "He saved me."

But her sympathy was running low. Still she gave it her best shot, even though to her own ears it sounded hollow and vague. "Then he accomplished what he wanted, I'm sure. We're all going to lose someone in this."

Her words only served to wind herself up tighter. To make the outer edges of the world go fuzzy. Her family wasn't small. If they'd lost just over half . . .

She didn't want to think about it. So she checked out her IV, noted that vitamins had been added. Just when she had forced her breathing back to a shallow imitation of normal, Jack sauntered in carry reams of printed pages.

Becky sat herself upright. Ignoring the pounding in her head, she held her hands out. But Jack wouldn't give it to her, "Now, what city do you need?"

"Knoxville." Jack started to hand her the blue covered book.

But Becky remembered. She had sent them to Aaron. "No! Charlotte!"

"North Carolina?"

She nodded frantically, barely able to wait while Jack thumbed through the books looking for that county. "They were visiting, so that's where they'd be listed, right?" *Right?*

"Your guess is as good as mine." But with two hands he held out a gray bound volume, green and white striped computer paper was compiled and clipped inside, looking like an ancient corporate budget.

She set it carefully across her lap, barely registering that the man in the next bed had asked to see the local book. Lifting the front cover she saw only the word LIVING at the top of the page, and immediately with no fanfare it listed names, social security numbers and addresses on some. A few were just descriptions. In the order they'd been found. No real rhyme or reason.

Names sounded familiar to her, but not familiar enough to pause and think back. She was searching frantically for her family. She found her father. Her breath escaping. She had one.

Three pages later she found Brandon. Both listed at Aaron's address.

Twenty pages later she had found no one else. Just a half unfinished page, and the top of the next page reading DECEASED, as casually as LIVING had been labeled at the top of the first page.

Breath held, Becky read on. She knew what she would find. Her mother, her brother Aaron, and baby Mel. But she had to know for certain.

She found her brother on the second *deceased* page. Melanie was less than half a page later. Becky felt her lower lip curl, her teeth biting into it in a rabid attempt to stop the tears even if she couldn't stop the knife cutting through her heart.

She blinked it away, telling herself she would let go when she found her mother.

But nineteen pages later she still hadn't.

Jack had stood by patiently, helping Wilson, as his name seemed to be, locate people he knew.

She interrupted, not caring about the manners her mother had drilled into her. Not when she didn't know where her mother was. "What about the people not listed? In either place?"

Jack shook his head. "It usually means they're unknown. Not found. Still comatose." He shrugged. "Like we just put the word out on you two, and a couple others from the past hour. But there's still a good handful of people here who haven't either come around nor given up the ghost yet." He shrugged again, looking like the whole world had gone crazy and he just wanted to be a nurse. *Well*, Becky thought wryly, *the world is now populated with patients*. "Other towns fell after us, so they're coming around later as well. They have even more undecideds."

*Undecideds?*

That was what you were in college if you didn't know your major. It seemed a remarkably callous label for people who had not yet died.

Her mother was 'undecided'. "When do we find out about them?" She couldn't lose her mother.

“We’re getting wires and phone calls and faxes all the time. If you want to give a few names the hub will keep an eye out for them. I think there’s a form to fill out. Would you like one?”

*A form to fill out?*

But Becky held it together enough to nod.

Jack swept away the juice cups and de-cluttered the tiny tent in efficient motions as he made his way off to retrieve the offensive forms. But Becky stopped him short. “Do you have the local lists?”

She had to do something to keep from breaking down. She couldn’t turn into Jell-o now. She forced herself to breathe deeply and evenly. She chewed her lips. And graciously accepted the green bound forms.

She found no one on the LIVING list. A few techs, a few nurses. But of the small handful she really knew, there were no names.

The DECEASED list held just as much mystery as answers. Only two names were on the list. Early on, Leon Peppersmith. His even had an asterisk by it. The small star took her to the ends of the row where it was listed: *\*blow to the head*. She had to flip back to the first page to discover that the notation meant he had died of something other than the reversal.

*Blow to the head.*

Had he fallen while he carried her? What? God forbid, murdered?

Becky shuddered, and shoved it out of her mind. There wasn’t a damn thing she could accomplish from this hospital bed.

Jillian Brookwood and David Carter II were missing. But on a fresh page, labeled DECEASED and obviously quite recently added, were ten names. Dr. Jordan Abellard appeared near the end.

• • • •

JORDAN HAULED JILLIAN back to their tent, her weight getting heavier every minute. He’d barely come out of a coma himself. But he wasn’t about to complain, everyone was making superhuman efforts. Trying to keep as many alive as possible didn’t allow for relaxation and recuperation. Unless you were Doctor David Carter the second.

The geologist sat propped up on the gurney that Jordan had initially put Jillian on several days earlier, toying with his IV and drinking a soda. Jordan resisted the urge to tell him that both actions were bad for his health. But then again, if you were willing to pitch yourself down the stairs to get out of helping, then Jordan didn’t have a real vested interest in making things rosy.

He pressed his lips together, forcing the thought aside. David certainly hadn’t thrown himself down the stairs. The man was no idiot. It was just circumstance. So he forced a smile. “Hi David. Are you feeling better?”

Dr. Carter nodded, then motioned with his chin – probably everything else hurt – to Jillian lying limp in Jordan’s arms. “Is she okay?”

Again a nod was sufficient. Jordan spoke coolly as he arranged her on the bed he had vacated only hours before. “She’s either sound asleep or passed out. Too much work in too little time with too little to eat.”

“So what will you do?”

Jordan shrugged. “Let her sleep. Maybe run an IV if it looks like she’s dehydrated.” Out of habit and the necessity to do something, he checked all her vital signs. Of course they all checked out. Jillian probably wouldn’t suffer her pulse or blood pressure to be anything less than textbook. He asked David if there was anything he needed. Without coming right out and saying that quiet was necessary for Jillian to sleep, he suggested reading materials, or a headset.

But David shook his head, and rolled away, making like sleep wasn't far off the horizon for him either, and Jordan was grateful for that small thing. He closed the flaps to the tent, hoping to create a false darkness in the room, but only succeeding in marginally dimming it. The tent leaked sunlight like a sieve.

He considered letting himself back out, thinking he should go and be useful. But David's chest was already rising and falling in steady cadence. And just the short time watching the two of them sleep was enough to lull Jordan into a chair. Painfully uncomfortable, he leaned back, lolled his head to one side until it contacted the pole of the tent.

He watched Jillian lie still on the gurney for . . .

Well he wasn't sure. Only that he dreamed Landerly had shown up and was shaking his shoulder.

Then the tent pole thunked his head as Landerly tried a little harder.

With a purposeful wrenching of his eyes, Jordan got them open to see that Dr. Landerly was, in fact, standing beside him, a cane clutched in his hand. As Jordan looked, he became more convinced that he had woken within his sleep state.

The left side of the older doctor's face had a bit of slack to it. His left arm seemed a little less rigid than usual. But Landerly looked just as formidable as ever. And now in his right hand he grasped the cane, either as a walking implement or a weapon. Jordan had no doubts that Landerly would never use the cane on anyone. He could simply point out faults and weaknesses until you admitted you were lower than worms, and begged to be beaten instead of fired. "Sir?"

The dream vision answered back. "Abellard. Good to see you awake. How long has our girl been under?"

He looked at his watch. 5pm. It was getting dusky outside and that translated to a portion of the dark he had strived for inside the tent. "Five hours. I figure she has another ten before she even begins to catch up on what she's missing."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Landerly lifted the cane from the ground as he gestured.

Jordan sniffed away the last clinging vines of sleep and told Landerly. "I think she only slept about six hours over more than two days." He sighed. "And about worked herself to death."

"You've been asleep."

It was just a statement. But from Landerly's mouth it was a bit more of an accusation. Why wasn't Jillian awake to talk to the boss? The two of them would be laughing like old pals in a heartbeat. But no, he got Landerly all to himself. He decided if things got tough, he'd just sic David on the old man. He nodded his acquiescence - yes, he'd been sleeping, God forbid.

Landerly leaned down. "She's not asleep."

"What?"

"She's comatose." Landerly walked over to her and lifted her hand. She showed no response, neither to the invasion of another person moving her limbs, nor to the drop her arm endured flaccidly back to the mattress when Landerly let it go. "I checked her. She's showing nothing."

Jordan was on his feet and wide awake. But this time he was desperately trying to talk himself into the fact that it was a dream. "She was asleep when I brought her in here." He paused, thinking back. "She almost passed out, but she showed movement. She murmured or something . . ."

"Well, not now." Jordan heard Landerly drop himself into the chair he had just vacated. But he kept his back turned. He blinked. He breathed deeply. Did everything he could think of to wake himself up from this. He did everything he could think of to wake Jillian up.

But she didn't rouse. Not to pressure or pain. Not to her name or his. And he realized that she hadn't moved from where he had laid her when he brought her in.



Through tightly clenched teeth, he turned back to Landerly and asked, “Well, what do we do now?”

But he saw his anger was misplaced. Landerly’s cane sat off to one side, his head rested in his right hand, and that elbow rested on the arm of the chair, as though the effort to hold any part of him upright was just too much.

Jordan didn’t ask. He suspected that Landerly’s own coma hadn’t been too kind to him. He hadn’t been sure the old man would make it out. Especially when, with the final sweep of the reversal, so many young, vibrant, and perfectly healthy people were succumbing.

But the poles had swapped. David had predicted it and, as usual, he’d been right. Everyone had fallen under for at least some period of time. The world had lost billions as best he could figure. The whole population reduced by slightly more than half.

No more China’s Only Child Policy. Property values would be reasonable again in New York and LA. There was clean-up to do - everywhere. The earth was shattered as far as he was concerned. And fallout was going to last for decades, minimum. At no point in his memory could he pinpoint a worldwide disaster like this since the dinosaurs had died out.

But at least, he had thought, they were finished.

Now was the time to pick themselves up and move on.

But Jillian. . .

How was she under again?

What the hell did she have?

He threw all these questions at Landerly and then some. But Landerly shrugged, said he didn’t know.

Jordan shook her again. But, of course, there was no response.

His eyes blazed holes in the top of Landerly’s head, the only part the old man was showing. “How the hell are we supposed to figure this out? She’s the brains of this operation!” He gestured back at the prone form in her blue scrubs.

That, at least, made Landerly look up at him. Finally some strength in his eyes. “This took my wife and daughter away from me. . . . and I don’t mean to sound horribly trite and cliché, but I *did* spend too much time at the office. And I *do* regret it.” He stood to his full height, able to look down on Jordan if only by half an inch. “But I will not let you tell me that we’re useless without her. You and I have more brains in our heads than ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the population, and we are trained for this. So let’s get a move on.”

He began walking out of the tent. “Draw her blood and meet me in the lab. We have profiles to review and phone calls to make.”

• • • •

HER EYES HURT. HER fingers twitched randomly. And there didn’t seem to be anything she could do about it. With effort Jillian pried her eyes open. The tent top came into view again along with a weird sort of déjà vu.

She remembered she had practically passed out after Becky had died. And Jordan carried her back and laid her on the gurney.

She looked around, the dim light in the tent telling of evening.

But something was wrong.

It took her a moment to place it.

She'd been moved. The gurney where Jordan had laid her down, the last thing she remembered, was at a ninety degree angle to the one she was on. She could see that it was vacant when she bent her neck back and looked. The empty bed was military sharp, the sheets drawn up quarter-bounce tight.

She breathed in, thinking that she felt well rested. And wondered why they had left her alone. *Well, I needed sleep, that's for sure.* But it had only been about five hours according to her watch.

Or . . . twenty-nine hours.

That was a distinct possibility. That would explain the well-rested feeling. Much better than five hours.

*David!*

She was in his bed. So where was he? And why hadn't she woken up when they moved her?

With an audible groan and severe pressure in her head, she swung her legs over the side. Stopping there to take a rest and wait for the little man with the ball-peen hammer in her head to stop whacking her, she squeezed her eyes. And heard the muscles move in what sounded like a mid-pitch thunder roll.

She must have sat there for about five minutes by her musing. Brain churning despite the pain.

Twenty-nine hours. Definitely.

That was the only explanation for her muscles feeling so unused. She forced her breathing to deepen, her ribs feeling the stretch again.

A normal life would be so appreciated. Waking up in her apartment. Going in to work to fill out forms about botulism. Or salmonella. Maybe a pet dog to keep her company. Or a cat.

With sadness she wondered if both species still existed. That was a bizarre thought. A world without cats. Mushu. A portrait of her beloved childhood kitty, the first and only fuzzy pet she'd ever had, popped into her head.

She pushed off from the gurney, landing on shaky legs and, using the bed frame, stabilized herself. Another minute. Time to walk.

Just then she heard a voice. Her reaction time being slow, she was barely able to shield her eyes as the tent flap was thrown in. Because she was facing west, the sunset poured through the open side, illuminating the silhouette of a woman holding back the heavy fabric.

"Oh my God, Doctor Brookwood! You're up!"

"Of course I'm up." Why wouldn't she be? Again something niggled at the back of her brain. She knew that voice.

As the woman approached into the darker portions of the tent, she developed eyes and features. Lucy. Jillian sniffed. She blinked. Hadn't Lucy died? Well, whoever was keeping the records had done a crappy job. She wondered who else was mis-recorded. Her own family. Jordan's. She shuddered.

"Is something wrong?" Lucy tilted her head as if trying to see her more clearly.

"No. It's nothing." But Jillian wondered. She held her tongue, figuring Lucy wouldn't want to know she'd made the 'dead' list. Or maybe she would. "It's just . . . I thought I saw your name on the 'deceased' list. You might want to call your family."

Lucy raised her eyebrows disbelievingly, and turned to a physician who was standing right beside her. The young man shrugged and Lucy turned back to Jillian. "Dr. Brookwood, I'll check that right out. But if you'll just sit back, Dr. Lee will take all your vital signs."

"Vital signs?" Jillian almost laughed. "Wow. Are y'all getting paranoid?" But she knew what it was like to have a non-compliant patient, so she shrugged out of the left sleeve of her jacket, being

careful not to drag the cuff along the IV insertion site on the back of her hand. But she didn't even scrape it, just continued to question the doctor.

Her first thought was that he was very intent on listening to her pulse as he took her BP. He didn't even make eye contact. As though he had never done this before. Her second thought was that he was young. Which was disturbing, because *she* was considered young to be a practicing physician.

He stood upright and nodded at her. "It's all textbook."

She smiled, feeling a little condescending, even though she wished it would go away. "I'm always 120 over 80." He wrote in her chart, having had it thrust out to him by Lucy. And Jillian startled. She hadn't remembered to pull a single chart this whole time. It was the right protocol but it hadn't even crossed her mind. And clearly the record keeping was getting screwed up if Lucy Whitman had made the 'dead' list.

But she shook it off. "What's with the complete set of vitals after a nap? Did it concern you that I slept so long?"

"Well, it was a *long* nap." Lucy looked at her young physician in some side glance that Jillian couldn't decipher. But she didn't want to. She hadn't ever been able to make hide nor hair of Lucy. So she let it be.

She started out of the tent. "I'm going to go now." She had to find Jordan, and David. And the more she thought about it, they needed to be in charge of notifying Becky Sorenson's family, whichever of them had survived. And Leon Peppersmith's, too. She'd let the person in charge handle the rest. But she felt she owed it to those two families. And she knew Jordan would agree. But as she passed the front entry of the tent the young doctor's hand shot out and grabbed her upper arm. The grip wasn't harsh, but she also wasn't going to go anywhere until he decided to release her.

And that pissed her off. Trying to stay as level-headed as she could, she ground the words out between her teeth. "Would you mind explaining to me why you're restraining me?"

She felt the heat flare under her skin as he had the balls to look sheepish. "Oh, I'm not restraining you, doctor."

"Then remove your hand."

He did, but stepped in front of her. And just as she was about to yell at him, he spoke. Again sounding trite. "I just think it's important that you understand that you just woke from the coma that you saw so many patients go into."

Her muscles relaxed. "Well now, there's the problem. I was actually out of this coma before any of you were. I woke up first." She continued even though they were clearly questioning her. Sharing furtive looks as if she were a child. "I went back to sleep because I was exhausted. I had spent so much time hauling people inside and checking them out that I practically passed out."

She could see that they didn't believe her, but she had really ceased to care. They had been busy sleeping their time away, while she had worked herself to the bone. Then the little smartass in the white jacket tried again to stop her from leaving the tent. "Dr. Brookwood . . ."

"Dr. . . ." She read the name on the front of his jacket, since she had forgotten it precisely the moment after Lucy had told her. "Lee." She'd had enough. "I'm leaving."

"I don't think that's wise."

Her teeth clenched again. As if it wasn't bad enough that the world had dropped dead one by one around her. That Landerly was threatening to name the damn thing after them. This little . . . whatever he was, was trying to restrain her. "I understand that you don't think that. I don't care."

"As your physician-"

She didn't let him get any further than that. "You aren't my physician. You'll do well to remember that I am a physician."

He opened his mouth and she didn't let him start, just gave him something to chew on. "I am also your superior."

With that he huffed out his breath and turned to Lucy Whitman. "Well, I guess we've done what we can."

"All right then." Lucy handed him the chart. "We did the right thing. If she won't listen then that's her own fault." The two of them strolled out of the tent looking like old chums. Like there hadn't been a fully charged atmosphere just a second before.

But Jillian took it as a breath of relief. The air was clear now. They were gone.

And, as usual since this whole thing had started, she had plenty to do.

She had to find Jordan, and see where he had moved David. And . . .

Jillian blinked.

She had just realized that she never found out what had happened to Dr. Landerly.

Her chest constricted a little at the thought that he was probably gone. She'd seen his labs, and he had all the hallmarks of the ones who had failed early.

• • • •

DAVID'S STARE HAD GONE blank.

Jordan had witnessed the blow to pride the man had taken just to ask for morphine, and he had happily pushed the drug into David's IV. It took only a second away from the paperwork that he was pouring over with Landerly. And for a moment it took his mind off Jillian.

It was all insane.

Jillian and David had seemed immune. But she had slipped back under - for no apparent reason. Why hadn't David gone back under? It had to have something to do with the pattern of exposure. Jordan's hands clicked through the rhythms of capping the needle and flicking it into the sharps container while his brain wandered through problems.

He had identical exposure to Jilly, up to a point. When he had gone to Lake James he had continued going in and out of the weaker bubbles. Jillian and David had stayed in Nevada, and had wandered into the path of that sweep - which felled everyone in its path, healthy, old, young. And now they were showing different symptoms than everyone else.

His theory was Swiss cheese it had so many holes. The problem was that they weren't just different *now* - they had been different even as far back as Nevada. When that reversal had swept, Jillian and David had walked out. And the way Jilly had told it, they had stood within the bubble and watched others walk in and fall at their feet. So they had to have been mutated, or different, *before* that.

If only Jillian would wake up and tie the loose ends.

Landerly hadn't come into the tent to check on her. The old man was too much like Jillian. If it was scientifically interesting he would be able to stand for hours and watch a patient breathe. After about two minutes of that he would be able to point out that every seventh breath was some micro-seconds shorter than the others and why that was significant. Then he'd check the chart for the patient's name. But if there was nothing new about this patient, someone else could make the effort.

So Jordan had called his father, leaving Landerly alone with the reams of lists. Glad to hear Jackson's voice, and no longer startled by the fact that his Dad would cry over the phone. Jordan

didn't know what had connected them again, finally, but he wasn't about fight it or hinder it in any way.

Now he watched as David passed through the initial phases of morphine intoxication. David's musculature relaxed, his face no longer quite so tense. The glazed look wasn't uncommon either. But David hadn't been really talkative since they had brought Jillian back in.

When Jordan explained that she was under again, Carter had wrenched himself around trying to get a look at her, even though she was directly behind his head, and the shoulder harness prevented him from doing anything of the sort.

What Jordan hadn't been able to get the geologist to say what he was feeling. Jordan had two good guesses. The first was that he was actually concerned for Jillian, which normally Jordan would have dismissed. But Dr. Carter seemed to have developed an attraction to the little dark spitfire and Jordan certainly couldn't fault that. The second option was that he and Jillian had gone step by step together. Immune in Nevada. Falling under here just after everyone else. Waking early. It was a logical progression that David was watching her to see what was coming next, if he might fall back under as well.

But he just stared at the white walls of the tent. He said he was writing his paper in his head while he waited for his laptop. Someone had confiscated it for medical use, while he'd been recuperating from his fall, and the staff had yet to locate it. David wasn't happy about that either. His theories were floating out there in the ether, he had said.

Jordan watched while David sank into a peaceful slumber, then woke the man, just for a second. Just to be sure.

Then he steeled himself, knowing he had no more cause to avoid Landerly, which he knew in his heart of hearts was exactly what he was doing. And he marched himself right back into the records tent.

Landerly didn't look up, or acknowledge his return in any way other than to begin speaking. Jordan briefly wondered if Landerly had simply continued the conversation all along, not even realizing he was gone. He suppressed the smile that fought to be free and tried to pay attention.

"We don't have an age bias. Or a race bias. Nor seemingly a continental bias."

"Why 'seemingly'?" Jordan seated himself and picked up one of the tomes.

"Many continents aren't fully reporting - like Africa. There's an interesting case. With their numbers of AIDS infected I'm curious how they'll fare. But they're barely reporting at all. The towns that are look like they match our numbers here and Europe."

"What about India?"

"Same. Their reporting is better, but not great." He removed his glasses, aging himself ten years in the process, and rubbed at his eyes. But his voice continued. "There's some issue with the Australian Outback as well. There are a lot of people, some aboriginal, that may never have been accounted for. And we don't know what happened to them."

Jordan thought for a minute. They had been frantically writing everything down as they thought of it and discounted it. Although he hadn't been sure what it mattered until Jillian had slipped back under. But now there was a goal - they had to see if there was any way to pull her out. And help anyone who went back under like her.

"What about gender bias?"

"What?" Dr. Landerly had already engrossed himself in the next long list, jotting on it in slashes of pencil, with no regard for the fact that the book would be looked over by anyone with family in that

area. That they might not want to see Landerly's number counting or comments on age and race in their family member's margins.

Jordan spoke, knowing he was rehashing, but thinking that it might trigger something important. "The women went under first, pretty much everywhere. So this thing does have some sort of gender distinction. The only person who's slipped back under is female."

"HmMMMM." He flipped through several pages. "I haven't seen it in the survival rates."

Jordan just set down his pencil and began flipping pages looking for anything unusual. But after several hours his butt hurt. He hadn't found anything that stood out. And he needed to check on David.

And Jillian.

Without a word, he got up and walked out. He couldn't go into the tent though. And without even a hesitation stalked past, going through the dark of night, under glaring overhead field lights creating enough light between the tents to see by. Stepping carefully on the cold dark grass, he made his way into the now functioning cafeteria and got himself a soda. Which he'd gotten hooked on again after having practically given them up when he graduated med school. Oh well. He wasn't dead. He'd survived a disease worse than the plague. What was a soda going to do him really?

With his soda in hand, he forced himself back to the tent that Jillian and David shared. Afraid of what he would find when he checked Jillian, he tried to rouse David first. And had no success.

Tamping down the frisson of fear that escaped up through his senses, he set down the drink and went about it the right way. But he got no response. "David!" He tapped on the man. Pinched him. Yelled again.

Nothing. The geologist didn't even sputter when Jordan yanked up his eyelids and shone his penlight directly in. Damn the man.

"Landerly!" He used all his lungpower. "Somebody get me Dr. Landerly from the records tent!"

A tech popped his face in and asked Jordan to repeat the instruction. Jordan thanked him and went through with the rest of a vital signs check. After he'd been through everything he knew to do, twice, he gave up and turned to Jillian. Landerly walked in just as Jordan finished taking her vitals.

"Landerly." He heard the shaking in his voice, and there wasn't much he could do about it. "Her respirations are at sixteen."

"So? That's within normal."

He shook his head. "Jillian's always textbook. She's always eighteen. Right when she went under the first time and this time, too. When she's asleep . . . she's eighteen."

Landerly cocked his head.

But Jordan kept going. "She's slipping."



With her lower lip between her teeth, Jillian walked out into the dark beyond her tent. People scuttled here and there, each seemingly with a purpose. Many of them held charts, and most of the tents were lit like Jack-o-lanterns, a soft glow perfusing through the canvas and pouring blindingly out of the openings. In one of the open tents doctors in white coats were passing papers around in a lively debate while a mechanic in the background took a wrench to one of the UV-and-visible-light machines. It looked like a Christmas card for the scientific community.

It was organized. Purposeful.

What a difference a day could make.

Jillian took a deep breath and found her own purpose. She was starving. All the family notifications could wait, but she'd pass right back out if she didn't eat something. With determination, she headed toward the building, passing square white tents, the flaps ruffling in the breeze, and she pulled her jacket a little tighter.

With luck, she'd find Jordan in the cafeteria. Maybe even David - if she'd been asleep for twenty-seven hours and woke up in his bed then his hip must have been well enough to get into a wheelchair. He could be anywhere, as long as he had someone to keep an eye on him. She figured he'd be downgraded from morphine to Percocet by now.

And if they weren't there, then at least someone she knew would be. Throwing open the door she was assaulted by the smells of cheap Italian food. The pasta wouldn't be quite al dente, and the sauce would be thin. And the bread would be steamy, meaning not crusty.

And it would be heavenly.

She followed her nose, not even bothering to look around for anyone she knew. If they wanted her, they would have to yell. Loud.

She grabbed a thick Corian tray and piled it high with food as she moved down the line. The bread was in her mouth before she even began ladling up soggy looking green beans.

But in minutes she was sitting alone at a table, methodically moving the fork from plate to mouth, eating as fast as she could, breathing deeply and inhaling the smells until she had finished every bite.

After sitting for a moment, she hauled herself up and stacked her tray on top of the trashcan as she exited into the cold night air. The sky had gone from trailing reds, that she remembered as fact and not as feeling, to dark navy set with bright stars.

For the first time in her life it gave a deep feeling of belonging, of being a tiny part of something else. Jillian stood silently. Digesting. Breathing. Staring. Wondering if the world would shift again beneath her feet. If she'd get sick, pass out, fall under again. But she was fairly confident that it would stay steady now. That her deep inhales wouldn't draw in anything dangerous.

It was all broken by the revving of an engine as the car pulled into the drop-off lane, reminding her that they had hijacked a high-school.

Her brows pulled together.

If the car was pulling up, that meant it had been somewhere, even if it was just around town.

The reports told that the whole world had switched. That everyone had gone under and either woken up or died. But that meant as soon as they cleared things up here, they could go home.

Suddenly the air wasn't so inviting. She didn't feel so safe.

She longed for the streets of Atlanta. Not even Signal Mountain where she'd grown up. Georgia was the home she had chosen. She could go back to her job, maybe even get in a few days of nine-to-



five, write some reports. Jillian snorted to herself, likely she would spend the rest of her career writing *this* report.

Turning away from the parking lot, she heard another car turning over and pulling out, more evidence of freedom seeping in through the closed gates of the city. She headed back into the tents to find Jordan and David. A smile played across her lips. At least David wouldn't be able to move very fast, and that ought to make it easier to catch up to him.

In her own tent again, she was shocked to see that all evidence of Jordan was gone. Jillian frowned before realizing that he had probably moved back upstairs.

Without thought, she turned and pounded her way up the four flights. Thinking that signs of David had been removed from the tent, too, and he certainly wouldn't have moved back up stairs he couldn't climb. But she continued. Empty of life and sound, the dim hallways were lit only at every fourth fluorescent, to give you a way to see, but saving energy as well.

Jillian started to laugh out loud at that, but stopped herself when she heard the noise start a macabre echo down the length of the hallway. Energy conservation would be a whole different ballgame with less than half of last week's occupants now on earth.

Reaching the top, she saw that the room signs, the plain hand-printed taped-up notes, had all been pulled down. But she found 204, and turned the knob.

The room was lit only by the light peeking in from the hallway, and that was low at best. She flipped the switch, squinting against the instantaneous full glare. And blinking at the . . . lack . . . of everything.

The cots were stacked in the corner. No duffles or briefcases were anywhere. The maps, where Jordan had plotted the growth of the bubbles and the sites where people had gone under, were gone. As well as the flow charts and the grids of lab values, all pulled from the walls and absent.

With a sigh, Jillian switched off the light, leaving the hallway a dim shade of gray as her eyes adjusted. She took off at a jog, back the way she had come. Rushing through the halls at a ground eating pace, she only slowed when she hit the tops of the stairs, thinking of David's fall. Tightly holding the railing, she forced herself to slow down, finally reaching the bottom after what felt like an eternity.

As she shoved open the double doors out onto the field of tents she was greeted by the sounds of humanity - busy people wandering in the glow of the corner floodlights, just not very many of them. The wind shifted and caught a faint odor, carried in from beyond the tent city. Her nose twitched at the decaying flesh that was more a slight burning sensation than any real odor. But then the wind must have changed direction again, and it was gone.

Making her way into the maze, she said hellos to those she recognized and those she didn't. Finally arriving at the records tent, she pushed back the canvas and startled the person inside. "Can I help you?" He sat by a bank of phones, his hands cradling a yellow legal pad filled with lists. People to call. Places to hear from. Faxes to send.

"Please." She smiled even though she was frustrated that her own search had turned up fruitless. "Where can I find Dr. Abellard and Dr. Carter?"

The man blinked. His brows drew together, but not in thought. He looked concerned. For the life of her, Jillian couldn't figure out why, and she was too tired to work at it. So she simply leveled a look at him that she wasn't going to wait very long. And he got to work. Pushed his glasses up his nose and began thumbing through a list of names and tent numbers. *Damn, everyone had gotten organized while she'd been asleep.*

"Dr. Carter is in tent forty-three."

“And where is that?”

He smiled again, a fake look that mean nothing but that she was being placated. “There are fifteen tents per column. Starting on the left, from the cafeteria. They number front to back and then snake back to front and so on.”

She nodded. David was near the back of the third row. “And Dr. Abellard?”

The man tilted his head. “Dr. Abellard passed away a good number of days ago. I’m surprised no one told you.”

Jillian sighed and shook her head.

For having all their charting done, and numbering the tents, they had only achieved the look of organization.

Because their lists were fucked-up.

• • • •

DAVID BIT BACK A LOW moan. He ached everywhere. They hadn’t woken him up for his Percocet. And he needed his Percocet. Every muscle protested as he moved it. Each piece of him creaked and pulled.

It was deep into night inside the tent. Even though he could tell that there was an overhead light just outside. The top of the tent gave an unearthly glow that didn’t go further than a foot or two, leaving a fog of black huddling in all the corners and thick along the grass floor.

He breathed deeply, waiting for any monsters within to jump out at him, but after a minute nothing had moved, so he went about pushing himself up on his elbows.

David tilted his head from side to side waiting for the pain to stop his movement. When it came, it was softer than he had expected, a stretching rather than tearing feeling. His head was able to turn further. He could look directly over his right shoulder. Although what that gained him he couldn’t say as the tent was nothing but dark.

He breathed again, a little deeper each time, wishing he was repelling along the side of a sheer cliff. Layers of rock and time passing up as he slid down. Each telling of a different age. A few feet of color denoting millions of years of life and death and silts. In pure silence.

Instead, he was dealing with a dry throat. So he couldn’t call out to the people who were invariably making the shuffling noises outside his tent, couldn’t ask for the medication. Unlike the morphine, it wouldn’t make him drowsy. But he would be able to sleep, pain free.

So he worked up a good breath to shout out.

But just as he started to hiss out a noise, the tent flap pulled back, allowing in light and a dark figure he recognized instantly.

“Jillian.” He croaked.

“Hey, David.” But she didn’t look up. Just scratched at the back of her hand, and turned to examine it in the light of the opening.

“What’s wrong?” Again it was barely more than a hiss with some voice behind it. But she understood.

“I just . . .” She turned back to him, then reached up and flipped on the overhead light, drowning him in the harsh glare that receded as his eyes adjusted.

After he stopped squinting he saw that she was holding the back of her hand up to him for inspection. But he didn’t see anything. And he shook his head at her. He wasn’t a damn doctor so he didn’t know what the hell she wanted him to see.

“No mark.” She stated the obvious. “There should be a mark.”

“Because?”

“Because I wore an IV for four days! It just came out yesterday. But it’s gone! There’s not even tape residue, that’s the weird thing.”

“Bully for you.” He laid his head back down and found some air. “Can you get me a-”

“Your leg!” She practically screamed, like she had completely lost it. He was getting ready to say so when she yelled it again. “Your leg!”

So he looked, to see the black widow or rattlesnake that was going to end it all.

He’d be grateful if the death went quickly.

But there was nothing there.

*Ah, good to know I’ve discovered the final phase. Utter insanity.*

Jillian still stared, and he sighed. She wasn’t going to listen about the Percocet.

Her voice was tinny, and frightened sounding. “Where’s your cast? I worked really hard putting that thing on you! And your shoulder sling?” Her hands were on him, testing him for injuries and her face was frowning. Not at all the image he had harbored of Jillian feeling him up.

But he looked, and the cast was gone.

With a sharp frown he bent the leg.

“No! Don’t re-injure it!” She grabbed for him, trying to stop him, but wasn’t fast enough.

His leg bent - and it didn’t feel that bad.

So he shrugged. “You must be really good, Doc.” He smiled. “Someone must have taken it off. Do you think you can get me a-”

“They wouldn’t take it off while you sleep! That’s medically contraindicated.” She started to walk a tight circle. Thinking and worrying a trail into the grass beneath her feet.

What it seemed was that Jillian was contraindicated with his getting his damned Percocet.

“Where are your x-rays?” Her hands flew across the practically spotless countertop. “Are they in the other tent? When did they move you?”

“I don’t know.” Juice. Juice would be good, too. Or maybe some liquor. Hysterical woman always went down smoother with a good Jack and Coke.

Jillian planted her fists on her hips and her glare on his face. “How did you not wake up when they moved you? Or cut off your cast?”

*Like he would know!* He shrugged. “The morphine?”

“We didn’t give you that much!” She turned away from him, taking her scrunched up face and his hopes of getting a Percocet. She stepped just outside the tent and grabbed the next tech she could find.

He heard her ask about his x-rays before he decided to close his eyes and wait it out. There were some raised voices, akin to yelling, but not quite a fight. It was clear that Jillian disagreed with the tech and the tech was a bit afraid of the angry doc. Then again, Jillian wasn’t just any doctor. She had found this thing. She was hot shit in her little blue scrubs and ponytail, seeming no older than twenty until she opened that way-too-intelligent little mouth of hers.

David smiled. It *was* a hot little mouth, and oh, what it would do to him-

“David! Tell him you fell down the steps!”

*Good, just the thing he wanted to rehash.* Maybe she’d ask him to tell about the time his Grandfather had walked in on him masturbating, too. That’d be some nice icing on the humiliation cake. So he closed his eyes and mumbled to the tech. “I fell down the steps.”

“No you didn’t.”

David blinked. And stared at the kid. The little prick sounded awfully sure of himself. “Yes, I did. When I walked down. I broke my leg and bruised my ribs.”

The tech laughed then, as though he had finally caught on to the joke. “Must have been a bad dream then.”

Jillian’s mouth hung open for a second. And the tech turned to leave, his white jacket puffing a little in the night breeze. “Wait!”

He turned back, a question in his eyes.

“Bring the portable x-ray, please. I need films on him.”

David sighed. Then he popped up. “And Percocet!”

But the tech had already cleared the open space of the tent flap, and Jillian was worrying her circle in the grass again. *Son of a bitch.*

• • • •

BECKY PUSHED HERSELF off the gurney. She’d fallen back asleep almost instantly. Even as she had been sucked under into dreams she had wondered how a person got so tired in a coma.

But she’d woken back up. The covers mussed and tangled around her. Sleep had been a light wrap that had been easy to throw off this time. And she yawned and stretched and faced a new day.

For a brief moment.

Until she remembered that she had lost Aaron. And Baby Mel.

And maybe her mother had been moved from the ‘undecided’ list. Either woken up, or died. The heaviness wrapped and suffocated, but Becky shrugged it off. There was nothing she could do. And this wasn’t her personal tragedy, either. It was everyone’s. She had to go out and help. And maybe that would help her, too.

She leaned out and worked the safety rails. Popping the side down and slipping onto the ground, testing out legs that were barely sturdy enough to stand on. But that made sense.

After a moment she stabilized herself. When the world stopped swirling around her, she cursed her fuzzy mouth. She’d sell her soul for a toothbrush. With a languid blink she realized that she didn’t have to.

Her duffle was stuffed under the gurney, all things organized and neat. So she squatted down and rifled through the bag until her fingers brushed against heavy steel. Closing around the barrel, Becky brought the gun out of its hiding place. Clearly no one had searched her bag. With raised eyebrows she rummaged, and triumphantly held up her overnight pack.

A few minutes later she dried and repacked her face soap and toothbrush. For a moment she fingered the bottle of sunscreen, then thought that one day’s exposure wouldn’t kill her. She needed the feel of pure sunshine on her face.

She needed to walk.

To get away.

She’d have research to do for the rest of her days, trying to prove or disprove what had happened to various species and why. There’d be a whole new field - ‘Post pole-reversal biology’. So, for now, she didn’t need to do much. It would still be there tomorrow. Right?

But she didn’t much care.

There was a civic-center across the street. She could walk over, and get away from the scientists and the bustle and the worry.

Tucking her toiletries bag away, she felt her fingers brush the gun again. She could hear cars on the road. But she didn’t really know how it was out there now. With a pause, she grasped the gun and

tucked it into the back of her jeans, then rummaged again until she came up with the clear snap case that held three extra tranquilizer darts.

She wouldn't use it unless she had to, and it wouldn't kill anyone.

Becky set out of the tent. Quickly making her way to the edge of the field, she gave one last look over her shoulder then bee-lined for the sidewalk that paced the turnpike. With a startled glance, she saw that the traffic lights were working. But of course they were. This was Oak Ridge - the town of physicists - if they couldn't get things up and running no one would.

The few cars on the road obediently followed the signals, stopping patiently and waiting, even though the road was completely clear. Her brows lifted in shock. And she decided against crossing straight for the civic center, instead going down to the light where she wouldn't have to jaywalk.

Becky was grateful for her decision when a cop pulled into the intersection and sat patiently while she got all the way across the street. The convenience store on the corner called to her.

She walked up the pavement and pulled back the door, startled by the loudness of the bell. Maybe it was just that the bell sounded so much louder now that the world lacked its usual turbulent background noise. She looked about, "Hello?"

But no one answered. She went to ring the old-fashioned ding-bell on the counter but saw the hand-lettered sign instead. *Leave money. Make change. Honor system. Thank you.*

Honor System!?

But there was already a pile of money. Pennies and quarters strewn amongst bills. Just waiting for whoever would take it. Becky could have. She *wouldn't* have. But she *could*.

She contemplated it as long as it took her to decide that she needed two packs of Cheetos and a large fountain cherry coke. She was eating while she added up her purchases and looked up the total on the tax-finder card that had been left on the counter. She took coins in exchange and made her way back out into the strange day.

The civic center loomed ahead, and she crossed through the damp grass, wetting her sneakers and not much caring. There was a crowd gathered in front of a tiny stage; they cheered periodically but she didn't know what at. A few steps further and she began to hear the voice.

"-we have almost all the police force!"

A cheer rose up.

"-and the FBI!"

Another cheer.

"Most of the thieves and murderers gone!" Cheers again. But Becky waited to hear what was coming.

"The CIA gone, too." This time the cheers were punctuated with laughter.

The woman on stage raised her fist high into the air. "I tell you, it is The Ascension!"

The roar of the crowd continued for several minutes this time, while Becky stood on the frayed edges. Her eyebrows knit together, while she contemplated the deaths of Aaron and Melanie. The Ascension?

But the voice broke her thoughts again. "This is God's world. And we are God's chosen. And we are to re-build Eden. Here!"

Becky turned her back to the thunder of cheers. Hadn't these people lost loved ones, too? Or did they just believe that those they had lost weren't worthy?

With a heavy heart, she turned to go back to the safe little village of tents. Back to the place she had so recently sought to escape. This time she had to seriously fight the urge to jaywalk. But God forbid, any of the ascension-ites saw her and deemed her unworthy of Eden.

It was hard to be upset with people who wanted to make heaven on earth, who thought this was a chance to make a better place for everyone. But where did they get off thinking they were the ones God had chosen? Her mother had always told her that those who died were closer to God. So that would make this crowd a composition of the un-chosen by that standard.

Becky almost chuckled.

• • • •

JILLIAN WOKE WITH A start. The gurney was uncomfortable, although not in any way she could pinpoint. It was also heartstoppingly high. From up here she could see the large brown envelope that held David's processed x-rays.

She hopped off the bed, the icy dew from the grass seeping instantly through her socks. "Shit." She tried to keep it under her breath. A quick look revealed she hadn't woken David. And the damage was done. She'd change her socks in a minute. First she wanted to see those x-rays.

She had kept several techs up half the night worrying over x-rays and demanding that the films be returned as soon as humanly possible. Every one was making weird faces at her and Jordan hadn't stopped by at all. With a sigh, she held the x-ray up to the light and wondered where he was. No wonder these people all thought he was dead.

Her face pulled into a fierce frown.

There were no marks of a tib-fib fracture at all. She pressed her face closer, looking for details, but still found nothing.

Wanting desperately to believe it was the light, she moved to the opening of the tent, her socks squishing with each step. She frowned, turned the large stiff picture, and frowned again.

Nothing.

Even years-old fractures showed on x-rays. Bones bore the marks of past sins long after they had healed. But David's showed nothing.

Not on the chest x-ray. The tiny fissures she had seen on his earlier films were gone.

And so were the films.

She shook her head.

There was suddenly this veneer of organization. Protocol was being followed to the letter. Yet too much was messed up. David's films had disappeared. Jordan was 'dead'. Lucy was supposed to be dead, but was walking around.

And then the healing thing . . .

Her IV puncture was minor. But David's tib-fib . . . that was huge. What if the reversal had sped up the healing process? It was hypothesized that the dinosaurs were so large because the magnetic field had been stronger seventy million years ago - the bigger field supported larger life. Would it also heal faster?

Her heart started racing beyond her standard seventy-two beats per minute. It was enough to make her want to run to the cafeteria and steal a good serrated knife and cut herself, to watch how long it took for the scar to close.

But there had to be a faster way. A better way. Just in case she was wrong.

With her lower lip between her teeth, Jillian thought for a moment, then smiled.

Feeling every step upon the cold grass, she pushed through the flap into bright day. People milled everywhere, and she grabbed a tech as he walked by. "Did you ever break a major bone?"

He shook his head.

*Damn.*

But she tried again.

And again, until one guy laughed. "I used to skateboard. You'd be hard pressed to find a bone I didn't break!"

"Excellent." She didn't bother to explain much beyond the fact that she wanted to x-ray all of him.

He grinned and handed his tray of urine samples off to another tech passing by, glad to give up the mundane in exchange for being a guinea pig. Jillian wended her way through the tents, the tech in tow behind her. Without much ado, and throwing all of her authority around, she shoved the operator aside and shot every inch of the kid, using up film like there was no tomorrow. Handing each one off in turn, she demanded that it be processed immediately.

The first film came back as she was finishing his jaw, having saved his head for last. And knowing that she'd radiated this kid, top to toe, in the name of science.

She held the film up to the light, with the tech looking over her shoulder. There were two breaks. One clean, the other not so much. "Did you break this twice?"

He nodded, pointing. "Six years ago, and ten years ago."

Jillian frowned, then accepted a second film as it was delivered from the tent next door where two techs were developing the x-rays as fast as they could. He had broken his left femur. It had pins, and bone scarring. She could see the old collarbone break. He even admitted to having cracked it twice in the same place, which was perfectly consistent with the level of damage.

This kid was a mess.

And it was all still there, in black and white and foggy gray.

She asked him questions, pinpointing break after break. And about to give up as she slid the last film into the envelope. "Did you ever break anything else? Anything we didn't look at?"

He shook his head. "I think you caught them all."

Her breath sighed out of her, she'd been so certain that she'd find something. "Well, if you think of anything, come get me. I think I'll be in tent 43."

With a shrug and a sad smile, he went off to find more work to do. And Jillian went back to the tent to find David, and shoes.

Now that she'd proven nothing, the cold had seeped into her feet, and through the bone up her shins. She needed to soak them in a hot bath, or at least wrap them in a foot warmer.

Was it just her and David that healed rapidly?

She slogged around the last corner, looking into the tent at the back of the person standing by the gurney and laughing with David.

Memory tugged at her brain, until the woman turned around.

And Jillian screamed.

Becky Sorenson was smiling, until the bloodcurdling noise came out of Jillian's mouth.

Techs and physicians rushed through the still open tent flap, dragging in biting air that she didn't - couldn't - feel.

Becky Sorenson was staring at her, questioning the scream that Jillian only just managed to shut down.

"Are you all right?" The physician had shoved everyone else out of the way, and had his fingers on her neck, already checking her pulse. Although why he would check that, when she was clearly alive and upright, was beyond her.

Jillian pushed at him, only wanting him to go away, and beginning to believe she was truly crazy. "I'm fine. I was just startled. Becky reminded me of someone who had died, and I thought . . . well I

had a shock. But I'm good, so you can go. . ."

She knew she was prattling, but she couldn't stop.

Where was Jordan? He'd make her a flow chart and explain some of this. Or at least offer something. Was she really going insane?

At last when the extra people crowding the tent had been shoved out, Becky pushed her down into a chair. "Do you care to explain what that was really all about?"

Jillian shook her head, knowing she had held Becky's hand while she died, just two days ago. The healing power of the reversals must be even stronger than she had thought. That was the only viable explanation she could come up with. But it was hardly a reasonable one.

She just looked up at her colleague, into Becky's blue eyes, and asked, "Did you ever break any bones?"

"Just my finger. A long time ago." Becky gave her that are-you-losing-your-mind? look. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Jillian buried her face in her hands and fought back tears. She couldn't go mad. She just couldn't. She wouldn't survive it. The only thing she always knew to be true was that she could put pieces together. But someone had dumped her puzzle, and nothing fit.

She started with what she knew. "David fell down the steps. About four days ago. Right after he woke up. He broke his leg. But it doesn't show on the x-ray. In fact, someone took off the cast I put on him."

Jillian looked up just long enough to see Becky nod. She continued telling how his shoulder had healed, and how her IV mark was gone.

"Wow. You two were immune for a while, and now you super-heal?" Becky's hands found homes on her hips and she stared at the tent ceiling, making sure the view in her retinas was nothing that would interfere with the cranking of her brain.

But Jillian had no qualms about interrupting Becky's thinking. "No. There's more."

"What?"

"You're the best."

Becky's brows raised.

With a sigh, Jillian let it slip out. "I held your hand two days ago while you died."

"I'm not dead."

"Thanks." Her tongue was laced with dry wit, good to know she'd still have that when they locked her up. "I'm a physician, I already diagnosed that."

"I woke up yesterday at four." Becky shrugged. "I never died."

Jillian felt the old familiar cold steel of a gear click in place in her head. "What day is it?"

"Thursday."

She gulped air. It was a day earlier than she had thought. "But that's it. You *died* yesterday. At . . . just before four."

"No, I woke up."

Jillian stood, ready to fight. "I checked your pulse. Jordan declared you dead. I watched them pull the sheet over you."

"But I didn't die."

Again, *click*, another gear shifting. "Do you have a twin?"

Becky shook her head and looked at Jillian like she would a small child. "Did you dream it?"

The cold seeped up Jillian's socks into her feet, this time going straight from there to her heart. Becky's voice interrupted her thoughts again, "Because Dr. Abellard died several days ago



according to the lists.”

Jillian shook her head. “The lists are messed up. Lucy Whitman is listed ‘deceased’ and she’s not. Jordan isn’t either. And David fell down the steps.” She looked to David, beseeching, knowing that if he didn’t corroborate she’d have to check herself in to the loony bin.

Becky looked over at him, too. And much to Jillian’s relief, he nodded. “I fell down the last flight of stairs. Broke my hip and leg, dislocated my shoulder, and cracked ribs. I don’t feel any of it now. But I remember Jillian pulling on bedsheets and stuffing my shoulder back into place.”

It sure wasn’t how she’d describe it, but he did get the job done. And he smiled showing even white teeth. A smile just for her, that reached to his eyes. He knew she wasn’t nuts. And that was enough, for now.

He explained how he didn’t remember getting moved here, or the cast coming off. And Becky took the quandary upon herself, leaving the tent, and asking the people passing by how Dr. Carter had come to be in this tent.

Jillian stood and listened just behind the tent flap. Three techs told the same story. They had found David in the room upstairs, and carried him down to this tent. Down all four flights of stairs. He’d been comatose the whole time.

Becky came back in and looked from Jillian to David.

David sat fully upright for the first time. “So I never broke my leg?”

She smiled, while Jillian watched in abject horror, but unable to do anything, as her body virtually refused to listen to any of her commands.

David slid off the gurney and stood on wobbly feet. In a few minutes he let go of the gurney and walked on his own. Another fact flying in the face of all her memories. Even David remembered the fall.

Had they simply shared a dream?

Becky walked back in the tent, even though Jillian didn’t remember her stepping out again. Her face conveying that she had bad news even before she spoke the words. “They said that Jordan is at the mortuary. A few of the bodies were transported waiting for someone to sign off on them.”

Jillian shook her head. Jordan was alive yesterday.

Because she’d only slept for four hours yesterday if it was Thursday. That meant she’d seen him less than twenty-four hours ago.

Becky nodded at her. “We need to go. I’m headed there to get Leon Peppersmith’s belongings. They should go to the CDC or to his family.”

Silently Jillian agreed to the trip. Her brain telling her that if Jordan was at the mortuary he would be there working, making decisions or taking samples.

Becky waited while Jillian changed her socks and put on shoes. Then told them she already arranged a car to go see about Leon’s things. Softly she asked. “If he’s alive, then where is he?”

*At the mortuary!* But Jillian fought down anger, accompanied with fear and bile pressing at the back of her throat. Without a further word, she followed David and Becky to the car.

David walked with an easy swing to his stride. He clearly hadn’t broken the bones. Not four days ago. He chatted with the biologist. Somehow able to make meaningless small talk, even though he said he remembered the same things she did.

Sliding into the backseat, she listened quietly while Becky told of the woman rousing the crowd about The Ascension.

When they arrived, her feet stepped out onto the gray of the blacktop, the morgue and coroner’s office located under the small police station that served the entire town. A steel door let them inside,

where they passed down a long hall and through a walk-in refrigerator door.

The air changed texture, to a created, and probably expensive, climate, that was, ironically, nearly the exact temperature as the air outside.

Jillian still couldn't find her tongue when the coroner told Becky that they had Dr. Abellard. The fuzzy noise behind her eyes worsened. There was no way that Jordan was here. She hadn't dreamed him alive.

Yet the coroner pulled open a door and slid out a tray.

He peeled back the sheet, revealing Jordan. Sleeping in shades of gray. Lacking the small movements that betrayed life.

Still not believing, she reached out, felt his hair. It didn't feel right. It felt dead. He didn't respond, as her brain told her he wouldn't. He looked like someone had cast Jordan in wax, and laid him out here, a la Tussaud's. But her brain knew it was deceiving itself. Even as she refused to accept, it was her own voice telling her the truth. He was gone.

Jillian felt the pressure at the edges of her vision. She saw the sparkles, right before the roaring worsened, and everything went black.



Jordan stood at the edge of the gurney, just on the other side of the baby rails. Jillian slept. Just caddy corner, David, too, slept the sleep of the dead. There was no eye movement, no motion whatsoever from either of them.

He had allowed himself five minutes every hour to come and check in on them. *Her* - if he was being honest. He had slept here in the chair last night, in case either of them came around. But he had barely roused himself each time the alarm on his watch had gone off. He had forced himself to set it for two hours, thinking that he might get into a much needed deep sleep cycle if he could stay asleep for long enough.

But from the way he had creaked this morning, and felt like he was moving through sludge all day, Jordan was sure he hadn't had any REM.

He had talked to his Dad on the phone this morning for an hour.

Jackson Abellard had joined up with the work crew, hauling bodies, demolishing houses where people had been left to rot, and getting Lake James up and functioning again. He'd said it was sad what had happened. But that he felt truly alive for the first time since Jordan's mother had died.

Jordan had told about his own woes: that there was no pattern to the deaths, that he was ready to give up, but Landerly felt there had to be something. So they'd been pushing, and analyzing, and finding jack.

Jackson had laughed. "It does seem random as hell. We lost the vast majority of our electricians. But for some reason we've got lawyers out the yin yang."

Jordan had laughed, too. Wishing Landerly would stop beating the dead horse. Or the billions of dead horses. Wishing Becky Sorenson had lived, to go check out the frogs and report something of use to distract Landerly.

His watch beeped at him. Signaling that his brain had wandered and he'd lost track of his five minutes.

Not surprising.

He looked down at Jillian again, seeing her hand hanging loose within his own grasp. He told himself that fingers twitched first a lot of the time. That he touched her so he could feel what he might not see, not because he wanted to.

Turning to go, he reluctantly let her hand slip free of his, almost missing the finger jerking as it slid from his grasp.

Without covering the space between, he was over her bed, hovering, watching.

Waiting.

And seeing nothing.

It must have been nothing.

But still he picked up her lifeless hand, holding her fingers sandwiched between his own. Rubbing them. Hoping for a response.

And finally his breath hitched, when he felt it again.

Just a twitch.

His breath gushed out. "Jillian! Jillian!" He chided himself for calling out to her. She would come around as she chose. Not because he said something. Something she probably still couldn't hear, or even process as her own name. Then he did it again. "Jillian, can you hear me?"

Another twitch. This time it was her whole hand, quickly grasping his, before slackening again.

He patted the side of her face. Tapped the back of her hand. Listened to her breathing. Counted eighteen breaths per minute.

She groaned.

“Have you been standing here looking at your girlfriend this whole time!?” Landerly yelled like a man half his age, even if he hobbled along with a cane at his side.

Jordan’s jaw clenched and he didn’t turn to address the man yelling at his back. “She’s not my girlfriend. She’s my partner.”

“Then why are you standing here making lovesick puppy eyes?”

Yup, the old man couldn’t be bothered to notice a person he was speaking directly to, but he seemed to have pegged Jordan without a sideways glance. Son of a bitch. He ground his teeth and focused on the tiny quivers of Jillian’s lips. “She’s coming around.”

“Really?”

He heard the uneven footsteps. The grass was cold enough to crunch with the punctuation of his cane as Landerly made his way beside Jordan. With quick, agile fingers Landerly took her pulse, watched her eyelids as they began to show REM signs, and pulled out his stethoscope to hear her breath sounds.

Jordan spotted the cane hooked over the baby rail, looking for all the world completely unnecessary. Landerly’s feet planted apart, as though the earth might tremble beneath him and he’d need his balance. After a moment, he nodded.

Another few minutes later she began to mumble. And Jordan started speaking again. “Jillian. We’re here. Jordan and Dr. Landerly. Open your eyes. Come on-” *Baby*. He bit off the endearment before it slipped out.

In the space his slip provided she mumbled again.

Then again.

Jordan leaned over, smiling as her eyes slowly opened and closed. Opened and closed. They rolled, denying her the focus she was trying to achieve. And he remembered forcing back the darkness and crawling out only a few days ago himself.

Finally her eyes opened fully and stayed that way, they found him, latched on to his grin, and he watched, smiling, while recognition dawned.

Until her scream shattered his eardrums.

She looked at him like he was Satan incarnate.

And screamed again.

Then he watched in abject horror as her eyes rolled back in her head and she passed out.

“What the hell?” Landerly shoved him out of the way, the strength in his arms surprising but unnecessary. Jordan was as stable as a wet noodle and shuffled easily to the side, sliding into the chair, barely looking up as Landerly’s voice cut through him again. “What did you do to her?”

*Glad to know you’re so certain that I did it, old man.* But he didn’t speak, only shrugged and wondered if Landerly was right.

This time it was Landerly tapping her hand and her face. None too gently from Jordan’s viewpoint, but maybe she wouldn’t scream and pass out when she saw him. He could see the twitches as she came around again. And he sent up a silent prayer of thanks, to a God he was no longer sure was there, that she hadn’t slipped right back under.

He heard her voice as though it came from under glass, “Doctor Landerly?”

“We’re here.” Landerly motioned behind him for Jordan to get up and join him at the bedside.

Again the soft lilt of confusion, “But you’re dead.”

Landerly thumped his chest, and Jordan would have laughed had he had it in him. “Nope, alive and hale.”

“Jordan?”

He stepped up. “I’m here.”

Her breath whooshed out of her, “Oh thank God,” as she launched herself into his arms. Her face pressed into his neck, the scent of her permeating his senses, her soft breasts pressed to him as she wrapped herself around him.

His hand stroked at her hair. Even as he realized he was giving himself away to Landerly there was nothing he could do to stop it. But he ruined it anyway. “Why did you scream?”

She pulled back, untangling herself from him, taking the warmth with her. “You were dead.”

“Hmm?” He heard Landerly’s voice on top of his own.

“You were both on the ‘deceased’ list.” Her face looked so earnest. “From several days ago.”

“You must have dreamed it. We both woke up several days ago.”

Her head shook, in the stilted manner of someone denying, not to the world but to themselves. “I didn’t dream it.” Her eyes bored into him, and he felt as though they could see straight through to whatever was behind him. “Becky Sorenson took me to the mortuary.”

He started to point out that Becky had died, that Jillian had been there, but she spoke again, cutting off his thoughts, again chilling him to the bone. “I saw your body.”

• • • •

“PINCH ME!” JILLIAN held her arm out. She looked to Landerly, “that *does* work, right? If I feel the pain I’m not dreaming?”

Landerly actually reached out and took what felt like a good bite out of her arm. “Ow!”

Jordan looked at the two of them like they’d gone mad, and Jillian felt the chill wrap around her heart again. Her voice was barely a whisper as she pushed it out. “Don’t look at me like that. I can’t be crazy. You were dead.”

“But I’m not.” He shrugged. “I woke up the day after you did. . . the first time.”

*Click.* Another gear snapped into place.

“Oh shit!”

Landerly’s eyes snapped to her. He’d probably never heard her swear before, but she didn’t care. It was falling into place. “That’s it!”

Both men raised their eyebrows, identical expressions on very different faces. Her tongue fluttered in her mouth, trying to form words for the abstracts in her brain. “That’s what Becky said. She said she woke up at the same time we saw her die.”

“Okay. But she’s really dead.” Jordan squeezed her fingers.

Only just then realizing that he had been holding her hand, Jillian yanked it away as though it burned. In essence it did. This man, who had become her best friend, maybe by default, clearly didn’t believe her.

“None of them are dead!” She wanted to shake them, make them believe. But her brain rolled over and took charge. She had to tell them first.

“Sit!”

Both men scrambled to obey the authority in her voice. Jordan politely gave Landerly the chair, and hoisted himself onto the counter. When she looked to the gurney, expecting to find it empty, she started.

David was laid out there, as still as the desert night, and trussed up like a turkey.

But after a thought it made sense.

David, comatose here, was still with Becky, wherever that was.

She smiled, because when he came around, he'd corroborate her story. And she started by telling the two men that.

"David will corroborate what?" It was Landerly, interrupting before she even started.

She pinned him with a glare. "Everything. No more questions until I finish."

She explained that she had seen people who were deceased here. That those that were alive here, were dead there. "Gary Winchell. He's a tech. He's dead, right?"

Jordan shrugged at her, still not putting together all the pieces she was feeding them.

She pointed to the open flap of the tent, at the white coats scurrying by. "Well, send a tech to check the 'deceased' list. Because I x-rayed him head to toe this morning."

Jordan hopped to his feet and obediently sent for the lists.

"I hadn't met him until this morning. But ask around. He was a skateboarder. He's broken every major bone in his body. Two tib-fibs on his right leg. Left collarbone, twice in the same spot. . . ." Her voice failed her again. With her eyes she pleaded with Jordan. "How would I know that otherwise? You've been around me the whole time, how else did I learn that?"

His gaze was steady. "To be perfectly scientific, Jillian, I haven't been around you *all* the time. You were off with David a lot."

But just then, an out of breath tech arrived with the local binder. Jordan flipped through, stopping at Gary Winchell, and handing the book over to Landerly.

His voice was uncertain as he probed. "So everyone who's dead here, is alive . . . *there*?"

Her shoulders sagged. "No." The admission sounded small and hollow even to her own ears. She hated the holes in her story, wished that it all sewed up neatly and precisely. "They lost most of their elderly, too." Her head snapped up. "And Leon Peppersmith. He's dead there too."

Her jaw hurt, and she realized she was clenching it. "People are waking up there at precisely the times they die here, and dying there at precisely the times they wake up here." She was repeating herself and getting nowhere. "David was out the whole time. He was awake here, breaking his leg, while he was comatose there. He only woke up there about nine last night."

The two men looked to each other with a sharp movement.

"That's when he went under again, isn't it?" Her excitement sharpened in her bones.

It was Jordan who spoke, and she could tell he tempered his response, not wanting to give in, to validate her too much. "I discovered he had slipped under shortly after nine."

Her voice softened. "He didn't fall down the stairs there. Because he didn't wake up until yesterday. So his leg isn't broken, his shoulder never dislocated. I was trying- *we* were trying to figure out how he healed so quickly, but I realize now that he didn't. He was just never injured."

*Click.*

"Leon Peppersmith!"

They looked at her, waiting.

"He died in both places. But it's because he didn't die from the reversal. He hit his head. He lost blood, that's what killed him."

Jordan again stepped into the ring. "But he did that *here*. So why would he have that head injury *there*?"

"We were *all* here. But here isn't here."

*Oh, hell.* She wasn't making any sense now. But she plowed ahead and tried again to untangle what she was thinking and saying. "We were all here. We all went under, and things shifted. Making

two parts. Some people woke up on one side and some on the other.”

Jordan leaned toward her. “So there are two earths?”

“Yes!”

“Jillian, that all sounds very . . . *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.”

She let out a frustrated breath.

“Fine! Let me tell you who I met there. They’ll all be in your little ‘deceased’ list.” She jabbed her finger at it.

“Lucy Whitman.” For a moment she pronounced the name, feeling triumphant, but then she shook her head. “That doesn’t count, I saw her name on the list before I went under. I could have conjured her.”

She thought again. “The coroner is a Dr. Whitman. He’s Lucy’s Dad right?”

Jordan nodded. Of course he would know that.

But she kept talking. “He’s an older man with gray hair.”

*But who wasn’t?* She saw the question mirrored in Jordan’s eyes, so she did a better job. “He had male pattern baldness, and piercing blue eyes. He has the same smile as Lucy’s. He’s about five feet six inches tall, short for a man. He’s medium build, mild clubbing of his fingers, and has a thick gold wedding band on his left hand, no other jewelry. . . Oh, and silver glasses.”

She sat there on the edge of her gurney, feet dangling, feeling very self-satisfied.

Jordan nodded. He looked to Landerly. “She did describe the man to a T.”

Jillian looked over her shoulder. “And David is there . . . right now, he and Becky are probably wondering what happened to me, why I went back under.”

Landerly steepled his fingers, not talking, not looking at her, letting his brain digest. It was Jordan who leaned forward and questioned her. “Do you really believe all this?”

She nodded slowly, turning her lips inward, as though that might hold back the tears that threatened. “If I don’t believe it, then I have to accept that I’m crazy.”

“You may have dreamed it all.” He shrugged.

She nodded again, acceptance not coming easily. “Then I may very well be dreaming you now.”

His smile was quick and steady, “I assure you I am quite alive.” He stood, stretching, his movement proclaiming him finished with his part of the conversation. “You aren’t dreaming this.”

“That’s what they told me, too.” A small laugh burbled out of her, but she stopped it before it bloomed into hysteria. Tears pushed at the back of her eyes. “I don’t think I’m dreaming.”

Jordan nodded. “It’s a shame we didn’t put an EEG on you.” His hands rested on his hips as he paced slowly.

Her eyes opened, wide and clear, as she looked up. “But we can put one on David right now.”

Landerly nodded. “If he *is* dreaming . . .”

She shook her head vehemently, “It doesn’t prove anything one way or the other. I know. But if he isn’t . . .” She let out the sigh that had fought to escape. “When he wakes up he’ll tell you all the same things I did, then you’ll *know* he didn’t dream it. I’ll even leave the room so you can question him separately.”

Landerly’s voice was smooth and modulated. “You seem very sure of yourself.”

“I am.” Holding out her hands, palm up, she played her last card. “If he doesn’t corroborate everything, then you can lock me up.”

In unspoken agreement, Jordan left to fetch an EEG, and Landerly stood, putting too much weight on the cane to get out of the chair. His fingers quickly probed along her jawline. She almost laughed, thinking that a massive infection *would* explain some serious hallucinating on her part. But she could



tell he didn't find any enlarged lymph nodes. He took her blood pressure, and listened to her heartbeat, and let out a tiny chuckle.

"What?" As she asked it, she noticed his eyes had changed from calculating and scientific to human and warm.

"Abellard was right. You are textbook."

She only nodded. Of course she was textbook. Humans varied, everyone deviated from the norm in some way or other. But not her, and this whole mess was just another convincing factor that she was less than human in some way.

"You pass all the physical inspections, so I'm going back to the records tent. You and Abellard get something to eat and bring me some when you finish. Maybe you can help us find the sorting factor."

"Sorting factor?"

He turned back. "Why those people died - or lived."

She couldn't raise her voice, couldn't find the energy to be loud and forceful to this man. But she just as much could not let him walk out uncorrected. "It's not just dead and alive. There are three categories. Alive here. Alive there. And dead in both."

His back to her, he nodded, and left. As he hobbled off, looking older than he ever had before, she wondered if he really wanted to study or just didn't want to trek the distance to the cafeteria.

Alone in the tent with David laid out on the other bed, Jillian moved her sore muscles. Her jaw had already gotten its workout, but her legs and arms could use some good range-of-motion exercises.

She stretched and twisted, feeling for the third time the strain of movement on long unused muscle. She began to wonder if she would feel this every time she awoke. If each time she fell asleep she would have to wonder where she would wake up.

Before the thought could depress her, Jordan wheeled in the cart containing the EEG set up. Wires hung in wrapped loops off the side of the cart, the ends little silver snaps waiting for the corresponding pads. Jordan had two pages of the thick foam stickers with the snap backs and small sponges in the center holding conducting gel.

When he turned his back to her she heaved herself off the bed, and grabbed the babyrail as her legs tried to buckle under her. Without seeing him move in behind her, Jillian only felt his arm slip around her waist and lift her fully upright, legs extended, and finally supporting herself. She batted his hands away and carefully walked the two feet to get to the head of David's bed. Without a sound she began pushing away his blond hair, snapping the wires to the pads and sticking them across his head. For a moment she pushed away her own concerns, and admired the pattern that the probes made - simple, mathematical, containing no fear, concern, or disbelief.

Within minutes the small screen was tracing a series of green lines across its face, showing the brainwave activity of a comatose David. The theta waves were low, indicating a non-dreaming state. But that didn't mean anything. Not until he passed at least three hours - overnight would be better to prove that he hadn't entered any REM sleep cycles, no dream phases.

They watched silently until the lines completed their first trek across the screen, then they turned to get dinner.

• • • •

JORDAN WATCHED HER while she ate. She consumed food like he had normally only seen her consume information. But he didn't judge. He hadn't been through what she had. Even in the

simplest sense.

He hadn't walked the reversal long after it wasn't safe for anyone else. He didn't awaken before anyone else and toil to save lives. And he hadn't slipped back under. Never mind what she claimed she had seen.

She wasn't speaking to him. Not in the flat-out-refusal way that a child would mete out punishment, but he could sense her withdrawal, her pain that he didn't just blindly believe all that she said.

The one thing she had done was convince him that *she* believed it. But it didn't make sense, not the way she said. And she could have dreamed it. Hell, everyone had a dream or two that felt so real you bought into it, even after you woke up. His lips pressed together. The difference was that people who dreamed woke up. And, once confronted with some sort of evidence, they let go. He had once dreamed his puppy had died, but he woke up and was corrected by a single bark. A good lick on the face and the dream was banished.

Here, two full hours later, Jillian still believed. And she was trying to spread the news, at least to him and Landerly.

And she *could* have dreamed it. He had watched her thumb through the 'deceased' list when she'd been awake the first time. Jordan also knew that her brain was razor sharp. It could have memorized, somewhere in her vast subconscious, the entire list. Who knew what a brain like Jillian's was able to catalogue? If she had once passed by that tech's file, if it had been open, she could have absorbed every fracture, every nick on every bone.

He watched as she carefully cut the turkey slices on her plate with the dull cafeteria knife, slicing neat squares from the ovals before her. She dunked them in gravy then chewed them, her motions as uniform as her cuts, and she never made eye contact. She was angry.

Equivalently she'd had the answering bark. He'd talked to her, they'd touched. Landerly touched her. She had dreamed they were dead, but all the signs saying otherwise couldn't convince her.

And that theory. That was neat. She managed to sew it all together so it worked. One set here, one there. She could simply continue the dream when she went to sleep.

With new eyes, he looked at her, knowing that she felt it, and that she wouldn't return the gesture. Was she simply so smart that she could drive herself insane? His dream had dispersed, although the memory of the terror was still glass-clear in his adulthood. But he didn't - couldn't - make up ways for it to have truly happened. Jillian was smart enough that she could.

He waited while she methodically finished the food on her plate. Wordlessly, she stood and went back into the line. If her back hadn't been to him she would have seen his jaw unhinge.

*Maybe she's pregnant.*

*David.*

Like lightning, a bolt of deep jealousy traced a sharp path through him. He worked to push the thought back down inside, to shove it low and bury it deep. She was just eating a lot because of the stress on her system from being comatose for a good portion of the past week.

He saw her exiting the line and coming toward him. The cafeteria plate no longer in her hands, but replaced by a paper napkin roll of plasticware, and a black plastic plate piled high with food he couldn't identify through the steam inside the lid.

His breath let out. *Not pregnant.*

"Ready?" She looked at him, but only at the surface. And when he nodded she began walking away. Not waiting for him to get up. Not looking back to be sure he followed.

He trailed behind, mesmerized by the soft sway of her hips, the light blue scrubs hugging the curves that were partially obscured by the jacket she had slung on. Her sneakers cut even steps in the shortest path to the records tent. In the dimming light, it was one of the few lit up like a bulb. A faint shadow marked the spot where Landerly sat just inside.

Jillian lifted the flap and pushed her way in, the canvas falling back into place behind her so that Jordan had to open it for himself.

Landerly was taking the plate from her, looking more like her grandfather than her boss. For the old man she had smiles and easy conversation. They were already discussing the fact that Landerly still couldn't identify a sorting factor, other than the one that he and Jordan had already figured out. He lifted the lid from the plate and stabbed at the turkey with his fork, explaining while he cut the meat into neat, even squares. "The elderly and infirm died. The people who had any or all the markers you two found before the complete reversal hit. But a lot of young people died that I can't account for. There's no age or race bias . . ." His voice trailed off as he dunked the perfect cube of turkey into the little puddle of gravy Jillian had gotten him.

And Jordan almost turned tail and ran. Dear God, he was stuck in a small tent with two of them. Falling hopelessly head over heels for one of them, and she wasn't speaking to him. Instead of fleeing screaming, he opened his mouth. "There's a gender bias that the females fell under and woke up or died first. But beyond that, there's no statistically significant difference in who woke up and who died."

Jillian cocked her head. "Did you check for a religious difference?"

"Huh?" Jordan heard it come out of his own mouth. Years of education and student loans down the drain.

"The Jewish people are the only religion that's its own race, but there may be a religious bias in the sorting. I don't know anything about the physiology of religion, but something must exist."

Jordan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course, he and Landerly had been wracking their brains, but Jillian in her first few minutes in the tent proposed something they hadn't thought of. She drove him nuts, so why the hell did he like her so much?

Without being asked, Jordan slipped out of the tent and went in search of Jason. Lucy was gone now, and she had been a fantastic go-to girl. He'd wondered if she'd had some sort of crush on him, or if she was just that efficient and willing to do whatever needed to be done. Jason was simply driven. He saw the opportunity afforded by the drastic shift in population, and he was going to come out on top.

Jason was in one of the other lit up tents. Of course. He would work well into the night, sleep a few hours and wake up early. He'd make sure he was indispensable. And certainly that's how Jordan found him, sitting at a desk, frowning at the yards of graphs in front of him. "What's the trouble?"

Jason looked up, a hint of startle showing on his face. "I must have messed it up, but . . ."

Jordan almost smiled. Messing up didn't seem like much of an option for someone like Jason. "What did you mess up?"

"Well, I figured that if compasses were acting up, maybe other things had, too. My first thought was the MRI. It's magnetic, so that made sense."

"Is it messed up?" Jordan stifled his inward sigh. The last thing anyone needed was more problems, but if they existed they needed to be checked out.

Jason shook his head, still looking confused. "No, it was fine. I guess the internal field is just too strong to be bothered by the earth's field. The NMR was next. Same issue. But both the IR and UV-

vis are honked up.”

“Honked up?” That was one he hadn’t heard in a scientific sense before.

“I got nothing. So I tried to recalibrate it.”

Jordan felt his fists hit his hipbones. “And . . . ?” It felt like he was pulling teeth over messed up machinery when he needed Jason working on finding out what he could about Jillian’s religious bias theory.

“I recalibrated the UV-vis.”

“Oh.” Well, that certainly hadn’t been what he expected, not given the look on Jason’s face. So he launched into what he needed. “We-”

“No. I recalibrated it. But our visual red recalibrated in the UV scale. The whole thing’s off by a frequency of 300 hertz.”

“Hmmm.” So the machine was fucked. He tried again to speak.

But Jason wasn’t having any of it. “I got my Dad to check the ones out at the labs. They all recalibrate the same. I even called U Mass and UCLA. They’re the same.”

Jordan nodded. “Good, I’m glad you got that solved.” And he shifted mental gears. After explaining what they needed, Jordan headed back, pushing aside thoughts of the future. If Jason reacted by over-working and over-thinking, others would react by shutting down. Suicides were a highly likely outcome. Some had lost their entire families. And it was inherent in the human species that some people just didn’t survive that.

He shook his head, trying to make out the two voices as he approached. Jillian’s soft lilt, her laugh, and Landerly’s response, for the first time Jordan detected a scratch in the old man’s voice and wondered how many years of his younger life the man had spent smoking. He pushed through the canvas flap, enjoying the feeling of the heat enveloping him. Lord knows, the two of them had probably solved all the earth’s problems while he was out.

Jillian was at a desk, her seat turned to face Landerly’s, while she sifted through reams of printouts, talking as she went, and Dr. Landerly was polishing off the last bites of the dinner she had put together for him.

“Jordan,” It was the first time this evening she had spoken directly to him, since he had dared to indicate that he wasn’t completely on the dual-earth bandwagon. Landerly wasn’t either, but for some reason the old man remained in her good graces. Jordan looked at her, eyes up, waiting. “Didn’t they say something about the wardens all dying in Nevada?”

He frowned. “They didn’t all die.”

“Yeah, but wasn’t there a disproportionately large number? Far more than fifty percent?”

Landerly nodded, wondering where she was going. “All the first people who woke up were murderers. Single killings, passion killings. You found that.”

But Jordan shook his head, for the first time since Jillian spouted off about her dreams, he and Landerly were on the same page. But Jillian wasn’t and Jordan put voice to his concerns. “I don’t think that murderer / non-murderer is going to be the sorting factor, I’ve looked at the list.”

She brushed them both aside with her hand. “Of course not, but job description might. Oh-” Her eyes widened as she cut off her own thought.

Again he and Landerly waited.

“You weren’t there. . .” He could see her getting excited. But even when she opened her mouth she still didn’t make sense. “I wasn’t there either!”

For a moment he wondered if they were really going to wind up putting her into a straight jacket. And he barely managed a sad sigh before she spoke again.

“Becky mentioned something on the way over to the coroner’s. That she’d been over to the Civic Center across the street and they were having a rally.”

“I didn’t see a rally.” He looked askance to Landerly and the old man just shrugged.

Jilly’s eyes narrowed and her face took on the expression of a viper ready to strike. “Of course you didn’t see it. *Becky* did. It wasn’t *here*.” She gave a long suffering sigh. “So try this on for size: At the rally they believed the reversal was the Ascension because all the lawyers had died and . . . the police force had mostly lived. So had the FBI,” she paused, her eyes rolling up skyward as she relived the memory, certainly in her brain she could hear Becky speaking. “But almost no CIA. Low survival among thieves and murderers.”

She pinned him with a glare. “Check it.”

“What?” He still wasn’t quite up to speed on what the idea was, even though he’d understood what she said as plain English.

“Job descriptions. The lawyers and CIA and thieves and murderers are alive. *Here*. Because they’re dead *there*. We’ll also be short a good police force, and the FBI.”

He frowned. He understood; he just wasn’t buying what she was selling. “The FBI just all died?”

“I doubt it was *all* of them!” She was as frustrated with him as he was with her. And from off to the side he could see Landerly watching the whole exchange with his eyebrows so high they almost popped off his head. Jordan was just too damn frustrated to laugh about it.

Jillian started in on him again. “Most of the FBI is dead. I’ll bank on that just like I’ll bank on David corroborating my story. Has anyone thought to check on him?”

*Of course not, no one really likes him.*

Jordan tried to squelch the thought. His mother had taught him better. And as a physician he had taken an oath to be better.

But it was Jillian who stomped out of the tent and went on her way to check on David.

He tried to take a moment to gather himself. But it was practically impossible with Landerly sitting there watching him. So he forced himself to don the appearance of *not* being wound into knots. He faced Landerly, “Now what?”

Landerly shrugged from the seat he had occupied the whole time. “I guess we get cracking on checking the job descriptions of everyone we can find.”

• • • •

“DAMMIT LEON.” BECKY muttered under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She managed about half a smile and shook her head at David. She wasn’t going to repeat it. Not the cursing of the dead. Not her anger at Leon for leaving her here to sort out the species by herself.

Of all the people who had died in the reversal, Leon was the one she had been sure would make it if anyone would. He radiated health. It was worse that he had died of a hit to the head - nothing more than a scratch to Leon. But there had been no one awake to lift him into a bed and stitch him up.

The only remaining Peppersmiths were still in Minnesota, faxing in fabulous data on some seriously unfabulous extinctions. Leon’s sister had stepped up to fill the lead spot, the business running smoothly in the face of personal and global tragedy. John Overton had died as well. And Becky let out a breath when she thought of the gleam in his eyes when they talked about the downed

moose. Overton hadn't been anywhere as useful as Leon had been. And it was wrong of her, but she couldn't muster up any real pain at the loss.

David went back to working on his hands and knees some five yards away. He was chipping at an exposed surface of granite, the tiny pickaxe making a rhythmic ping against the scar he was creating in the earth. He was making too much noise now to hear her if she muttered.

The crickets had stopped for a mile in every direction when he had started the nasty noise that signaled to the wildlife that they were not alone. The predators had gone into hiding, away from the now rotting feast that had been left out for them. Luckily they had eaten enough that the smell wasn't overwhelming and Becky had adjusted to it. David worked like he didn't notice anything, quiet except for his little axe and his breathing, in a circle of illuminated glare. One knee flat, the other up, with his elbow resting on it, his fit torso encased in a red L L Bean jacket that spoke of money and sport. He looked like an ad rather than a scientist. The only glimmer of truth in the whole bright image was that his hair was thinning on top.

Becky went back to unearthing the things that had taken great pains to earth themselves in the first place. They squirmed and fought, but only rarely did they escape. She apologized to the souls of each of them, and again wondered what God thought of what she did to his creatures.

Her minister when she'd been in high school had thought God wanted the people to use the creatures to help the people. She was certain there wasn't any real danger of being smote down by anyone organic or overly holistic in the East Tennessee Baptist Church. But nowhere in the bible was there any good solid reference to God's or Jesus' ideas about the worms and their scientific versus holy purposes.

So she dug them up.

"You about done?" David's voice was clear in the unearthly quiet.

"Yup!" She scrambled to gather the few containers she had brought with her. Her cell phone shoved deep into her pocket. She wasn't 'finished'; she hadn't really started. She was simply taking advantage of being out. David had said he was coming out here to check the rock formations, either with her or without her.

And after Jillian had gone back comatose, Becky didn't think any of them should be anywhere alone, and certainly not David. He was the one who seemed to function the most like Jillian. And he could simply pass out and slip under at any moment.

Granted, Jillian had been triggered. She had seen Jordan Abellard's body in the morgue and let out that soul shattering scream. The hideous noise had only ended when Jillian had passed out.

So Becky didn't find the brilliant Dr. Carter so all-knowing wise when he decided to come out to the back of beyond in the middle of the night to chip rock, even if it was her own backyard. Her mother and father would be bringing Brandon back here. They had Melanie and Aaron buried in Charlotte where he had been working, where the reversal had hit them.

For a moment she had to scrunch up her face to keep the thoughts and therefore the tears at bay. The steady ringing of metal on rock had stopped. And with a sniff, she looked to her right, to the perfect size twelve tan hiking boots that bore just enough scuffs to show that they had been worn, once before, maybe. "Need a hand?"

The fitted black glove reached down into her view, and she was certain he was offering to tug her to her feet, but she couldn't face him yet. And David wasn't the kind of man you just threw yourself at when you needed a good cry. So she slapped a salamander in a clear container into his palm.

The palm lifted out of her vision and came back empty, so she held up another and another, until she had corralled her thoughts and was able to face the man.

And to think she had come out here believing she was protecting him from going comatose out in the woods. Nope, he was far more stable than she. It was just Jillian with the issue.

She stepped pace behind him on the trail, only briefly musing at following *him* down trails she had walked since she was old enough to wander away from home. But before she realized that they had come that far, she was blinded by the sudden glare of the motion-sensor spotlight on the side of the empty house. Her hand flew up to shade her eyes and she caught a brief burning glimpse of David doing the same thing, just before she ran into his back.

“Umph.”

*Well, that was beautiful.* With a deep breath in, she apologized.

“Don’t worry.” He pushed the button on the car key and the sleek black Mercedes in front of them blinked and made a few laser-like noises. Becky figured he’d gone out and bought it. But she wasn’t sure when. Or why. There were tons of available cars these days. But it seemed that David just *needed* the black Mercedes. Or maybe *it* had needed a man that wore L L Bean and breathed money.

Again, she held out her gloved palm, waiting patiently until he relented and handed over the keys. She wasn’t about to let him drive. No matter how sure she was that he wasn’t going to slip into a coma.

A few minutes later the black leather, hand-stitched backseat was covered with pieces of rock, baggies of silt and soil, and plastic containers of water and writhing creatures. Definitely not what the Mercedes-Benz corporation had built this luxury-mobile for. Why couldn’t the man just admit that he played in the dirt for a living and get a truck?

Becky turned the key, threw the car in gear and, when the gas pedal made the car start reversing out of the bumpy gravel drive, she figured the engine was running. The flood light snapped off as they pulled out of range, shutting down the still picture the house had made beyond the windshield.

But Becky put that thought out of her mind, too. At least her folks would be back in a couple of days and it wouldn’t feel so eerie. She hadn’t even brought herself to go inside this time. Even though the dust layer would have been microscopic, she would know it was there, feel that the house no longer had a family in it. That it knew it was unused.

So she pulled away, using the high-beams to illuminate a road she knew by heart.

David stared out the side window, although if he could see anything other than the green reflection of the dash lights, she wasn’t certain.

Twenty-five minutes later she pulled into the lot at the high school. The tent town was ghostly white, moving slightly in the breeze. A few of the tents were lit up from the inside, like Japanese paper lanterns. But David didn’t see any of it.

He had fallen sound asleep on the ride back, having reclined his seat and wedged his head against the door jamb.

“David.” She kept her voice soft, as though maybe it weren’t her intention to wake him.

But he didn’t respond.

A seed of thought began forming at the back of her brain, and she decided that she didn’t care if she startled the hell out of him. She grabbed his shoulder and shook him for all she could. “David! *David!*”





“David! *David!*”

The voice seemed muffled, and at a distance. It was a wonder he could make out his own name it was so murky. And he was tired. Why couldn't Becky let him sleep? It seemed like he had just slid away. Finally, peacefully getting the rest he needed. The seat of the Mercedes was warm and soothing, because he'd turned on the ass-warmer.

The salesman had a better name for it than that, but David didn't care. It made everything else about the car worthwhile. Even the pricetag. So David wrote yet another check out of his trust fund. He'd sworn never to touch the account, but lately it seemed that was all he had done.

He started to roll sideways, away from the sound of her voice, but the sheets were cool, and her voice was receding. Good. She was going to let him sleep.

He slid away, letting the recesses of dreams come close and fold him into a place where he simply didn't care that he was in a car, sleeping in the parking lot. A thought about hubcaps slipped through his head and he could see the parking lot filled with rows of little black Mercedes.

“David.”

*Damn, her voice had gotten-*

It was a man. A male voice. And he remembered that she had left, that he had heard her skittering out of the- . . . the car?

“David.” A hand clasped his shoulder, the grip commanding rather than soothing. “I can see that you're coming around. Watch that arm.”

*Arm?*

*Son of a bitch.* They weren't going to let him sleep. He sighed and rolled toward the sound, trying to force open his eyes, but it wasn't working. He rubbed at his face.

His arm was ripped from his body. For just a moment causing a blinding pain, then the feeling rescinded to a bright burn.

“Aaaaaggggh!”

He barely registered that it was his own voice through the haze. Even though he didn't move it again, his shoulder punished him with a throbbing sear that onset with every heartbeat. He opened his eyes even as he chewed the inside of his lip in an effort to create a controllable pain that would overshadow the uncontrollable one.

Finally his vision settled on the man in front of him. Forcing his eyes to follow the clean lines of the scrubs, he looked up into Jordan Abellard's too-blue eyes.

He screamed again. And scrambled for the head of the bed, hoping to get away from the face he had seen cold on the slab just that morning. But again his shoulder punished him with a tearing feeling, followed by a sharp burn that permeated the whole area.

David would have let out another yell, but as the doctor leaned closer David pushed with his legs, and was rewarded by the hot certainty that the limb had been sawed off and left open about halfway down his calf. Something stabbed, swordlike, through his hip up into his abdomen.

His left arm held. His left leg didn't feel like it had been severed, and so he used those to right himself. Holding one hand in front of him, he warded off the dead hands reaching toward him. “Back off, you son of a bitch!”

Finally he was able to feel his throat, and it too was mad at him. Sandpaper rubbed on every exposed surface, creating an intense, raw, seeping pain that clouded his vision further.

“It’s me, Dr. Abellard.” The head tilted, the chocolate hair sliding and falling a little too long, as the eyes focused on his face.

“No shit. Get back.” He held his palm out, as though the sight of the soft side of a hand would keep anything at bay besides a gnat.

But the Jordan-thing did as it was told.

“David?”

It was a kind, soothing voice. But that was all it said.

David started running at the mouth. Although he wasn’t sure why. “You’re dead! I saw you this morning dead- . . . cold- . . . at the coroner’s.”

“Huh?”

*It wasn’t Jordan.* Jordan was more eloquent than that. Every bad zombie movie he had ever seen flashed through his brain. Becky was complaining about extinct species. The techs and doctors droned about all the deaths. There was no reason that the walking dead couldn’t be a part of all this.

The Jordan-thing stared back at him; its mouth moved asking something about the morgue. But David ignored it. He was frowning at his arm, and a horror worse than the dead man standing and talking to him poured over him. The pain that had receded to a dull rhythmic ache was in his right arm. At the shoulder. The shoulder that was in a blue standard issue immobility sling. With the Velcro strap around his chest. Just where he had remembered it. “My shoulder was dislocated?”

“Yes.” Jordan nodded.

“When I fell down the last flight of stairs?”

“Yes.” His expression clearly telling that he thought David might have injured his brain in the fall as well.

“But I healed. . . . my leg healed.” Again the words stumbled out of his mouth, along with some weird belief that if he just explained, things would right themselves. “I was walking. Becky took us to the coroner’s. Jillian can show you the x-rays. I-” He wasn’t making any sense and he knew it.

Jordan pulled up a chair and a notebook, before pulling a sleek, expensive pen from the unassuming pocket stitched on the front of his scrubs. “I’m going to ask a few questions and take some notes, okay?”

David gritted his teeth and remembered from two days ago. “Can I have a Percocet?”

Jordan nodded, but his words didn’t quite match. “When we finish, okay?”

Again his teeth ground - one of the few body parts he could work without instantaneous punishment in the form of rending pain.

Jordan dove into the thick of it. “I’m dead?”

“Well, you don’t look very dead.” He could feel the sarcasm flowing through his veins. “You got a twin?”

He shook his head. Looking far too like Jordan for David’s stomach to stop clenching. “Well, there’s a body at the morgue that had your name on the toe-tag, and your name on the ‘deceased’ list. And from the looks of it, I can see why they got you confused. You should check into having a brother you don’t know about.”

Jordan nodded.

“When did you see it?”

“This morning. Maybe eleven a.m.” It felt like an interrogation, but he let the doc go. The sooner this crap was over, the sooner he got his Percocet.

“Who was there with you?”

“Jillian Brookwood, Dr. Rebecca Sorenson, and the coroner, Dr. Whitfield, Whitson, something.” He stated each name clearly for the record, mentally pushing back the feeling of having his hip ripped open.

“Becky’s dead.” Jordan leaned forward trying to see how David would react.

*Was this one of those horrid mental studies?* “Hey doc, I thought they banned this type of psychological research years ago.”

“What are you talking about?”

David shook his head. “You know, where you tell people their family is dead just to see how they react. . . this ain’t right.”

Jordan breathed deep and shook his head. “I’ll explain it all as soon as I can, but Jillian’s telling us some pretty weird tales, and she says you’ll corroborate them. She ran to get me when she saw you coming around.”

*Jillian!* She would get him Percocet. “Bring the doc around then.”

“I can’t. Not until we’re finished.”

Anger burst through him, washing past in a hot rush. “I’m in pain here. While you pussyfoot around. And I don’t even know why the hell I’m re-injured. So get the hell on with it.”

“Why don’t you believe Becky Sorenson is dead?”

“Because I was just with her.” He looked at his watch. The time and date matched. “I was in the car. My black Mercedes I bought this afternoon. I fell asleep. About twenty minutes ago maybe.”

“You saw her twenty minutes ago?” Jordan leaned forward, his face a mask of incredulousness.

“That’s what I just said.” He forced his breathing to stay steady. Percocet was coming. Just ignore the pain and the fact that you are at the mercy of this sadistic doctor. He almost admired Jordan for having the balls to hold him hostage in his bed.

“And Jillian was there?”

“No. She passed out when she saw your body at the morgue. Screamed like a banshee and dropped like a stone. She went comatose. Becky and I brought her back. One of the docs had checked her out and said her heart rate was low and her breathing shallow.” He watched while Abellard’s face gave away everything he felt for the pretty little brunette. Whether he admitted it to himself or not, it was there in plain writing for all the rest of the world to read. But David kept talking. “They hooked her up to monitors and watched her. Becky and I went out to gather some data.”

“You left her?”

“I wasn’t going to sit around and watch her not move. Not much I can do to help anyway.” Yup, Abellard was in a bad way.

“You walked?” He motioned with his pretty pen to all the breaks that would clearly prevent any of David’s story. David ate a sigh. None of it made sense. And if Jillian was awake then where was she anyway?

“I healed. No marks on the x-rays that there ever was a break on any of the bones. Hip in the socket, girdle unfractured. I don’t know what this is about,” He gestured to all the casting and bindings he wore, “but it hurts like a mother-fucker.”

Jordan muttered under his breath. David heard the words *son of a bitch*, but it was hard to believe that phrase had come from Jordan’s mouth. David knew he must have simply heard the words he would have said. Abellard stood and stretched, long lean lines that made David ache with jealousy and wonder where the hell his good health had escaped to.

“I’ll send Jillian in with that Percocet. You can talk to her.”

He straightened where he sat, propped against the pillows, his hip burned, reminding him not to bend. His arm twitched, and his leg sent pulses of pain to every part of him. He ignored it. “When did Jillian wake up?”

“As of about noon.”

“But she was still under when Becky and I left this evening, around six.”

Jordan nodded, “She’ll explain. She was awake here.”

• • • •

JORDAN WALKED CALMLY from the tent, making certain he was well beyond the flap before he bent over and put his hands on his knees, finally allowing himself the deep gulping breaths that his body had been fighting for. Oxygen seeped into his system like a drug, reassuring him about everything in the world except the fact that Jillian had been right.

Whatever the hell she had seen, truth or not, David corroborated it.

She had seen him start to wake up, and bolted from his tent, fetching Jordan. Telling him to ask all his questions, her eyes gleaming with the promise of vindication.

Well, she had it.

Jordan had checked the EEG readings several times and found the only conclusive thing he could have found. David showed no markers of dreams at all - which meant that the creepy explanation that he and Jillian had shared a dream wasn’t going to fly. Instead they had as conclusive of evidence as they would ever find that the even creepier explanation Jillian had proposed would hold.

The toes of small, very familiar sneakers entered his line of sight, and he fought to stand upright and look less shaken than he felt. Jillian’s voice reached him before his eyes made it to her face. “It all matches.”

She didn’t ask. She didn’t have to. Jordan knew it was obvious from how he was reeling from his interview with David. But he forced himself to stand erect and look her in the eyes. “He needs Percocet. Then come back and talk to me, please.” He heard the begging quality in his tone. Recognized that it was in response to the instant her eyes had fled elsewhere worrying about David.

“He doesn’t even know why he’s in casts; why he isn’t healed.” It was a statement, in a faraway voice, deep concern about the only patient he hadn’t seen Jillian treat as a scientific subject. He told himself the rolling in his gut was from the fact that David’s story had smacked him around and upended his world.

Jillian scampered off, fetching meds for David and disappearing into the tent.

She had woken up on the other side, wherever the hell that was. And so had David. He had talked to Becky, less than an hour ago. He had chatted with Lucy Whitman’s dad long after the man had died.

Jordan started. For a moment he didn’t care about Jillian and David. Was his mother there? Eddie? Was it just the land of the dead? Had it always existed and Jillian and David had simply been thrown there by the reversal? His breathing picked up pace again and he sprinted into the tent, to ask her.

But he pulled up short when he saw her standing beside the bed. Talking. Telling David about the two parts, how they were passing back and forth. Jordan held himself in tight check waiting for a spot to interrupt, until Jillian shifted revealing her hand held softly in David’s. His voice found itself, putting the setting to rights. He had no claim, and wondered where the hell all this was popping out from. He had sat across a desk from her, finding her cold and impersonal. And now . . . well, intense attraction was a normal outcome to a shared traumatic stress.

Armed with this explanation, his brain worked again, and he pushed out the words. “Was it just a place that has always existed? Were other people there? Grandparents who died a long time ago?”

He shook his head in frustration, wondering how to explain what he meant. But Jillian gave him a sympathetic ‘no’, needing no further background, knowing instantly what he was trying to ask. “There were still a whole slew of people who actually died in the reversal. Remember, Leon isn’t anywhere. I didn’t find any evidence of anyone’s long departed ancestors, and no one seemed to think they were in heaven, which I’m sure would have come to mind if suddenly all your dead relatives were around.”

Jordan nodded. And admitted to himself what he had only briefly hoped: his mother wasn’t there.

Until that moment, he had simply accepted her loss. That a long round with cancer slowly ate her. That it had destroyed his father as well, even though it didn’t kill him. Only in the glimmer of chance did he realize how much he missed her. But he re-packaged it into its small neat box and shoved it back into the recesses of his brain.

Jordan stepped out of the tent, knowing Jillian would follow, soon. And steeling himself to the reality of it all: that Jillian had wandered across unbreachable barriers and hadn’t even known it.

With far more force than necessary, startling Landerly from his now almost permanent spot in the straight chair, he shoved his way into the records tent. Jordan made a note to get a recliner. He thought he’d seen one in the faculty lounge. Landerly’s brows went up, silently asking what Jordan knew was coming.

He nodded. “It all matches. I-” He shrugged. “I guess it’s all correct. Hers is now the only theory that makes sense.”

“What about all the dead? People deceased from a long time ago?”

That crept him out - the fact that it was now *his* brain working like Landerly’s. “I already asked. And no.”

Jillian came into the tent behind him, her sneakers so soft on the now worn grass that she didn’t make a sound, but he felt the cool night air follow her, and he smelled her. “So, you two believe me now.”

Both men turned to face her and nodded. Jordan knew what was coming next.

“There’s not much option is there?”

• • • •

THE TWO MEN SIMPLY stared at her.

Jillian knew.

They wanted to believe she was crazy. That she simply believed it was true.

But it was.

“I’m right aren’t I?” For some feminine reason, it wasn’t enough to feel vindicated. They would actually have to say the words. Their acceptance meant everything.

Jordan looked at her through suddenly narrowed eyes. “Until we come up with a better explanation.”

She felt her mouth form into a shocked ‘o’. He would just keep looking until he found a way to discredit her. “What better explanation is there?”

“Well, maybe this one: you and David share a psychosis, nothing more.”

“Psychosis!?” She could have thrown something at him, and wished she had something solid and heavy at hand. Something better than the stethoscope she had casually tossed around her neck upon

standing upright. If her boss hadn't been watching, she just might have slugged him, then slugged him again for being right.

It was possible. The world didn't turn on her wishes.

She sniffed in and tried to put the pieces of a calm expression back into place. To let her clenched lips relax. It was much harder than it ought to be.

"Children?" Landerly's condescension made it happen much faster than her will did.

She looked over and saw that Jordan, too, had been distracted from their fight.

Dr. Landerly held up his cell phone, "I have a Doctor Melanie Sorenson on the line. . ."

Jillian felt her brows pull together. But it was Jordan who filled in the blanks. "That's Becky's sister's name, but I thought she was a child . . ."

Landerly smiled. "That explains a lot." He turned back to the conversation he had muted with a well placed thumb. "Yes, Dr. Sorenson, what do you have for us?"

While they stood there, hovering, he had a conversation with the small girl. Jillian could make out a high-pitched but well-modulated voice because Landerly had his volume up so loud. "notebooks, huh? . . . Becky's field notes. . . . Thank you. We'll come and get them."

In a few more sentences he signed off and looked at the two of them. "You guys get a fetch job. I want those notebooks."

Jillian didn't object, but she was curious, "How did she get your cell number? No one has that."

Landerly grinned. "I think she talked her way through."

"She's seven!" Jordan looked incredulous.

Landerly laughed. "We'll have to keep her in the CDC's sights. . . . Now go get a map and get out to Dr. Sorenson's house."

Jillian turned to go, her jacket still around her even in the warm tent, she really just hadn't thought to take it off. Jordan's hand on her shoulder stilled her, but it was Landerly he spoke to. "Jillian's not going."

Anger exploded through her in a wash. "Excuse me!?"

Still he didn't face her, simply made his case to the man sitting and watching with a bemused expression. "What if she slides back under?"

"I won't!"

When his eyes found hers, dark lights burned in his gaze. "You don't seem to have any control over it."

"I'm up and around!"

"Yeah, and we thought that last time, too!" His fingers gripped her arm, in that one sure way letting her know she wasn't calling the shots here.

"Well, you could slip back under at any time, too, you know."

"No! *I've* been out here doing research. There doesn't seem to be anyone else in the world that slipped back under. No other fantastical tales of the 'other side'. Just you and David."

"Fantastical!" *He was still trying to undermine her. Bastard.*

"She can go." Landerly's cool calm rode over them, radiated out from his seated position, where he clearly still commanded the respect he was due.

"But-

Jillian resisted the urge to stick out her tongue when he cut Jordan off. "You'll be with her. She'll be fine even if she does go back under." With that said, he turned his attention away.

Jillian knew where her bread was buttered, and she started off toward the operations tent.

Jordan didn't follow her, just seemed inclined to stay behind and stew, so she let him. Five minutes later she emerged from the tent with the keys and quick printed map, thinking she'd just go by herself, until Jordan turned the corner and smacked into her. "Ready?"

His voice was tight and clipped, and he yanked the keys from her fingers even as he asked. "I don't trust you to drive. You might slip away and kill us both."

Her mouth hung open but she followed him out, through the rows of mostly stationary cars and trucks, until he seated himself in the driver's seat of one and expected her to slide into the passenger spot.

*Fine.* Two can play at that game.

And she managed to stay silent for about half the trip. Then finally it just burbled out of her. "Why are you so upset about me coming?"

His hands visibly clenched on the steering wheel, but he explained. "The last time you went under, your vital signs started dropping."

"That isn't uncommon."

"Yes, but yours kept slipping. That isn't uncommon either, in patients who die in their comas. So no, I'm not real comfortable having you in the car and driving you further away from medical care."

She kept her mouth shut and waited out the rest of the ride. They finally arrived at the old farmhouse, where the front door opened even before they put the car in park on the gravel driveway.

A small redhead with her hair flowing down past her shoulders came out the front door. She was in typical kid clothes, but no pigtails. And she walked with an air of intelligence and introduced herself in perfect little belle form before handing over a pile of black and white, well-worn composition books. "These were Becky's. She left them here, because she did a lot of the frog research here. Y'all should have them."

It was Jordan who thanked her by name, took the books and shook hands with the hunky blond older brother, took a few minutes to learn what they did.

Aaron was a lawyer. And Jillian resisted the urge to point out that fit the profiles of those who had survived. The lawyers were over here. Of course, one lawyer didn't prove anything.

Melanie sniffed and ignored her. That made sense. Jillian didn't think she'd ever had a way with kids. Even when she'd been one. But the little girl spoke a mile a minute to Jordan. *Didn't they all?*

"Becky told me to go to the magnet school in Knoxville. I didn't want to, but--"

"Why not?" He was down on one knee, just below Melanie's eye level, and Jillian watched, fascinated. She just wanted to see how it happened, because a real conversation with a child was so far out of her own scope.

"I didn't want to ride the short bus. I didn't want to be different." She sniffled again. "But now I think maybe that's okay."

"If you want."

Her little head nodded vigorously. "I can learn to be a biologist."

"From what I hear, you already are." His hand settled on the small red head, and he managed to do it without coming across as condescending.

They said a few good-byes and Jordan made it clear that he needed to get Jillian back right away, although that was a pile of crap as far as she was concerned. But on the way back she put her head on the windshield and curled into the car door.

Jordan's hand was rough on her shoulder. "Don't you dare go to sleep. Don't even think about it." His eyes looked out over the road but his attention was on her, she knew. "You are not going

under on my watch.”

• • • •

BECKY SAT VIRTUALLY still in the heated tent as she shuffled through the composition books she had dragged from home. The house hadn't felt quite so cold or lifeless when she had gone back this morning, and wound up having an hour and a half all to herself. Maybe it was because she and David had been through there. Maybe because she had accepted that the house no longer answered her back.

The notebooks, too, felt useless.

All the creatures in them had survived. The Warblers were thriving, and in the right place. The bees were still making the weird columns in Los Angeles. All her frogs were out and hopping: in her own backyard and in McCann. And she had to wonder what the hell it was all about. Why did they mutate? And would they ever know just what the effects were? And since the shifts only happened once every 60 million years or so, there was no real scientific need to find out.

But they did have to find out what the hell was happening to Jillian and David. Maybe there was a connection between what was happening to them and the frogs and other amphibs. The shift had taken a different toll on some species. Maybe it was doing the same to Jillian and David. And in the meantime it was taking its toll on Becky, too.

The mirror in tent 43 revealed the blue marks under her eyes. Initially only smudges, they had bloomed to full on bruise-like shades in the last twenty-four hours. Jillian passing out at the morgue had shocked a solid ten years onto Becky's age. Just when she thought everything had stabilized - hell, the frogs had righted themselves even - Jillian managed to scream herself into a coma.

Luckily David had caught her. Becky had her wonderings if it was because he felt something for the dark-haired doctor or if it was because he *didn't*. She couldn't read him. And wasn't sure she wanted to.

Then he had slipped away in the car on the ride home. That had put another ten years and two shades of pale on her face. If she added it all up she just might need to start smoking.

Dr. Jordan Abellard had died early.

David Carter was under, and so was Jillian Brookwood.

And she sat here, staring into space, because she had gotten tired of watching the clock move, sleeping in the straight-backed chairs, and fearing the ever-present slowing of the heart monitors.

The last two were slipping away, of the four who had initially discovered the reversal.

So she was here. The only survivor.

The day sent sun streaming in through the pores of the tent, making the desk lamp into a simple waste of electricity. The heater worked overtime, even though hot spots formed on her jeans clad legs where patches of sun filtered down to her. But she shivered.

Maybe when her folks showed up.

Maybe then she'd start to right herself.

“Becky?”

The voice was soft and familiar even if she didn't place it, and Becky turned to see who had approached through the open tent flap behind her, and let out the same ghastly sound that had come from Jillian's throat at the morgue.

Jillian Brookwood stood upright in the doorway, the straightforward expression and blue scrubs not any sort of indicator of whether Becky was having a hallucination or seeing the real person.

Jillian didn't respond. She couldn't. She was being jostled by the doctors and techs who came to check out the unearthly sounds emanating from tent 43. Becky closed her mouth, having developed a



sudden fear that she, too, could scream herself into a coma.

Jillian's frown at being jostled around and shoved aside was all too appropriate, and Becky lost the fears. Shoving the techs out of the way, she engulfed Dr. Brookwood in a too-familiar hug. "When did you wake up? You seem fine! How are you feeling? Do you want to sit down?"

Jillian just waved away all the concerns and looked Becky in the eyes and smiled. Her grin revealing even teeth and a dimple. Her eyes nearly glowed and Becky wondered what was up.

She was baffled as Jillian shooed the others out of the tent, closing the flap behind them, before forcing Becky to sit.

"You're going to think I'm crazy-"

Becky had to interrupt. "Trust me. At this point there is no *crazy*."

"While I was under I figured it out." Jillian's eyes flashed: she knew something, and Becky knew that she would, too, in just a minute.

"You are the only person I know who could 'figure something out' while comatose. So what did you discover?"

Settling her hip on the desk, Jillian spoke and Becky absorbed. "During the time when everyone was under the earth shifted. It split. Not in half . . ." She gestured like slicing an orange, then waved a hand while she searched for words, which was significant in and of itself. Jillian was never at a loss for the right word. "There are two places now. Identical. Maybe two whole earths."

This time Jillian's hands found purpose. She wrapped them around an imaginary ball, fingers entwined, then pulled her hands apart, leaving her fingers in place. Her motions now showed her holding one of her imaginary earths in each hand. She shook her head at Becky, "I don't know where the other earth is, but I've been there. I think they're actually in the same place," her hands gestured as though the two little earths melded, "But in different . . . I don't know the word . . . 'realms'?"

Becky followed and Jillian must have gauged something from her face, for her eyes scanned once then she continued. "So the people who died here, woke up there." She gestured as though she still held small planets in her hands. "And those who died there-"

"Woke up here."

"I don't have it all worked out, but I am certain people can't exist in both places at the same time."

"So in order to wake up here, they had to die there, and vice versa." That was the logical tail, Becky knew, and in confirmation, Jillian nodded. Her thoughts turned over, and for once Jillian waited for someone else to draw their own conclusions. Becky didn't stop to wonder why she had been granted this rare privilege. "So, on the other side there are otters? But no frogs? No honeybees?"

Jillian shrugged, her blue scrubs revealing the sharp curve of her shoulders, and Becky realized that the doctor had lost weight. But even as thin as she was, she had shucked her jacket first thing when she'd come into the tent. And only now did Becky reach out the short distance to turn down the heat. Only now did she feel a little less cold herself.

But Becky saw right away that Jillian wouldn't wait for her feelings to catch up, so she tuned into Jillian's voice, already in progress. "-don't know about the otters but we have all the animals that were having troubles before the reversal."

Becky felt one eyebrow rise, "And you know this how?"

"Because when we went back under, David and I woke up there."

Becky wanted to release the sigh she was holding back, but years of southern manners forced her to retain it. "Of course you did, otherwise how would you have figured that out? I bet David fell

down the steps there, too, but what about-”

Becky gasped as the air was forced out of her by way of a merciless hug from Jillian. She had blinked and missed seeing it coming - only suffered the feeling of having the wind knocked out of her.

But Jillian didn't apologize; she shined. “You are so much smarter than the boys. Even after I explained the whole thing, they still didn't believe me!”

Becky shoved aside the sinking feeling that Jillian was serious, and ignored the dance of joy. “The boys?”

“Jordan. Landerly. David's there now.” Jillian had answered straight up, but her brain wasn't engaged with Becky. It was on its own track and further into the conversation than Becky was. And for a brief moment she wondered how Jillian could do that.

But because it was Jillian, who would take the conversation and run, Becky pushed through another round of thoughts and tried to give credence to the theories. “If all the animals that were abnormal before the reversal survived both here and there, then maybe they were reacting to it. Preparing in some way.” Jillian nodded, and Becky dove in with her objection. “But where did you get your list? I don't know if anyone had as comprehensive a list as I do.”

Jillian's eyes twinkled again. “We have *your* list. . . . well, on the other side they do. We got it yesterday. Seems a kid talked her way through to getting Landerly's cell number and called him up posing as a biologist-”

“Melanie?!” Becky felt her whole body lean forward, and even as the name tumbled from her mouth, she knew she'd be devastated when Jillian said ‘no’.

But Jillian was nodding before the word was through. “She said she was Doctor Melanie Sorenson. Said she had your notebooks and that you would want the CDC to have them. That she'd found them in the house.”

“In the house?” Everything had made sense up until that.

“They came back a day or two ago, and yesterday afternoon Jordan and I drove out to get them.”

Becky's belly clenched. “Dr. Abellard? You two drove to my house? But I was there this morning!” She paused as it washed over her. She wouldn't see Melanie ever again. She wasn't going to slip into a coma and find the missing pieces of her family. “But I was *here*.”

Again Jillian nodded, her head looking like the little bobble dogs everyone had in the back windows of their cars, what with the incessant nodding and the grin. The funny image kept Becky's tears at bay. It helped that Jillian didn't see how she felt and just kept talking. “We met her and your hunky older brother Aaron. They came back and he decided they should stay.”

“Aaron.” The name rolled off her tongue in some sort of homage, but she was too mentally busy to figure it out. “Of course he's not here, he's a lawyer.”

Jillian almost cackled. “You know, it took me *hours* to convince Abellard and Landerly that people were sorted by their occupations. And they still didn't begin to get any of it until David woke up pissed off about being casted from hip to toe.” With a sad smile she changed the topic with no segue, but Becky followed her. “Melanie said she was going to go to that magnet school you suggested, that it didn't matter if she had to ride the short bus.”

With that the constriction in her chest expanded saturating every part of her. Creating pressure inside until it forced its way out in tears and sobs. But she didn't know what she cried for. Because she was happy they were alive. Or because, no matter where they were, they were still gone from *her* world.



David pushed through the blackness. Struggling to find light. And knowing even as he came around just what was happening. He was coming out again. And from the feel of his twitches and jerky, involuntary hand-squeezes and such, he wasn't broken up.

*Hal-a-fuckin'-loo-yah..*

The other side wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't bashed all to hell.

He laid there, eyes still closed and lacking the control necessary to open. He didn't push much. It never seemed to help anyway. The darkness would recede on its own terms.

So he waited it out, feeling the air pull into his lungs a little deeper each time. His breathing and heart rate sped up bit by bit, while his consciousness rolled around in his head, waiting to solidify.

"David?"

The tone came through sweet and clear.

*Jillian. "Are you coming around?"*

*No, honey, I thought it'd be best to hang out in the netherworld for a stretch.*

He felt rather than commanded the exasperated sigh that fled his lungs.

And, pure as bells, Jillian laughed from somewhere over him.

"Well, we don't have to worry about any impostors."

He would have smiled, but was caught off guard by a second female voice coming from behind her. *Sorenson. "With all the other problems we have, I'm glad we don't have that one."*

But Becky's sarcasm was brushed aside by the slightly southern lilt of Jillian, so close. "We're glad you made it back to us, David."

*Was there any question that he wouldn't?*

He cringed at the raw scrape in his throat. He could live without this wrenching process of waking up. Sound forced its way out of his mouth, but he didn't have much time to process it, because light shined in through the miniscule slits his eyelids had formed and it burned like a mother-fucker.

Another sound emanated from him, and he turned slightly, wincing as he went. But in a moment of clarity his consciousness congealed. *No pain.* No breaks. Here he was as good as new.

David let his breath out and blinked his eyes a few times even though they felt like they were filled with sand. Jillian's gentle hands grasped his shoulders and applied soft pressure to wake him up. *Hold off on the shaking, honey, I'm coming around.*

"He's coming around." Her voice was a little muffled, and within the light he could make out a long, dark chocolate streak - her ponytail. She was talking over her shoulder to Becky. But the streak swung out of the glare and her face moved in closer to fill his vision. Her eyes burning like aquamarines and becoming clearer with each moment. "We weren't sure when you'd come out."

He nodded slightly, and opened his mouth to speak, but Jillian beat him to the punch. "Your vitals were getting concerning until about an hour ago. You were dropping well into the low end of normal and we were debating a few measures. But you're here now."

"You, too." He wasn't sure why those words were the ones that came out of his cotton-filled mouth. And from her frown neither was she. But he licked his lips and worked his tongue for a moment before he explained. "Abellard put you on an IV. . . . for low heart rate. Something about your volume."

She nodded, absorbing and understanding what he relayed, even though he didn't. "My blood volume. Goes with low blood pressure. Over there?"

He nodded. Then with a few deep breaths he gathered the energy to prop himself on his elbows. He ignored Becky and Jillian while he sat up, piece by piece. They didn't seem to take much notice of him until he was fully upright and rotating his ankles and knees, the sensation of stretching muscles flowing through him in the sweetest of ways. This beat the hell out of living in casts and popping Percocet.

He wanted to get out and walk around. Hell, he'd have turned cartwheels if he could have. Well, maybe if it wasn't so gay.

"Hey, cowboy," Jillian's grasp wrapped around his upper arms and held him on the gurney, "don't go anywhere without a little help."

He thought about waking up with the searing pain in his shoulder and hip, and that, over there, he never got out of bed at all. "Well, I only have half the practice at it that you do."

"Touché." She had the grace to wince.

With a sigh of acceptance he let Becky and Jillian brace him on either side, and he actually enjoyed the sharp pains that shot up his legs when his feet hit the ground. He looked at the small women trying to hold him upright with Lilliputian efforts. Men might have done a better job, cushioned his landing a little more, but right now neither woman seemed to notice that she was plastered, full-length, down his side. David noticed. And smiled.

"I'm hungry."

They both looked up at him. Maybe wondering why such normal words had fallen out of his mouth in such an absurd situation.

Becky shook her head, and he could feel the movement where her chest was smushed against him, just under his ribcage. "I forget how fast you two come around once you do wake."

David stifled a perverted smile as Jillian shrugged and the movement drew her breast against him. She explained, "Once you come around, it's just like any other day. . . except the part where you're crazy."

David actually laughed at that. He didn't care to imagine the way that Abellard and Landerly must have grilled her. They had given him hell and they hardly knew him.

Her voice cut into his thoughts again. "So, let's head over to the cafeteria." She tugged on his arm, and he realized that even together, they couldn't budge him.

"No." He extricated himself from their grasp. "What I want is to drive my new Mercedes and go out somewhere and have someone cook me a nice big steak."

"That sounds heavenly."

They almost started drooling and he had a momentary vision of a bubbling hot tub, with the drooling faces inserted. Except he had once had Jillian in a bikini in a hot tub, and there had even been beer, and . . . nothing.

Becky's voice chimed in, "I'm game. But where would we get a steak now?"

Still they proceeded with full hope that it was possible, the women shrugging into their jackets and Jillian tossing him his brown suede bomber after her hands were through her own sleeves. They filed out the tent flap, his fingers encircling the ring of keys in his pocket. A brief burst of relief settling into him that they were really there. That he had actually bought the car. Here.

He pulled the keys out, letting the short frigid gust of wind steal heat from his fingers. But he didn't care. Looking up to see how far the chattering women had gotten ahead of him, he stopped dead.

*No way in hell.*

But it was.

In the flesh.

“David.” The old man spoke through thin lips. His hair whiter and wisper than the last time they had seen each other. His chest a little more of a barrel, but in general he seemed the same. Certainly in great shape for a man of sixty-nine. And David knew, with the certainty that he knew himself, that if the weight was there, then the old man simply hadn’t been able to get it off. “Dad.”

His right hand shot out, years of reflex and training, and grasped the slightly wizened version that met it.

“How long has it been?” His father’s voice was cultured and smooth. Of course. Naturally, everything about him spoke of wealth and power, just the way he planned. And David felt the added pressure of another disadvantage: David Carter The First also hadn’t just awoken from a coma.

*God, he hadn’t even thought to check the lists to see if his old man was alive over here.* And here he was - in Tennessee of all places.

David’s chest settled into lead. *He came to see me.* He gathered himself and answered his father’s question. “Two years.”

“Too long.”

*Not long enough.* But he mustered a weak smile.

Jillian and Becky stood in the background of the portrait his father made, behind the space the old man commanded. He wished they would go back to their female chatter, and stop watching this drama unfold, because David knew what happened every time he and the old man talked.

Damn, he had really thought he was done with the man when his name had turned up on the lists. But that was *there*. It would be best to just get it over with. “What are you doing here, Dad?”

He felt his body shrink back to adolescence, his maturity level drop several notches. And things he had carefully shoved to the back of his life begin a steady seep into the here and now.

“I came to see my son.” He gestured with the brilliant mahogany cane David had only just realized he was carrying. “I hear you’re the wizard who discovered all this.”

Where the hell was the old man going? David waited for the knife to come out, the other shoe to drop. But he only nodded. Knowing, even as he did it, that Jillian and Becky were standing right there listening, and that they deserved their due. But he couldn’t bring himself to give it, not when The First stood in front of him.

“Very impressive.”

David heard, but didn’t believe, the praise. Years of experience had taught him that the better the complement was, the harder the knife came from behind. So he waited, and the old man spoke again. “Did you use my hotspot theories?”

*Ah, the joy of honesty.* “I used a few. But in the end they didn’t pan out.” Again he fronted what he hoped looked like a genuine smile, and promptly changed the subject. “Dad, I’d like you to meet Dr. Jillian Brookwood and I believe you’ve met Dr. Rebecca Sorenson several years ago. They’re both with the CDC.”

Jillian nodded, of course she had already figured it out. His father scanned the two women, keeping his smile in place. But David knew. Dad wore a full business suit, and a small tic of the muscle along his jaw revealed what he thought of Jillian’s scrubs and sneakers, and worse yet, Becky’s faded old jeans and hiking boots. But his father just nodded in return, and acknowledged the two women in a polite way. Only David knew that it was less than his usual greeting. The one he reserved for esteemed colleagues and ornament women.

The invitation he extended was with his usual graciousness. “I was wondering if you would do me the honor of joining me for dinner.”

David felt both stares swing his way. He warred between being grateful that the females deferred to him in front of his father, and frustrated knowing there was no polite way out.

Before he could answer, his father stepped up to the plate and steered the conversation. “I have my limo waiting.”

*Great.* He felt his insides congeal and sink. Becky’s jaw dropped open and Jillian tried to hide the lift of her eyebrows but didn’t quite swing it.

David conceded defeat, a position he was used to when The First was around. And his father smiled, a big genuine grin that ate at David. Was it because he was happy that people would join him for dinner, or because he had succeeded in manipulating the situation?

The driver stepped over, decked in his full black suit, and held the door while Becky and Jillian slid in the back. They resembled puppies running loose in a mansion - young, out of place, and oblivious to all of it. He followed his father into the tight black confines of the car, wondering how the hell this had happened.

The earth had undergone a radical transformation. Over half the population had died. People were still trying to just get their lives back on track, to get institutions up and running. And his father had found a limousine, complete with a monkey-suited driver.

The voice, so like his own, broke through his thoughts. “Now, do you have a preference for dinner?”

Jillian and David looked to Becky, who shrugged as if to say, ‘I don’t live here either’. But her mouth opened and she spoke the words. “We were thinking about steak, but I’ll be honest, we have no idea where to get one right now.”

David bit down on the end of his tongue, wondering what his father would say. But the old man reached across the space between them, his hand clapping his son on the back. And for a brief moment David thanked the fates that his father had found him in this world and not the other one, that he hadn’t been forced to have this conversation from a gurney, behind the safety of the babyrail. “I’m staying at the Garden Plaza Hotel.”

“It’s open?” Becky’s voice cut the air with her shock. “The convenience store is still on the honor system. There are a few fast-food joints that are up and running, but-”

David watched while his father nodded at the plebes, unsurprised by their lack of understanding. The First always lived as though money could buy anything. “I had them open it. The driver will have called ahead to tell them how many to expect.”

The old embarrassment crept over him. He had been raised this way, but for whatever reason, it hadn’t stuck. His father considered it a huge shortcoming. And David was appalled that his father believed the world came running with the wave of a few bills. It was worse when The First believed that his son should, too.

He saw Becky and Jillian exchange glances. But whether it was awe over his father’s abilities, or a good moral sense that disliked the buying and selling of everything, he didn’t know.

It was clear that The First was through with their shock and he simply turned to David. “That was some very impressive work you did, son.” His father’s eyes caught his. The complement seemed genuine. “All the universities will be trying to grab you for next term.”

His father actually seemed proud - like he was glad The Second was his son. He never really had been before. There had been moments like this where it had felt like the rift was closing, not healing,

but getting narrower. And always before, David had reached out. Always before, when he had pulled his hand back it was bloody.

Still, he wondered.

• • • •

JORDAN STARED AT THE inert form as he felt his chest caving in on itself.

Jillian lay still and quiet, spread across the gurney in front of him. At a perpendicular was David. They had watched him slip away about ten hours ago. The geologist's vital signs were dropping slowly but surely.

But it was Jillian who had already sunk into dangerously low numbers.

She was the one that worried him.

Jordan couldn't say he'd feel anything but professional failure if David completely slipped away. But if Jillian did . . . he didn't even want to examine that too closely.

They had initially covered her with a blanket, in a feeble attempt to retain some of the body heat she was so rapidly depleting. A few hours ago he had added an electric blanket, heating her from the outside. He and Landerly had made the call to run an IV into her just after David had slipped away.

But she'd been under now for sixteen hours.

A long time.

Her vitals were lower than he had ever seen them. And still slipping lower. The electric blanket made up for some of the cold leached into her system by the IV fluid. Her core temperature was ninety-seven - low, but close. He began tucking the blanket around her, under her feet, along her side. She made no response.

Not that he had thought she would. But he did keep hoping.

With a last look, he turned his ministrations to David, noting with professional detachment that his temperature was stable and very close to normal. Jordan pulled the hospital issue blanket up just under David's chin after taking a full round of vital signs and recording them in the chart left open on the desk at his side.

With a glance at Jillian, Jordan reached down and calmly turned up the space heater. He told himself that it was chilly in the tent, that any additional help maintaining her body temperature would be welcome. But there was nothing else he could do. Techs were looking in on the pair every five minutes. And her vitals signs were ebbing away in a flow that was too slow to actually watch.

He wandered to the cafeteria and ate a dinner he couldn't remember ten seconds after he swallowed the last bite, staring straight ahead the whole while.

*Where was Jillian?* If her theory was right, then she was somewhere with Becky and now David, too. And if there were two separate realms on top of each other, maybe she was here, in the cafeteria. His eyes darted from one spot to another. Thinking he might catch a shadow of Jillian, or, just maybe, see through to where she was.

He didn't want to believe it. Coma was a medical mystery of sorts. Unlike near-death-experience, it was believed and quantifiable, but with no true underlying explanation. No solid evidence about what happened to patients' conscious minds while they were under.

A black composition book sat unopened on the table beside him, and all around him real shadows existed, cast by other team members. They talked and waved like a hurricane around the silent eye, but they didn't interact with him, these stragglers last CDC scientists.

The tent town was still up in its entirety, but in the past day or two the population had thinned out as the scientists had returned to jobs and families. There was even talk of needing to re-open the



high-school.

His watch showed that he had been sitting there, eating his forgettable food, for nearly an hour. He'd been lost in the blank walls of the cafeteria, looking for Jillian, when according to her, the other side was just as populated as here. There would be shadows and hints of people everywhere if he could see them.

He turned to make his way back out into the cold night, through small but vicious gusts of wind, that wouldn't register with him at any level other than the most cursory. And he would begin again - go through his whole routine, checking on Jillian.

She looked exactly as she had when he left her. But when he counted, her heart rate was another beat per minute slower. She was another breath per minute slower, too. And that was very significant given the low rate she was already at.

He wandered off to get Landerly. "Her resps are slowing." He spewed it out as he pushed through the tent flaps, any 'hello' a wasted formality on the old scientist.

"We shouldn't interfere until she's in serious danger. We'll go back in an hour."

Jordan felt his heart clench. The old man had simply brushed it off. But then again, he was an MD, too. He knew his numbers and had seen far more than anyone's fair share of medical mysteries. So Jordan forced himself to sit. Then to open the notebook and pretend to do . . . something like working.

He felt Landerly's eyes on him before he heard the voice. "So what do you think of our girl's theory?"

Jordan shrugged. "She believes it."

Landerly nodded. "That puts a lot of weight behind it for you."

It wasn't a question, so Jordan decided to neither acknowledge nor refute it. "She has all the right information. And I don't know how she could have gotten it any other way. Nor how she could have gotten such perfect corroboration from David . . ."

Again Landerly nodded. "Let's work from the assumption that she's right. How does this second earth work? Where is it?"

He almost laughed. That was exactly what had been ricocheting around his brain since Jillian had slipped under. The only thing that occupied his thoughts except Jillian's status. "It's right here. It's the same earth you and I are on."

"Then why don't we see them? Where are they?"

His brain focused. God bless the old man for the distraction. "It's like x-rays. It passes right through and we don't detect it."

Landerly scrunched his face.

So he continued. "There's more space between atoms than the atoms themselves take up." He tapped his hand on the table. "My flesh doesn't go through the table, not because there's too much *stuff* but because they vibrate in the same range. That means they bump into each other. Higher and lower vibrations pass through us. Like UV light. It's borderline, and it gets through the top layer of our skin. So if something was much higher or much lower, it wouldn't even be in our range. We'd pass right through it and never know it was there. Like x-rays.

"If we follow Jillian's theory, then at some point while everyone was under, the vibrations could have shifted into two distinct bands. And some people stayed with one and some with the other. Jason found that shift in the UV-vis scale. Jillian put a lot of stock in that. She's probably running a panel on the other side right now." Landerly didn't say anything, so after a few seconds Jordan continued, just to fill the empty space. "It might explain some of the shifting. In fact, that shifting may

be why everyone got sick in the first place. We just didn't hold up well in the Earth's splitting vibrational level."

Landerly pondered it. Jordan could see it on his face. And saw that he, too, had found holes or gaps in the theory. It wasn't a perfect theory, but as usual, Jordan was stuck waiting for a better one to come along. Certainly Miss Jillian could come up with something.

Landerly tapped his thin lips with his pencil. "So how did it get decided who wound up on which side?"

"Jillian says there's a job description bias."

Landerly shrugged. "She's right. They've got most all the cops, we've got the lawyers. They've got preachers and we've got teachers. We got the CIA almost to a man. Now that's creepy."

Jordan almost laughed. But it *was* creepy. "Surely there's no God sitting up there saying 'lawyers this way, cops that way'. What I can't figure out is how it ended up that way. Geography would have made more sense, especially given that the root of the problem is a geological phenomenon."

"There is some geographical bias." Landerly leaned forward, the fact that he moved from his standard, laid back, steepled-fingers position indicated that he was interested in the topic. Very interested.

"Like what?"

"It's not obvious, but it is statistically significant. We have more Californians, less southerners, more east coast, less bread basket." He dragged a pencil across the map he had flipped open as he spoke.

"But there are greater and lesser populations in those areas. It just matches with the census."

Landerly shook his head, and Jordan knew he'd been chastised, "Beyond that. Based on percentage of the population those areas are higher and lower."

"Oh." Of course Landerly hadn't missed an obvious point like that. Jordan and Jillian had been hired to be the man's field hands - not his brain. "Maybe there's a meteorological factor, like humidity or cloud cover."

There was never a response to his idea. The older man simply bent back to his work, flipping pages, making spreadsheets with data from the deceased lists and survivor lists, adding in colored bands with Jillian's info.

It wasn't long before the requisite hour had passed, and Jordan popped up to check on Jillian.

He was back within a heartbeat. "She's too low."

He reported the fact to Landerly, but he didn't ask anything. He simply left, running through the tents, asking everyone where he could find a ventilator, wondering why he hadn't been better prepared when he had seen this coming. Maybe because he hadn't wanted to believe.

He called the hospital, who said they couldn't spare one. So he yelled until he was hoarse and a ventilator was on its way. Luckily the small local hospital was barely across the street. Within twenty minutes the techs were wheeling the thing his way, bumping it across the chewed up grass, while Jordan cringed, wondering if it would still function by the time it reached her.

He pulled her gurney out so he could stand at the head, and lowered her a notch, then drew a deep breath before beginning the process of intubating her. He was far more stressed than usual. Jordan had done a hundred intubations, but this one *counted*. As he finished and let out a shaky breath, the techs hooked up the machine and her lungs started expanding with the forced air at her normal eighteen respirations per minute.

The tent cleared out, leaving him alone with the two patients, and he wanted to feel relief. But he was closer to crying when Landerly showed up. “I figured you’d do it sooner or later.”

Shock sent him staggering back a step. “You wouldn’t have done it?”

A deep sigh, holding untold decisions, preceded the remark. “I don’t know. I only knew that I didn’t have to, that you would make that decision. I might still let her go.” He shrugged, old bony shoulders making points beneath his white jacket.

“Why?!” Fury raged through him alongside the despair he had felt at his father’s bedside. But this was worse. This time he felt he *should* be in control. He just wasn’t.

“I-”

But he cut Landerly off. “Why did you hire me anyway? I thought I was this brilliant scientist and she would do all the nitpicky stuff. Then I realized *she’s* the brilliant scientist *and* the perfectionist. So why the hell am I even here!?” God, he should have been in a pediatric office. He could have made a difference there.

Here, what had he done? Tagged along behind Jillian. Nodded acquiescence to her ideas. Charted her theories.

His breath rushed out, his volume shrinking.

But Landerly’s voice caught him. There was a smile in it. “I thought you would have figured that out by now.”

But Jordan only shook his head, pacing a small section of the grass while his eyes darted everywhere revealing the scattering of his thoughts.

This time it was Landerly who filled the space, compelled to talk to cover the harsh mechanical rhythm of the ventilator. “There were other doctors who were individually more qualified than either of you. More experience, et cetera.”

*Not helpful, old man.*

“But I put you two together thinking you would be the best team.”

“But Jillian is just like you. Why would you need me?”

Jordan’s gaze went to the upper corners of the tent, the glazed focus an attempt to fight off the waves of emptiness. His fists perched on his hips, as though he might physically fend something off. So he was surprised when he felt the weight of Landerly’s arm across his shoulder, the paternal gesture so out of character. “Jordan, Jillian is not just like me. She’s smarter than I ever was or ever will be. I think she thinks in the same kinds of patterns, but she’s faster and better at it than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Jordan nodded agreement, thinking that the one thing he wanted to know still wasn’t answered.

“And you, son, are a fool if you don’t see it.”

*Well, then, I guess I’m the fool.* But he didn’t say it out loud. Just waited while the ventilator clicked and grated its way through another two mechanical breaths.

“You’re the heart. Jillian couldn’t be what she is without you. I know *you* got those people in Florida talking. I’ll bet you’re the only reason that we have any data from Nevada that isn’t just a jumble of numbers. I’ll bet you’ve even listened to her think, then turned around and managed to interview everyone to find out if she was right or not. Jesus, five minutes into your interview you had me telling you things about my family and lifestyle that people who worked with me for years don’t know.”

Defeat. That’s what was sagging in him. But he answered the absurd ideas Landerly laid out. “Sure, but anybody could do that. There’s no effort or special skill, I just-“

“No, anybody can’t. *I* can’t. *Jillian* can’t. Most good physicians can’t. There must be special talent or someone as smart as Jillian would have figured out how to do it. Or at least fake it. And I’ll tell you something else, if you asked Jillian how she does what she does, she’d tell you the same thing: she just does it. It’s just the way her brain works.”

That much was true. Jillian brushed off her gift as though it wasn’t exceptional or unique.

Jordan pulled in a few sighs, finding it difficult to let his body just breathe when he was faced with the fact that Jillian just wasn’t.

So he changed the topic, found a way to get out of the tent, if only for a few minutes. He probably would be compelled to come back after that long anyway. “Speaking of Jillian’s brain, I want to hook her up to that EEG.”

Landerly nodded, before slowly and painfully making his way out of the tent. Jordan followed, his gait a shuffling mimic of the old man in front of him. In a moment he returned with the EEG set-up, thinking he should have brought two back and hooked David up as well. But it wasn’t like he was busy for the next ten hours or anything.

The gurney was still pulled out, so he stood at the head of the bed, where he didn’t have to look at her motionless face. With gentle hands, he brushed her hair aside and placed the probes one after another in the appropriate spots. But as much as he wished it, there was no response from her.

So he stepped back and flipped the switch, watching as the green lines crawled across the screen. To anyone else, they could have been anything. Lie detectors, seismographs, heart beats. But he knew what he was seeing, and he stared. For how long, he didn’t know.

The rustle of a person coming through the tent flap finally roused him back to himself. And while he hadn’t been really ‘in there’, his brain had catalogued every passing line. He knew them all and he knew what they meant.

Landerly’s voice cut through his thoughts. “Well?”

“She’s almost brain dead.”



Jillian had been shivering beneath the covers of the gurney in tent 43, and finally it was getting warm. Becky, of course, had simply crawled under the blanket on the bed next to her and sunk into sleeping oblivion without a second thought.

For Jillian it wasn't so easy. Alone now with her thoughts, she was unable to find rest. The shifting plagued her. She had looked for answers for most of the day. Checking out that UV-vis problem that Jordan had brushed aside. And sure enough the scale was way low here. And getting lower.

That was concerning. She had checked out the machine earlier in the day and then come back later with another sample. The machine had been just a little off, and she'd had to recalibrate.

But if that was due to anything other than her own error, that could mean the vibrations were moving further apart. The earth wasn't finished separating, it still had further to go. And where would she get stuck?

When she admitted it to herself, the insomnia was a physical manifestation of her fear - of not knowing where she would wake up, or with whom.

She was the reason Becky had insisted they stay together. Even going so far as to sleep alongside each other on the plastic coated and damned uncomfortable gurneys. So Becky would know on waking if Jillian had gone under again during the night.

Not at this rate she wouldn't.

Becky had also insisted that David sleep in the tent next door and had drawn up a schedule for the techs on the night shift to check in every hour. It seemed like they were gremlins, breaking the seal that the tent flap had made against the light. Just as she would feel she was finally drifting off, resting, the light would shine right into her eyes.

She had asked – begged - them to stop checking. Even if she went under what could they do except say 'look, there she went'? But none of them would agree to leave her be. The second check had come just minutes ago, kickstarting her brain when it had finally begun to fall silent again.

She knew they were checking on David as well, although there was every possibility that he had managed to sleep like a baby. He seemed to be able to just turn himself off and on. But then again, maybe he wasn't doing so well tonight. He was facing bruised and broken ribs, fractures and learning to walk again on the other side. He'd rather wake up here.

And he'd been agitated all evening. While she could quantify it, Jillian was hard pressed to name the source. Even though the steak dinner had been great and his father had been nothing but proud. Once she added that thought in, she would bet her life savings that he wasn't sleeping either.

Jillian tucked that thought back under her bonnet as well. At dinner she'd said something about hating that Landerly didn't believe her, and the server had leaned over and quoted the Bible to her - warning her that her hateful thoughts went against the teachings of Jesus.

Becky hadn't said anything, she'd been familiar with the parable the woman had named, but David had commented on the high quantity of Jesus and God he'd seen around. More than one group thought they'd ascended. Jillian was just waiting for them to don their identical Nikes and drink the Kool-aid that would get them to the mothership. The way she figured it, Darwinian selection wasn't just about predators selecting you out of the herd. Self-selection was as good as any, and darn cheap in light of societal costs.

“Pssst.”

*Had someone just said 'pssst'? No way, no one said that!* She ignored the sound.

But it came again. This time accompanied by a crack of light at the tent flap and a “Jillian, you awake?”

Even whispered, she recognized the voice. “Coming, David.”

Part of her didn't want to wake Becky, the other part of her wanted to do it just to disturb the peaceful sleep she was so jealous of. But she slipped softly into her sneakers, and pulled on her jacket, before passing quietly through the tent flap to where David waited, rubbing his hands together for warmth.

“Couldn't sleep?” They both said it at the same time, then laughed, until they remembered to curb it. Aside from a few night shift techs, everyone else was asleep.

David grabbed her hand, and she was grateful that he'd kept his warm. “I was thinking we might take a walk to wear ourselves out, but it's really too cold.” She nodded agreement, and didn't protest as he pulled her along to his tent, where he popped on the interior light at the end of the table.

She blinked a few times, then adjusted. Finally upright, and admitting she was awake, she could feel the exhaustion in her muscles. “So, we'll just sit up and keep each other company until we finally pass out?”

“That's my guess.” He shrugged, “I don't want to go back. I'm bashed to hell over there.”

She climbed up on the gurney, getting her feet out of the cold that pooled on the floors of the small tents, “But with physical therapy-”

He cut her off. “I've had three doctors over there tell me that I'm facing at least a year of rehab. And another surgery to re-break both my hip and leg so they can be re-set.”

Jillian cringed, but he waved her discomfort and guilt away.

“You did an amazing job. All by yourself. But I may never walk without a limp. And that's after all that therapy. Why do it?”

She nodded, understanding straightforward reasoning for a problem that was anything but. “And your Dad's here.”

“Yeah, I don't know what to make of that.”

She felt her head tilt, the outward manifestation of her natural curiosity.

“We've never gotten along. He never accepted me; I was always inferior . . .”

“But he was nothing but complimentary tonight. You're the best son in the whole world.” She didn't mean for it to come out as sarcastic as it did, but David understood. He laughed.

“Yeah, that worries me.” She could hear the resignation in his sigh, “We've been so far apart for so long that . . . I don't know.”

“Do you want to patch things up with your Dad?”

His shoulders shrugged. His head shook ‘no’. His mouth said “I guess.” And his hands came out, palm up, to question all of it.

It was all she could do to stifle the laugh that bubbled low in her. And she was grateful for the lightness of it. It beat the hell out of the fear she'd been trying to sleep with. She was only sorry that her improvement had come at David's expense. “Oh well. True, your Dad is here, but so are the Jesus freaks. And it's not like there's much you can do about it anyway.”

His head turned square on to hers, and their gazes locked. “So doctor, tell me what you think is going to happen to us.”

Just like that, it was her turn to shrug, to shake her head. “Our vital signs keep dropping lower and lower every time we go under.”

“Abellard said something to that effect when he looked in on you right before I popped over here.”

Good. She knew where she’d wake up if she came to over there. “I figure we keep passing back and forth until we die on one side, then we’ll be stuck on the other.”

David didn’t respond. How could he when she had just placed their mortality squarely in front of them? Her voice was low, in response to the difficulty she was having pushing it out. “With the way our stats have been dropping recently, I don’t figure we’ll go back and forth too much more. Maybe two times. Three or four at the most.”

He nodded. “Do you think we’ll feel it? Or we’ll never know, just realize that we keep waking up in the same place over and over?”

Again her head shook. It was the only thing she could think of. She couldn’t just shrug a response to every question. But the same ones had been tumbling through her own head all evening. “There’s another possibility.”

“Name it.”

“It’s worse.” She couldn’t look at him. Instead she studied the neat, even stitching on her once white sneakers, noting how the dirt had clung, clearly outlining the threads as they marched in efficient lines across her toes. “We could get caught between. Die both places.” Again her shoulders went up, and she suppressed the thought that she would get some really buff deltoids from all this shrugging. “We have to acknowledge that we might not survive this at all.”

Still she didn’t look at him, just waited through a few well-placed breaths until he spoke. “Any ideas why we got caught between?”

She laughed, a short bark of disbelief. “I still can’t figure out why people ended up on one side and not the other. There are a lot of Bible thumpers over here . . . but . . .”

“I think Becky had a good point that there was a lot of right and wrong over here. The Bible thumpers just seem to fall into that category.”

Her brain wrapped around that for a moment, wondering whether there were a lot of shades of gray on Jordan’s side.

In that moment, as she drew that breath in, she knew that this wasn’t the place for her. That if she could choose, she’d be *there*. With her job. With Jordan and Landerly. The way David would chose to be with his family here. But she couldn’t choose, so she ignored the thought, and started herself in another direction in hopes of shaking it. “I figure we got caught in between because of some weird pattern of early exposure. But I can’t figure out why Becky or Jordan or anyone from McCann doesn’t have it, too. Jordan says there are reports from about three other places in the world. Each with one person who keeps going back under.”

“Have any of them actually died yet?”

She knew he was looking at her, but she wasn’t ready for eye contact. “Not that I know of. But I haven’t seen Jordan in a full day now.” Maybe it would have been easier to stay in her own bed and toss and turn with her own thoughts rather than dealing with David’s.

“What if there were another option? What if you could choose?”

Her head snapped up, to find his blue gaze boring into hers. For some reason she felt he saw deeper than the surface of her for the first time.

He broke the spell by speaking. “It works because we want to stay on opposite sides.”

That was all he said, but she could see where he was going with it. “No.” It was just a whisper. She couldn’t do it. “We don’t even know that it will work.” Fear ran through her, icing her limbs,



holding her still when what she wanted was to leap from the bed and flee back to the cold gurney waiting in tent 43.

“We may die if we do nothing.”

“I can’t!” She started to actually move away from him, but his hand shot out, grabbed her arm, jerked at her as her feet hit the ground, preventing her flight from progressing past that first leap.

“Then you go back and forth. But do it for me when you wake up over there.”

“I can’t.” The anguish in her system burst forth in tears, “I can’t.”

He wanted her to . . . what? . . . hold a pillow over his face? Squeeze his throat? Medicate him? Any way to end his life. Over there.

“Then hire someone.” He hadn’t let go of her arm, and while he wasn’t bruising her, neither was she going to wrench free. “I’ll give you all my banking codes. You can draft yourself a check from my account and pay them.”

“David . . .” She searched for any logical ‘no’. “I’d go to jail.”

His gaze was steady, and should have been ice cold for what he was suggesting, but it was warm as the blue center of a hot flame. “I can get the names of some people from my Dad, it won’t be traced. You can just give them the banking codes. Let them get their own money. I’ll be very rich over there because my father has died and I’ll have more than I can spend.”

She couldn’t fault his logic. But neither could she agree.

Her head still shook back and forth. He slid off the bed, and stood looming over her, holding her upper arms firmly in both hands. Only then did she realize that streams of tears were pouring down her face. She couldn’t do any of it. Not go back and forth anymore, nor could she end it. He looked her square in the eyes and asked again, “Please.”

Again she shook her head, and started to refuse again, but he headed her off.

“What are you going to do? Go back and forth and maybe die? Wind up wherever you happen to be? Maybe in between, and who knows what the hell that is! I can release you over here, too . . . and stop this.”

She heard the soft ripping of the Velcro on the tent flap behind her. A tech popped his head in, and she saw David’s gaze connect over her shoulder with whoever it was. “I guess you two are both still awake.”

David simply nodded and started to look back at her, a certain dismissal of the young tech, but the voice came again, “Are you two okay?”

Her nod and David’s curt ‘yes’ must have sufficed, because the tent flap softly closed behind her, and the heat from the small orange-glowing heater at her feet seeped around to envelop her again, shutting out the cold that had reached in and tickled her from the open gap.

David’s stare returned to her face. “I don’t want to go back there. I live there on a gurney in a haze of pain and Percocet-”

“You’ll get better!”

“I *am* better. Here.” He was restraining himself from shaking her. But it wouldn’t have mattered. She could feel her heart thundering in the empty cavern of her chest. But she forced even breaths, afraid that if she passed out, she’d only shuttle herself back and forth again. Her eyes burned. Her mouth was swollen from where she’d been chewing at her lip, and her vision was glazed with tears.

“It’s simple. And it’s what we both want.”

She didn’t try to respond. She couldn’t have anyway, his mouth closed over hers, stopping all her protests.

Jillian simply surrendered. She needed this. Needed to feel his hands slip from her biceps to the back of her shoulders and pull her closer. His sweater was softer than she could have believed when her fingers passed over it, feeling the hard muscle beneath. She didn't even stop and make any quantifiable assessment of him. Just kissed him back.

She didn't protest as his fingers, tough and soft at the same time, pushed the tears away. "David . . ."

He pulled away just long enough to get her to open her eyes. And when she did he shook his head. So she closed them again, and raised her mouth, never once wondering if his would meet hers.

Jillian didn't realize when he had backed them the two steps to the gurney, only that he had followed her shoulder blades down her back, arching her body into contact with his, and finally arriving behind her thighs, where he lifted her astride him into the heat of him, and the unmistakable arousal.

He took one sharp look at her eyes. He knew what he was doing, and he wanted to know if she did. His hand snaked out to shut off the desk light that was now glaring in his face. With a blink they were bathed in the soft orange glow of the heater and the deep shadows that filled the spaces.

Later she remained there, naked in his arms, untied from her existence, until the pieces started gathering and settling back into place. There were no sweet words. She wouldn't have believed them anyway. Didn't have any of her own to speak in return even if he lied and said it. There was just the sound of two bodies, breathing heavily out of rhythm in the blackness of the tent.

He pulled the blankets over the both of them. Letting her drift with her own wayward thoughts while he settled in, his arms locked around her.

They hadn't used any sort of protection.

But it seeped slowly through her, not causing any real alarm. She wouldn't likely live long enough to be concerned about that. Her muscles were limp, and the darkness was saturating her thoughts. And she was grateful that she was finally going to get some sleep. Grateful that the pull of sleep was deeper than usual, not just because she was sated.

Because she knew she'd wake up on the other side.

His voice murmured to her while she sank away. But she made out the words. "I'm staying awake, Jillian. You go. And when you get there you can keep me here."

She couldn't gather the thoughts to fight him, nor the muscle to protest. Couldn't even really remember what her objections were. It was a simple solution to a simple problem, based on her own logical theories.

"Do you want me to leave you there?" His breath was humid against her cheek, letting her know how close he was. But she was too far gone to gather an answer.

She thought she said 'yes'.

• • • •

JORDAN FELT LANDERLY'S shoulder beside him. He didn't know if the older doctor was aware that they were touching or not. If maybe he was leaning for a little physical support, or if it was because they had been staring at Jillian's stats for too long now. Listening only to the machinery and the sounds of crickets beyond the tent. Looking at the lines on the computers that tracked her progress, or lack thereof, while the artificial light held the dark and the night at bay. Unable to make a decision about the lifeless looking body that Landerly had started referring to as 'Our girl' when he wasn't talking directly to her.

Jillian's hair was neat, untangled and lying behind her on the sheet. She was in blue scrubs. Jordan had talked a few of the techs out of changing her into a gown. The gowns were demeaning no matter who you were, but she was their superior, she was a doctor. She deserved the scrubs.

She was pale, beyond pale. She didn't look dead. Thank god. The oxygen that the machinery was forcing into her system kept her skin tone within the range of the living, if not exactly healthy-looking.

For a moment Jordan allowed the morbid thought that the mortuary make-up person wouldn't have to do a lot of work on her. But he squashed it as soon as it arose. They wouldn't have to do *any* makeup on her. He couldn't let it get that far.

Landerly shifted, finally bearing all of his own weight, or supporting himself on the cane so that he didn't lean on Jordan anymore. That probably signaled a decision.

"Our girl hasn't sparked a sign in hours. Her EEG looks almost brain dead. There's no real activity."

It was just a statement of fact, not a manifesto to unplug her, but Jordan reacted as though it was. "So? She *isn't* brain dead. Not quite. And we don't know anything about this. We can't make this decision. There's no precedence . . ."

"True."

Jordan felt the tension ease, seeping slowly from his system.

"But that doesn't mean we can justify the machinery, the cost, all of it. We may need to let her die."

The taught wire feeling returned, instantly solidifying in him. He had barely held back his protests about Landerly treating Jilly like a cost-benefit analysis. He shook now with the strain. "I know you care about her, so how can you think that? How can you say we should 'let her die'?"

"Because I do care about her. Because I see her as a person and not as . . . well, I don't have the feelings for her that you have."

Jordan finally admitted it to himself. His father had seen it, had even asked him point blank. And if Landerly saw it too . . . well, the only person less observant to human feelings than Landerly was Jillian.

And for a moment Jordan cursed her. If she could have looked at him and seen it, then she could have responded. Whatever her answer may have been. That she was crazy about him. That she lusted after him. Or maybe felt pity for him because he'd fallen in love with her and she didn't feel anything in return. At least he would have known.

Instead he had this - this unholy clinging to another person. She wasn't responding to anything that went on around her, much less his feelings. And he had to admit, in light of what was happening to her, his emotions were small potatoes.

"She's too low. Are you going to take her off?" The voice came from behind him somewhere and he didn't recognize it. And that was probably a good thing. He held himself back from smashing in the face of the tech who had walked in and made the remark about ending Jilly's life as casually as if he'd been updating them on baseball scores.

"No." He pushed it out through clenched teeth, turning to face the tech for a brief moment, hoping his expression meant that he was not to be asked again.

"Sorry," The young man was tall and skinny, just gaining some peach fuzz, and he began backing away. "I didn't realize . . ."

Jordan managed a nod. This was probably a high school kid who was volunteering and getting training. Jordan remembered how green he'd been back then. It had been easy for him, and

interesting. And he remembered the first time he'd been scolded for saying how neat something was when a patient was suffering. He'd paid attention. Maybe this kid would, too.

“Well, are you?” Landerly's voice broke the roar of thoughts running through his head.

“No.” He didn't look at the numbers. Didn't read the printouts. Didn't listen to the beeping of the heart monitor, as it slowly lost some of the steadiness that was the hallmark of a stable heart. And he didn't look because he knew what it would say.

If it had been anyone else, he would have turned it all off. He probably would have turned it off hours ago. It wasn't that she'd been gone for so long, it was that she was entirely sustained by machines. And he knew she didn't want that.



*Jillian might not want to be sustained by machines, Jordan thought, but screw her.*

“There’s no sign of brain activity. People don’t come back from brain death.” Landerly’s voice was softer than usual. Jordan could hear where the sounds were tempered with his own sadness at the loss of Jillian. Or maybe at the loss of her brain.

Knowing that he had to come from a place of logic, and nothing else, he fell back on the one solid argument he had. “There’s no precedence for this. So we can’t take her off. We don’t know what will happen.”

“But-”

There wasn’t a counterargument good enough as far as Jordan was concerned. And he had lost his fear of Landerly days ago. So he plowed right over the old man. “The only thing we know is that they took the man in Sri Lanka off his mechanics and he died nearly instantly. So we can predict that if we take her off, we’ll kill her. We need to leave her on for scientific purposes, if nothing else. So we can see what happens when one of these people gets the chance to come back through.”

Landerly nodded, and Jordan saw his smile. “Good idea. But it would help if you could find some evidence here. Anything that justifies keeping them hooked up. I like the ‘it’s for science’ angle. I’ll have to see what the brass thinks. They get the final say.”

Without anything further, Landerly turned and placed his weight against the cane that was constantly with him. Jordan felt the sweep of pride soak through him, it seemed the old man had been rooting for him, placing his faith in Jordan to find a good answer that would keep her alive.

So, with renewed energy, and the constant tension of one whose fate is decided by others, he turned back to the charts and beeps, this time listening with a purpose. For a moment he just stood and counted, hearing the synthesized blips interspersed with the techs outside the tent and the bugs that lived here where it was city, but not all concrete. He didn’t have a musician’s sense of rhythm and timing, but he could count. And so he rattled off a silent ‘one-two-three-four-five-’ before her heart triggered the machine to beep again. He counted to the next one and the next, getting four and six then six then five again. She was bradycardic - definitely too low, and not keeping good pacing.

He turned to the papers, the tiny strip of green grid with the single black line that represented all the functions of her heart tracing across it. It told that she had been this way for a while. Yards of it unfolded, showing that the rhythm had declined steadily and not stepwise

He next used the attached keypad to scroll back through the EEG stored on the computer screen. It didn’t print out unless it was commanded to. So he scrolled back to the beginning of the reading, and watched as her theta and delta waves lost their height and depth. Nothing. It slowly transformed from a linear representation of the basic workings of a human mind to flat lines. He thumbed through, his eyes occasionally skipping back to looking at Jillian herself, and not just the computerized readouts of her.

But her chest rose and fell in an inhumanly steady beat. She didn’t twitch or move.

And his eyes went back to where he was scrolling through the hours. The green lines passing in front of him as they had when they were recorded, only in super fast-forward.

He almost missed it. It was beyond the middle of the night and his eyes were tired. But there it was - brain activity – a cluster of bumps and ridges. Not the kind of upper consciousness activity he would have liked to see, not like when a person worked a math problem, but something deeper. It

registered mostly in her theta waves. Just a few simple bumps. But Jordan quickly highlighted the section, and typed in a few comments about the time and duration, before sending it to the printer.

With a purpose, he got up and slapped at her hand. "Jillian, wake up, wake up."

But it was futile, as he had known it would be, even though he had hoped.

He almost grabbed the printout and ran to Landerly when he decided to look one more place.

With a few commands the computer shifted screens, to David's readout. Jordan hadn't been much concerned with David's vitals or EEG. And why should he be? *David* was holding up much better. His vitals were low, but he didn't yet need a respirator. They had only hooked him to an IV an hour ago.

The lines in front of him were the same as they had looked when they hooked him up the first time, in an effort to see if he was dreaming. Before he had corroborated Jillian's wild story.

Jordan realized that he didn't question her now. That she either made sense, or he was simply grateful that, while he might lose her, she wouldn't actually be dead. It was possible he had wrapped his brain around that and latched on so tight because he wished to believe. He had noticed that neither he nor Landerly had been out spreading the theory around. There was no talk of papers or panels or meetings, just the ongoing discussion between the three of them.

*Holy shit.*

David had it, too.

Jordan popped up and pulled the three pages from the printer, holding the first one next to the computer screen. The time was identical. And so were the bumps and ridges in the theta waves.

They ended at the same time as well. *What the hell was going on over there an hour ago?*

He highlighted and printed again, not bothering with typing this time. Jordan stood and waved at the printer. He told himself that three seconds wouldn't make a difference in whether or not Jillian made it, but he still swore at the cheap printer. Jerking the page free even before the machine released it, he darted out to find Landerly. Seconds later he ripped through the opening of the records tent, already explaining before he had even made eye contact. Landerly's head snapped up and Jordan knew he had read the hope there. But he also saw the cell phone pressed to the old man's ear, and he stopped mid-word.

He waited while Landerly waited, listening to what was being said on the other end of the line. Landerly nodded, though the listener wouldn't see it, and did what Jordan guessed was as close as he would get to actually rolling his eyes. So Jordan held up the printouts, knowing that Landerly could look while he disagreed with whoever was talking. He pointed out the blips and bumps.

But that only lasted a second before Landerly yanked the paper out of his hands and interrupted the person on the phone. "Listen, we have evidence of brain activity. We can't take her off. I'm faxing it over, and you're authorizing this."

Jordan smiled.

"Goodbye." It wasn't friendly, more curt and resigned than anything. And Jordan was glad that he only had to deal with 'the brass' through Landerly. Dealing with Landerly was tough enough.

Landerly held the pages back out. "Make copies and fax them back to Atlanta. Attention Brassard." He nodded to Jordan. "Good work."

But he didn't ask anything about what Jordan had found, didn't examine the lines any more closely. He had turned back to his books and charts before Jordan realized that he had been dismissed.

Feeling blank inside, he stepped away to photocopy his pages, walking softly, no longer at the breakneck speed he had used to get here. He was at the tent flap when Landerly's voice caught up

with him. It was almost softer than the air, and held the loss of all Landerly's years. "Did you forge those?"

Jordan was stunned speechless. His mouth hinged open, but no sound came out. Finally, he found his voice. "No!"

But he was too late and Landerly spoke over him, drowning out his protest. "Never mind. Those pages are keeping her alive. I don't want to know."

With utter disbelief he turned back to his boss. "They're real. I didn't *forge* them."

Landerly just smiled. "Don't act so insulted. You *do* have a history of it, you know. I just hope that you did a good job, so they won't discover it."

God, it was unpleasant to be a grown man and feel like a scolded kid. It was just the kind of kick in the pants he could do without these days. His voice was soft, not betraying his frustration. "They're real. I swear it."

Landerly nodded his head. "Good. Good. Plausible deniability and all."

Jordan simply left. He had found a way to keep Jillian alive, and right now it didn't matter if the doc believed him or not. Jillian had her funding.

In a slow daze that told of the middle of nights spent sleepless and tense, he wandered over to the communications tent and looked up the numbers. He pushed buttons and sent the pages through, thinking that Jillian would have had the Atlanta fax number memorized. He promised himself she'd be glad to rattle it off when she came around.

Without any of his previous impatience, he didn't pay much attention to the pages chugging through the fax. He simply blinked one moment and realized the machine had gone silent, and the pages had fluttered around his feet.

He made copies in the same daze, then shuffled back to the tent where Jillian and David slept. But as he pushed his way through the flaps he heard the moan.

His head snapped up. Hoping.

But he knew that hadn't been her voice. He knew the voice that moaned. And while he was anxious, and excited, he was also deeply disappointed.

Walking over to the bedside, he began talking before he even got there. "David?"

Fingers twitched. Eyeballs moved beneath the eyelids in a pattern similar to REM sleep, but now identifiable as coming out. The moan came again, sounding more like the creak of old hinges than anything human, and Jordan wondered briefly why their bodies weren't getting more used to this. Why it wasn't seeming just like a normal waking up.

As usual, a stray glance cast its way toward Jillian, but registered nothing.

David, however, was rapidly coming around. His eyes fluttered. His hand clenched in a full grasp, and his right arm twitched, eliciting a swift intake of breath that Jordan guessed was none other than pain from having pulled against that dislocated shoulder.

"Son of a bitch!"

Jordan almost laughed at the words. They weren't perfectly formed. But he could tell what David had said.

"Hey, David." He smiled at the man on the gurney. Maybe this meant Jillian would wake up, too. But then again she had gone under first.

Jordan pushed that thought away, it would do him no good, and he turned back.

David's eyes focused on him and he spoke again. "Son of a bitch."

"Thanks."

"I'm not supposed to be here." The words were thick but no longer slurred.



“What do you mean?”

A sigh of defeat escaped David, and for the first time that Jordan had ever seen, the regal bearing slipped away from him. “I was staying awake. I was . . . well, I guess I wasn’t.” He turned to look at the wall, and Jordan heard the whisper, “Shit.”

So he distracted David, waved the EEG papers in front of him. “You want to tell me what happened about an hour ago?”

“What?” It worked. David was no longer swearing nor looking at the blank white canvas in front of him.

“About an hour ago both you and Jillian registered some brain activity.”

“Really?” He reached for the papers with his left hand at the same time he asked, “What time is it now?”

“About two a.m.”

David examined the readouts in front of him, and, as smart as he was, Jordan figured he had at least a rudimentary knowledge of what he was looking at. “So that’s what it looks like.”

“What *what* looks like?” Jordan held up the second set of papers. “Jillian’s got it, too. What is it?”

David took a breath and gathered himself, looking at Jordan, really looking at him, for maybe the first time ever - not just sizing him up, but reading him. And maybe even reading correctly. Jordan couldn’t say he liked it. David reading him made him damned nervous. But he needed to know. “What is it?”

“Jillian will have to tell you.”

*That was what happened when David read you. Nothing good could come of it.* So Jordan nodded and tried again. “Maybe you can ask her next time you see her.”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

His mouth opened for a rude comeback, but he noticed David pointing with his right finger. The hand wasn’t good for much besides pointing to the left, but it did its job now.

And he heard it: a rustle of sheets.

Abandoning David, he flew the three steps to stand directly beside her. Eyelids quivered with the rapid movement beneath. Her fingers twitched again, and her chest moved like she would moan.

But she couldn’t, because of the tube down her throat.

So Jordan stood over her, barely feeling the smile that spread unknowingly across his face, as her lids fluttered and fluttered again before opening. “Welcome back.”

• • • •

HER EYES BURNED. AND all she could think was that this was the worst part, so she forced herself through a few rapid blinks.

Jordan stood over her, an idiot grin on his face. “Of course you came back, I just saved your life.”

*What the hell does that mean?*

But she really couldn’t give it much thought. She couldn’t talk yet. She still felt rusty. But if she could have she would have started in. That was just like her and Jordan. She wakes up from a coma, and he starts sparring with her.

It felt good to be home.

The air was better over here, or something.

But she closed her eyes, letting the grit slide past. Because she remembered what David wanted her to do. What she was pretty sure she had agreed to do, just before she drifted off to sleep.

“No! Jilly!” Jordan’s voice, frantic with worry, broke through her morbid thoughts. She felt his hands on hers, smacking at the back of them, touching her forehead, resting on her cheeks. But she couldn’t much blame him for panicking when she closed up and shut out the world. She *did* keep slipping into a coma. So she opened her eyes to the relief on his face. And only then did she register the sounds around her.

Crickets chirped in the background, a few birds made calls in the middle of the night. It sounded like home. But overlaying all that was the bleep of a heart monitor, the hiss of a ventilator, and the feeling that she was wired to everything. Only then did she catch a glimpse at the edge of her vision, and managed to tie together what the dry feeling in her throat was.

She was intubated.

And Jordan would never have done that to her if he hadn’t had to.

A moment of pure panic settled over her. Now that she knew what the tube was, she had to get it out. Her brain knew she shouldn’t remove it herself, but her hands scrambled for purchase and her eyes watered. Her chest fought for the right to breathe, fighting the ventilator.

Warm strong hands closed over hers, and while she knew it was Jordan, and that she should have been comforted, the hands pushed hers away, stopping her from her goal. Before she could protest, his face was over hers, his eyes staring at her, making certain she understood. “Jilly. You have to wait. Let me listen, then we’ll take it out.”

He was lying. He wouldn’t necessarily remove the tube. Only if the sounds were right. Only if she was going to breathe well enough for herself when he took it out. But she wanted to believe.

The urge to swallow was overwhelming. She wanted to fight, but she tamped it all down, knowing that Jordan was right. And she simply blinked a few tears back, as she felt his hand slide under her shirt. The plastic circle of the stethoscope touched her once, twice, waiting each time, while she forced patience upon herself. She counted.

“You’re good.”

The words brought a flood of relief, but no real comfort. She managed a slight nod, filled with panic and tension, when he asked her point blank if she was ready. Jordan walked her through coughing, while he steadily slipped the tube up her throat. She had to cough twice, even though she knew it took most patients only once.

Finally when she was able to breathe for herself, she felt like oxygen was flooding her, even though she was fairly certain she’d been getting more of it through the machine. Her lungs worked rapidly, reestablishing their dominance.

Again she felt the hands. They grabbed hers and pinned them at her side. Why? Why was he holding her down?

Again, teal eyes looked into hers. “Jilly, you’re shaking, you were about to knock out your IV.” His arms came up to hold her, one hand stroking her face, and only as he said the words, “Jilly, don’t cry” did she realize that his fingers had come away wet.

So she squeezed her eyes shut, and leaned into him, while he pulled her into a sitting position, as she re-learned to breathe. In and out. In and out. Finally settling into a semblance of her normal rhythm.

“You feeling better now?”

Her head jerked around. And her lungs began to shove all the air out. It should have been a scream, but she still didn’t have much of a voice from being intubated. Instead, she pushed out a soft

but shrill wail that seared her throat like nothing she could ever remember.

David nodded at her, not bothering to look happy, or surprised, or anything other than pissed off.

When her breathing returned to normal, she realized she was staring at him. Just as she was going to do something about it, a gentle pressure on the side of her face turned her back to where she was inches from Jordan's concern. "It's just David." But he looked at her a little deeper, wanting an explanation of why David would make her scream.

So she told him.

Only no sound came out.

And after a moment she realized it was a damn good thing that no sound came out. Because she had started to explain what had happened.

David was going to have to kill her over there. There was no way she could show her face again. No doubt the techs had already found their naked, comatose bodies entwined on the gurney. Oh yeah, that was one for the books.

She felt the heat flood her face, and she did her best to bury it in Jordan's chest.

At last she found a whisper, and, figuring it was the best she was going to get, she settled for it. "David's supposed to be asleep."

"Because?"

Her breathing was kicking up and she wanted to fan her face with her hand. To fight the flush, to work off some of the nervous energy, to cover for the fact that she was panicking again. She never did things like that - and certainly not where she was going to get found out.

She turned and looked David in the eye. "We made a deal."

"Good." His voice was like ice. "I was afraid you were going to back out."

"So you showed up here to check on me?" She shifted in Jordan's arms, but he didn't seem to want to let go of her. Jillian really gave it no thought, other than that it was comfortable, and it was working to stave off another panic attack. There was nothing she hated more than being a helpless female.

Word by word, her voice grew stronger, "Trust me, I'm not backing out after that wake up." Her eyes focused on the straps and casts that held David in the bed, if not by force then by inability. "Is that what it's like for you when you wake up over here?"

He didn't speak, but his eyes held hers as he nodded.

She shuddered a bit at the thought. "I don't want to do that again."

"No shit, Sherlock." He grinned, but it wasn't in humor. "So you'll do it?"

She couldn't look him in the eye, not with what she was agreeing to. But in the end, this would set her free, too. "Yes."

When she found some backbone, some of the flash of anger she had felt before returned. "So why are you here?"

He spoke plainly as though it wasn't his fault. "I fell asleep."

"Why?"

"I'm male, it's what we do!"

She couldn't help the flush that crept up her cheeks, and David laughed just a little, a real laugh, at her expense. She felt more than saw Jordan's bewilderment through his arms. Finally, he found a voice to add to the conversation. "What?"

"Nothing." She and David both said it at the same time, looking away, and she figured Jordan had to have figured it all out. But when she finally looked up again, he seemed just as confused.

Silence reigned for a while, but it was David who started up again. “So, do you want to tell him what we decided?”

Thoughts of conspiracy charges flitted through her head. It was bad enough that she would do the thing. “No.”

But David surprised her by taking a stance. “I think we ought to. I don’t want to take a chance that you’ll back down.”

“I won’t-”

But he didn’t allow her to finish. His eyes quickly darted from Jordan to her and he simply began talking over her. “I think the boy has a vested interest in setting this to rights. I think he’ll be helpful.”

“What the hell are you two talking about?” Jordan’s voice cut through the argument, and Jillian knew there was nothing she could do to stop David from telling Jordan whatever he wanted. She also realized in that moment, that she didn’t want Jordan to know what she had done. That she had been curious and frustrated and scared, and that she had turned into willing arms.

She couldn’t really work up any good shame over it. She just didn’t want the embarrassment of the explanation. And the way she figured it, in this world it didn’t exist. But the men talked right by her thoughts, and Jillian needed to know what David was spilling.

But he wasn’t spilling anything, he was performing a careful set-up worthy of a courtroom. His question was directed at Jordan, “What happened to Jillian while we were under?”

As Jillian waited for his response, she realized that at close range his jaw was squarer than she thought, his shadow had progressed well beyond five o’clock, but it wasn’t enough to hide the clench of a tiny muscle in the side when David grilled him. “Her stats got so low we had to put her on IVs and intubate her to keep her breathing. Then the brass decided you two weren’t worth the money to keep on the machinery.”

Her breath pulled in, again burning her raw throat. “They were going to pull the plug on me?”

He nodded, “You looked brain dead.”

“I woke up just in time, then.” The pure chance of it didn’t sit well with her, but it didn’t have to, Jordan spoke up.

“No you didn’t. I found enough evidence to mount a case and they decided to let us keep you on it.”

Jillian felt her bones lose some of their starch, and she slumped down against him. “Thank you.”

When he nodded, she felt it against the top of her head.

But David interrupted again, keeping the conversation on the track of his choice. “If we can work this out, then Jillian won’t go under again.”

“I’m listening.” Jordan’s voice was hard, and so were his arms. He clearly didn’t think he was going to like what he heard, and Jillian knew he wasn’t.

“When I get back over there, I’m going to pull her plug, or medicate her, or suffocate her if necessary.”

The arms around her tightened with each gruesome description, until she couldn’t draw in enough air. They let up only when she started the makings of another panic attack. But Jordan had only a quick apology for her before he lit into David.

But she watched David, and he may have been lying on his side, casted from stem to stern, but he spoke with authority and slowly chipped away at Jordan’s resistance.

Jordan threw every what-if? at him. “What if she dies?”

“Then I die.” Jillian jumped into the fray. She wanted Jordan’s help, but she wasn’t about to let him talk them out of this. “It’s better than this going back and forth. That was the worst wake up ever. At the rate things are going I’m going to die soon anyway. At least this way I get a choice.”

Jordan focused on her, effectively removing David from the conversation, and by his intensity, David might have not even been on the planet. “So if he kills you over there, then you stay here . . .”

She nodded.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Again, “Yes.”

Jordan stared David down. “What do you get out of this?”

But David didn’t give any ground. “You two do the same for me over here. So I can stay there.”

“But why?” Jordan had leaned back away from her. He looked back and forth between the two of them, as though he saw what had happened, even though it hadn’t been mentioned. As if to ask, ‘why would two lovers want to go separate ways forever?’

Jillian stepped in before David could. “His father’s over there. And over here he’s facing massive amounts of therapy and at least a couple surgeries. There he’s whole.”

David looked embarrassed by that last bit, like he always was when the topic of his tumbling down the steps came up.

For the next half hour Jillian stood up and stretched, and traced a circle already worn in the grass, while Jordan grilled them both. He brought up every contingency he could think of. Threw out every way it could go wrong. Pointed out time and again that no one knew what could happen and that they just might really kill themselves in some very warped version of Romeo and Juliet.

Jillian pressed her voice into service. “I’m going to die soon anyway. If I’m lucky I’ll get stuck on one side or the other - just wind up wherever I am when my vitals finally give out. This way I get to choose, I get to stay here.”

His eyes looked through her. He saw so much more than anyone else. But he was thinking. And she knew he couldn’t argue her logic.

Finally he spoke. “Potassium chloride.”

She almost jumped with joy, she just didn’t have quite enough energy.

“Will you please tell me what the hell he just said?” David’s droll tone cut into her happiness, but she simply turned and gave an explanation.

“It will stop your heart, and then mostly break down. No autopsy would turn it up unless they were looking for it. And you already have an IV so there won’t be any puncture marks.”

David nodded. “Painless?”

Jordan shrugged. “You’ll be comatose, you shouldn’t feel a thing.”

David rolled over and looked at Jillian, “And what about you?”

How did she answer that? How did she choose a method to die? Especially when what she really wanted was to live. But in order to do that, she had to kill off the Jillian on the other side. She shuddered before opening her mouth.

But the sounds she heard weren’t from her voice. It was Jordan. Explaining that the potassium chloride was the best method, where to find it unless the tents had been rearranged, how to draw it up, and how to inject it.

“Good.” David turned and rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling, speaking to the air in general. “Now there’s just one more problem. How do we get me back under so we can do all this?”



Jordan had begun to question his own sanity. He was walking through the tents with a syringe of potassium chloride in his top pocket. It was hidden by the jacket he wore, and he was certain that no one would notice.

What he wasn't certain of was why he had done it. They should have plenty of time once David went under to get the medication and dose him. They should have hours. But he had seen the opportunity and drawn it up right there in the supply tent.

No one had been around and this way he didn't have to steal a whole bottle. Record keeping was still pretty poor, but a whole missing bottle would be pretty suspicious.

His heart tripped along at a faster rate. Jillian walked quietly at his side, having stood guard outside the tent while he drew up the liquid. She had spoken out loud, letting Jordan know that someone was there, and loudly repeated that the man was going to the cafeteria. It was a good job of relaying the information without letting on that she was speaking to be overheard or that Jordan was following the conversation from inside.

God, he had felt like a kid stealing a look at the files in the principal's office, and he couldn't remember the last time he had felt so guilty or so low. Jillian didn't speak as they traipsed quietly to the cafeteria, and he wondered if her thoughts were the same as his, if she ever questioned her theory. If she was wrong, and it was all a shared dream, then they were killing David. Just flat out murder.

He pushed that thought aside. If she was right, and they didn't do anything, she'd die if she fell under again. The trend that all five of the people going back and forth had established was to have their vital signs drop lower and lower the longer they were under. And to drop more rapidly each time they went back under. She had barely survived the last time, and Jordan was certain that she wouldn't survive the next one.

He saw his hand go out to the cafeteria door, swinging it wide and ushering Jillian through. She walked like nothing was wrong, like a normal human, not one who had nearly died two hours ago. Not one who had him arguing with the heads of his company, a *government* company nonetheless, to keep her on life support. People on ventilators shouldn't just get up and walk around.

*And doctors shouldn't carry syringes of potassium chloride in their pockets in case the opportunity to kill a patient arose.*

Jordan also doubted the quality of his decision making skills. He wanted Jillian here. No doubt about that. Having the threat of David removed didn't bother him any either. *Killing* David to get his way did.

He was halfway down the cafeteria line before Jillian tugged on his jacket sleeve and pointed out that he hadn't gotten anything. Shaking his head, he started choosing food from the other side of the line, not really caring that he didn't have anything but side dishes. He was simply here because he was hungry. His brain didn't care what he ate, just that he did it.

Jillian's plate was piled high, with carefully chosen and precariously balanced foods. A moment's surprise registered until he remembered she had eaten this much the last time she had come out.

Her enthusiasm for the rather inedible food relayed that she wasn't thinking what he was. How could they be certain that Jillian wouldn't go under first?

They had discussed the possibility of trying to medically induce coma in David. But that had problems. If they didn't get David through to the other side, then when they killed him they might

actually *kill* him. And if he didn't wake up, he wouldn't be able to cut Jillian loose. Which meant she would slide under again, and most likely die, if not just here, then in both places.

And there was another critical problem with it: they had no idea what they were dealing with. So they had no idea if it would work. And there wasn't time to experiment.

So they would simply have to wait for David to go under.

And keep Jillian here.

And Jordan had no idea how to do that.

Eventually he realized that all of his food was gone from his tray except a spinach side dish. He must have disliked it, because he had eaten everything else. But he had no memory of that decision at all. And Jillian was looking at him weird.

"You ready?" His voice slipped out as his eyes finally made contact with hers, real contact in the here and now, and not in the missing world of his thoughts.

She nodded yes, a tiny gulp showing along her exposed neckline as she blinked. Too quickly his brain registered that her eyes didn't reopen and he forced himself to not reveal the hot rush of adrenaline he felt every time she closed her eyes for longer than a second. Every time, he was suddenly and certainly afraid that she was slipping. But she had opened her eyes wide each time before, and he waited until she did it this time, too.

He understood again the meaning of the phrase 'with heavy heart' as they walked silently back to the tent. He supposed his heart would sink through his abdominal cavity if this didn't resolve itself soon. But then again, there was a murder to commit, and the way he figured it, it was likely that Jillian would want to shed herself of him and any reminders of this night as soon as possible.

Jordan didn't like it. But he had to find a way to be okay with it. He'd be able to call her, or at least check up on her, and know she was all right. Killing David didn't lead him to any fantasy worlds where he could roll over at night and watch her sleeping. And he forced himself to re-examine all his decisions.

Was he doing this just to get Jillian? Or was there any real justification to break his Hippocratic Oath? He understood and believed in all that Kevorkian had fought for. That people had the right to die, to choose their own quality of life. And David had initiated this idea.

Grass crunched under his feet in the chill night air as he considered the geologist's sanity and his own ability to show proof that he had agreed to the wishes of a logical man when he came up before the judge and jury for this one. But he couldn't come up with anything. They were operating on a theory for which the only proof was in Jillian and David's heads. And half that proof would be dead shortly.

Jordan considered calling it all to a halt. But one glance at Jillian beside him changed his mind. There was no way to stop this for her if they didn't let David go back. He couldn't even imagine David's job on the other side, though for a brief moment he tried. Hopefully the potassium chloride would do the trick. But in the end David was a logical man to his very core. He would hold a pillow over Jillian's face and be sure he felt her slip away if it came to that. Jordan almost laughed out loud at how well he could place his trust in David's aberrant code of honor.

But as he pulled back the tent flap even the cynical laughter died in his throat. David was glaring at him.

"Yes, I'm still awake." His teeth gritted and Jordan noted the pale clench to his jaw, figuring it was pain even before David spoke it. "I need a Percocet to get anywhere near where I can sleep. And I really want to get some sleep."

Jordan nodded.



Again it was David who drove the conversation, but with him sitting on his gurney waiting to be killed by an overdose of KCl, Jordan wasn't as threatened by it as he usually was.

"Just give me enough to send me under."

"No!" Jillian's voice jumped, strained and brittle, into the edges of Jordan's brain.

David glared, his eyes issuing some very serious threats for a man in slings and casts. "It's what we all want. Are you afraid of autopsy reports or something?"

Jordan knew what Jillian was thinking, and, unfortunately for David, he agreed. His voice ground out low and conspiratorial. "We could send you into medical coma. But we have no idea what it would do to you, if it would be the same as slipping under on your own. So you can only have the same doses that we gave you before."

"Then give it to me."

Jillian darted away, as quick as one of Becky's lizards, and returned with a paper cup with two of the round blue pills in it. It was a large dose, but Jordan figured they were no longer concerned with addiction.

David swallowed them down with a jerk of his head, then instantly fixed his stare on the two of them. "Go! I won't go under with you two watching me. I'm hoping I'll pass out from boredom."

They turned, and Jordan watched as his hand went out to hold the tent flap for Jillian, a dying, useless piece of misplaced chivalry if ever there was one. The night air hit them like a slap in the face, and with it came the jarred thought that Landerly hadn't been by to check on David since he had awoken.

But Landerly was a pretty sharp tack and Jordan wondered if the old man hadn't figured out what they were up to. His absence wouldn't be a stamp of approval necessarily, but at least it meant he wouldn't interfere.

In the distance he could see sunlight behind the mountains. He'd never really been anyplace like the Appalachians before, where sunrise was visible in the distance while it was still pitch black where you stood. The irony wasn't lost on him, and in a desperate bid for sanity he tried changing the subject. "So what went on with you and David last night? Around midnight?"

He could see that he had startled her. She blinked a few times and made an attempt to gather up scattered thoughts, but she didn't do it all that well. "What?"

He shoved his fists deeper into the pockets of his jackets, keeping them warm and out of the way. "Both of you had EEG activity at the same time – the same activity - even though you were reading almost brain dead."

"I was almost brain dead?"

"Yeah, so I figured something major must have happened . . ."

• • • •

BECKY STARED DOWN AT the human shape on the bed. It was so much easier to think in terms of frogs. When she distanced herself, she wasn't bothered by the fact that she had found the two of them entwined and naked. She had reached her hand into frog terrariums before and simply removed the amphibs from all kinds of compromising positions.

Never once had she felt she had violated the frogs' sacred privacy. But never had she been in the position of moving the frogs, and adjusting things so that the techs wouldn't see. Never had she had to threaten a cage cleaner so that he wouldn't report what he saw.

So she had nearly broken her back putting a gown on Jillian and pulling a spare pair of scrubs pants onto David. She had sweated bullets in the fear that one or the other would wake up while she

was dressing them. She had even rehearsed a small come-uppance speech to level at them if they did wake.

But they didn't.

She had moved Jillian rather than David, simply because she was lighter. It was hard enough lifting any amount of dead weight.

But now she stepped back as the techs moved around the room like bees in a field - working, making rapid efficient movements, flitting from one body to the other. When she lost focus the machinery became the drone of the hive, and she could imagine she was elsewhere. Somewhere where she didn't have to stand over two friends and wait.

To hear vital signs that she barely understood for humans. She knew appropriate blood pressures and pulse rates for cheetahs and moose and amphibs of all types. But with humans she knew just enough to constantly ask the techs if it was time to worry.

And from the looks on their faces it was approaching time to worry.

She hadn't mentioned a damn thing to David Carter The First. Even if he didn't recognize her, she remembered him, and how upset he had gotten over being given partial information. If she kept him up to date, the man might worry about his son, and Becky wasn't about to go spreading rumors that she couldn't substantiate, not to Carter Senior. No, she would wait until she had all her numbers, then she would tell him the facts.

But she could see what wasn't being said. There were frowns, and stethoscopes, heads nodding, followed by electrodes being attached. While she stood silently, the river of activity flowed around her on all sides. Her breath heaved in when she saw one of the women return with fistfuls of supplies. Becky recognized the IV bags and needles even in their sterile plastic casings. She had seen enough of it over the past week to know what it was all about. She knew that it wasn't good. And she knew that she should help. She just wasn't sure how.

So she stepped back to the edge of the square tent and bent her head. It had been far too long since she had done anything like it. She had missed church for a month of Sundays, always neck deep in one project or another. But her mother had pointed out, that with what had happened and all, the churches were now full. It came as no surprise that people would turn to God. But for the first time, she felt the need for it herself.

The words rattled in her brain, rusty from misuse, but she felt her way around until they became clearer, cleaner.

*Please God, help my friends. Guide me to help them. Show me how I can do your work. Help me to understand. Help them to understand.* She didn't feel her hands clasp together in front of her. Didn't know her lips were moving. Didn't feel the activity in the tent slowly come to a standstill around her. But she felt the peace. *Help all of us here to help them. To come back healthy and whole, or to find your kingdom in heaven.*

Becky didn't worry too much about the sex the two had clearly engaged in. There was too much biology ingrained in her as deep as the Baptist teachings she'd grown up with. God wouldn't punish them for doing what he had evolved them for. This was about finding the way. Whichever way was right for each of them.

*"Help me to be helpful."*

"Amen."

"Amen."

The chorus of voices startled her head up, shaking her from the cocoon of prayer she had woven around herself. Her eyes shifted, focusing on the roomful of medical techs and nurses, splashes of

color in varied shades of blues and greens against the white of the canvas tent.

But, to a person, every head looked up from where it had been bent. Eyes met hers. Nods were directed her way. And hands went back to work.

• • • •

JILLIAN FOUGHT THE yawn that escaped her mouth. She knew it would simply cause Jordan more worry. But she wasn't good enough to hide it from him. Hell, no one was.

"Stay awake, Jillian. Walk."

His fingers grasped her arm in a purely clinical manner and she had to wonder why that was. He was Jordan. And he'd never distanced himself from her before. Not when she'd thought he should. Nor when she'd wanted him to. He was always Jordan. But right now she'd have ground out the formal title "Dr. Abellard" if she could have found the energy. "Walking makes me tired!"

"You have to stay awake!" His breath washed over her face, he was so close. And for a moment she thought of the mint gum he had been chewing. That was Jordan, friendly even when he was hauling her around, trying to keep her awake even though it was late in the evening. The sun was setting and her nerves and brain were setting with it.

Her body pulled away from her thoughts, creating a sense memory of one of the better hotel beds where she had curled up next to Jordan's heat, and sunk into warm soft sheets, the covers velvety beneath her fingers and across her cheeks.

She almost drifted off there on her feet.

But Jordan yanked her arm nearly out of the socket, and she was catapulted back into the cold night and away from her reverie.

She sniffed in, her lungs and nose searing from the tiny icicles in the air. "Medicate me—"

"No." He didn't even look at her, just interrupted before the last sound was out, his mind made up.

"Then I'm going to bed."

That got his attention. And as he spun around and glared at her it dawned that that was exactly what she had intended to do - shake Dr. Abellard back into being Jordan. "If you go to sleep, you might die." His own breath was ragged, and for a moment she snapped fully alert, realizing that maybe the cold, clinical Jordan was easier to deal with, rather than this face of fear and pain. But what would she feel if it was the other way around? And in fact it *was* the other way around as well. If she slipped off, she would lose Jordan . . .

His voice cracked even as it cut a path through her thoughts. "We don't know what the medication will do to you."

"True, but we have a good idea what sleep will do, and it isn't pretty."

He started to walk away, conversation closed, but she held back, stopping him when her arm and body didn't follow his lead. "You know, I have slept and woken up on the same side before."

"But that was several times before. It hasn't happened recently, and I sure as hell don't trust it." He let go of her arm and it felt as though the night seeped under her skin, chilling her where the heat of him had comforted just a moment before. "I just wish David would go under." His hand, now without purpose, scrubbed aimlessly through his hair. As usual a few pieces stood up on end, leaving him looking as frazzled as she knew he felt. "I feel like fate is fighting us here. That your body is trying to get you back over there and his is trying its damndest to stay here."

"Medicate me."

All his peripheral movement stopped. His gaze squared on hers. "And if I kill you?"

“I have to stay awake long enough for David to go under *and* to wake up *and* get the job done.” She couldn’t give explanation to David’s *job*. “There’s no way I’ll make it now. Not that long. We have to try it. My brain is shutting down. I’m beginning to not care that I might not wake up. My body wants sleep.”

He blinked, leaving his eyes sheened in a glaze, and then he blinked again and it was gone. She wasn’t sure but that she might have imagined it or maybe she was just looking through her own frustration. Her muscles ached, and her eyelids fought for closure. She was ready to sit on the hard earth and simply cry at the injustice and frustration of it all. But the earth was too cold. Her butt would freeze. And while that might keep her good and well awake for a little while, it would quickly lead to hypothermia, and blissful, if deadly, sleep. Since that death wouldn’t be due to the coma-state sleep induced she was pretty certain it would actually *kill* her.

Jillian made the best decision she was capable of, her shoulders slumping, and her head tipping forward to allow her hair to hide the tears brewing in her eyes. “Please.” The word fell out of her mouth, with no force behind it.

But Jordan heard it. He always did. And as she started to drift away right there, she knew he was taking all of it in. The slumped shoulders, the exhaustion, the tears – he would know they were there even if he didn’t see them.

She felt his hands, cold, on either side of her face. With all the energy she could muster, which wasn’t much, she fought against him seeing into her when he lifted her face to look in her eyes. All she could do was glance away and pray that the tears didn’t fall in fat, rolling drops and embarrass her.

“Okay. But you stay awake until we get to the medication tent.” He stared right into her eyes, waiting for her to make visual contact and acknowledge what he’d said. But then he slapped her cheeks a little bit, jolting her. Jillian wanted to be mad about it, but knew that the startle had woken her up, just a little.

His hand encompassed hers and, without looking back, he pulled her one shuffling step at a time to the meds tent. Her butt immediately located a chair that was upholstered but still remarkably hard. *Government chair*. The words flitted through her brain as she slouched into the corner, waiting while he checked the meds. He kept up a steady stream of chatter, but she couldn’t have said about what.

When her brain worked enough, she threw in an “uh-huh” or “mmmhmmm” and he didn’t slap her again so she guessed she had him fooled. The poles of the tent came up slowly behind her, cradling her head and making the chair just the tiniest bit comfortable. Comfortable enough. Tension drifted from her shoulders as she thought of fluffy beds and hammocks on beaches. The ocean sounded so soothing, and she inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent and the heat of the sun rising in front of her.

*Shit.*

Someone was upset.

Jordan was upset.

But the sunrise was beautiful and the day was so warm. Her hammock swayed in the heat. All was orderly until a fly began to buzz in her face. She waved it away, swatting at it haphazardly, but thinking that it was surprisingly heavy when she did hit it.

Something landed on her arm, and in curiosity she turned her head down to see a large chameleon. It was purple and slow moving and made her smile.

Until it bit her.

“Ow!”

“Jillian!” Jordan’s voice was in her face. And as she blinked she realized that his eyes were too.

A panic attack overtook her, her hands shaking, her breath pushing in and out far faster than her usual eighteen breaths per minute. Her eyes scrambled through the scene before her, searching for some sort of purchase, some reason for the growing dread.

But there was nothing of concern. The space heater sat directly in front of her, its warm glow heating her face and chest and leaving her back feeling chilly.

“Jillian.” Again Jordan’s face swam before her. “I gave you some adrenaline to snap you out of it.”

That explained the panic attack. She would feel all the effects because of the medication, but her brain had back-figured that, if she felt it, she must also have been alarmed. She managed to slow her breathing for the most part, but couldn’t stop the shaking in her hands. Then the damn chameleon bit her again.

As she looked down at the little fucker, she realized that Jordan had a second needle in her arm. It wasn’t much more than a sting once she had identified it.

He quickly removed the needle and shelved the medications, letting her sit through the seeming eternity while he did all of it in close to slow motion.

Jillian knew that she was experiencing the adrenaline the same way people felt in the middle of a car accident, that time stretched and they could stop and think things through. She almost laughed as she realized that he had simply medicated her to *feel* like she was awake for a long time. In reality, the adrenaline would wear off soon and she would slip back asleep.

But he had given her something else, too . . . he had explained it while he shelved the medications. She could dig that much out of her memory, but she couldn’t remember *what* he said he had given her. Truth be told, she didn’t really think she cared, just as long as it worked.

The palm of his hand swung squarely into her field of vision, and it took her a moment to realize that he was offering it to her to grab. She latched onto it, and before she realized what was happening, he had used her own grip against her to pull her to her feet and haul her behind him.

“It’s time we went to go check on David again.”

Jillian agreed, but was too strung out to say so. She found herself able to perceive the cold, but not care. If her jacket had fallen off she would have simply shrugged and gone on walking through the frigid air, leaving it in the grass behind her.

“I’m not leaving you for a moment, Jillian. I don’t trust you not to pass out like you did in that chair. You scared the shit out of me.”

Again she nodded, even though she knew he couldn’t see her. Not when he was walking at a brisk pace facing into the night, and away from her, while he kept up his steady stream of talk.

“I also need to be sure that the meds don’t do anything to you. So you won’t be able to shake me for a good while.”

She almost laughed out loud.

And when he turned and looked at her strange she realized that she *had* laughed out loud. In fact, she still was. From the look on his face Jordan wondered what was so funny, or if she had finally cracked from all of it.

It took effort, against the drugs coursing through her bloodstream, but she formed the words. “Like I could shake you anyway.”

He nodded, his face in an odd resigned expression, and went back to pulling her like a skier through the maze of tents. *Why had he made that face?* Her own face scrunched up in thought and

she tripped over a . . . blade of grass or something. Would she ever be able to figure Jordan out? Probably not. Not completely.

She was just beginning to wonder if that was a good thing or a bad thing when she ran into his back. She felt her nose crunch against him. She registered that it hurt, and that her finger had bent, too. She just didn't care.

She laughed again when the words came out of her mouth. "I am so thankful that I never developed a cocaine habit."

"Great, you're high."

It was just a statement of fact. But Jordan's exasperated tone made it even funnier. He got into her face again, and she wondered briefly why the hell he kept doing that. When he shook her gently she figured it out for herself. Even in her face he couldn't quite get her attention. Whatever he had given her sure felt good.

"Jillian. Be quiet. I don't want you waking David if he's asleep."

She nodded. All gravely serious for the one instant that she could hold the straight face without laughing. He pulled her through the tent flap and she ran into the back of him again. With a quick jerk and movements that she couldn't catalog, Jordan yanked her around in front of him, so her back was pressed against his front, and got his hand clamped over her mouth. With all that restraint, her eyes focused and she saw what he saw.

David, passed out cold.

She shook off his arms, and walked forward, her focus entirely on the man lying on the gurney. He was reposed, looking peaceful in spite of the casts and slings. So she did the easiest test she could think of. She reached out to lift his arm.

If it fell, dead weight, back to the mattress that was as good a sign as possible.

But when she grabbed his hand his fingers curled against hers reflexively. Jillian heard that her voice was too loud only after the word had escaped her mouth. "Damnit!"

• • • •

THE TOUCH THAT HE FELT on his fingers was enough of an anchor to pull him back. His eyes fought to open, and already he perceived the faint light from the other side of his eyelids. He smelled the tent, felt the sheets, and heard the voice. All his senses were functional, now he just had to gain control and get up.

Funny how the very act of waking up, which he had done every day of his life, was only now something that could be catalogued - something he could control. It seemed it had always just happened before, with alarm clocks or daylight making the decision for him.

As he fought to make his muscles obey, they came into play one piece at a time.

His fingers jerked against the hand that touched him.

"You're waking up, huh?"

His brain recognized the voice, it just didn't quite place it.

But with a few determined tries David forced his eyelids to flutter then open. They snapped immediately shut, squeezing against the dim orange light thrown by the space heater. He fluttered them again, allowing his pupils to adjust and at last, he managed to focus on the woman standing over him.

"Good evening."

*Becky.*

*Thank-fucking-God.*

He scrambled upright, checking the next most important thing.

Jillian.

His brain registered that she wasn't in the bed with him, and that he had scrub pants on.

"I moved her, she's right behind you." But Becky's hands pushed him back down. She wouldn't let him up, and he fought against it, opening his mouth to protest only to realize that he was muzzled.

His hands scrambled to remove the thing that hindered his jaw, but again Becky just pushed his hands away. "Let me check."

Her face looked sincere, and it was Becky. He didn't think she could lie about slipping the family dog her broccoli. Deciding he'd have to be a fool not to trust her, David sat back and waited.

Becky kept talking. "The techs told me that if you woke up, I could take the oxygen mask off—" *ohhh*. "-if you were above 95. And you are. The numbers rose right up while you were waking. So give me a moment to untangle you." Her fingers worked at the elastic that held the mask onto his face, setting him free of the bindings. "You dropped off pretty fast once you went under. And you can't run off just yet. No big movements. I have to watch you for at least fifteen minutes to see that you hold that 95 percent."

*Fifteen minutes?*

"I can't have you crashing on me."

"Thank you." They were the first words he had pushed out, and as usual they were a little froggy sounding. But he figured that he needed to be nice to everyone, as he had some serious business to attend to. And he wondered if Jillian had already set him free back on the other side, or if he would feel it when it did happen.

"Don't move too much. You're still hooked up to IVs and electrodes and such. There's an EEG and an EKG and pulse oximeter."

He looked down at his body and saw what looked like a human circuit. Wires and tubes fed in and out of everywhere. And suddenly, his chest and head started itching. Surely it was just perceived sensation from knowing that there were stickers holding electrical contacts on him, but knowing that didn't make it itch any less.

With a deep breath he decided to do what was needed. He would have to find a way to turn around and look at Jillian, even if he couldn't do anything about her until the techs and doctor set him free. He could at least start assessing the situation.

Slowly, pulling and tugging wires, he twisted until she was in view.

Jillian was draped peacefully along the gurney. Her hair fanned out around pale skin, her eyes stayed closed and still in a way that could never be mistaken for real sleep. She wore a medical gown, and while he knew she would have hated it, it was far better than lying there naked. With a deep breath, a certainty hit him in the gut. She would die in that gown.

"I untangled you two." Becky's voice was soft over his shoulder, and he listened for, but thankfully didn't hear, any condemnation or rebuke.

"I moved her myself and dressed both of you before I let anyone else in. I figured it wasn't their business. Or mine for that matter, but . . ."

Her wariness bled through into her speech. And David looked back at her, taking in the soft, droopy red curls, the age that had layered itself onto her face, and the worry that made her look much more adult than the first time he had met her. He didn't think anyone would mistake her for a kid again.

"Thank you." He heard the words and the sincerity. And realized that she would get suspicious any moment now if he didn't get it together and stop being so polite. "So what's up with Jillian?"

“She’s got lower vital signs than you do.”

He could see the oxygen mask, the IV and all the brightly colored wires. She looked like the bride to his Frankenstein.

David scanned, looking for the rubber covered point along the IV line where nurses could inject medications. Jillian had pointed one out to him when she had explained what to do. His eyes stopped and rested when he found it, just a short ways up the tube coming from her left arm.

He needed to get to the supply tent and find the potassium chloride.

“I don’t know if she’ll be okay.”

That jerked him back. Becky’s face had a layer of worry, and her head shook slowly from side to side.

“Will she die?” Would it all be better if she just died? God, he prayed he didn’t sound hopeful.

But Becky shrugged and didn’t look at him like he was evil incarnate.

He sat, breathing, in and out. Silent while his mind chugged. Becky must have better things to do, but she didn’t budge. Maybe she had promised not just to keep an eye on him but to actually watch his every movement *literally* until that fifteen minutes was up.

David needed to sort through his thoughts. And he didn’t like her staring at him. Although it didn’t seem there was much he could do about that.

For a brief moment he entertained the thought of bringing her into his confidence. But he squashed that quickly. Becky was too religious to help him kill Jillian. Even if it was what Jillian wished. Even if she would be set free to live elsewhere in the process. He was pretty certain that Becky believed they were getting shuttled back and forth, but he was certain that, if left to chose, Becky would let God handle things.

But God hadn’t handled much in David’s life to his satisfaction, and he wasn’t about to let the big man have another go at it over something this important.

Besides, if he didn’t succeed, Jillian would likely wake up over here, and he had no doubt that she’d have no qualms about killing *him* for failing. And if the thought of the promised eight surgeries and twenty-four months of physical therapy didn’t terrify him, living with Jordan while Jillian was stranded here sounded even worse.

He sat with his thoughts while Becky sat with hers and watched him. He wasn’t much for prayer, but he did ask that she not be able to read his face. Rebecca Sorenson was probably one of God’s favorites, and *He* would use her to stop David if necessary.

The tent flap lifted and a physician walked in. David knew he had seen the man before, but couldn’t recall the name. Thank God doctors knew they weren’t memorable and saved everybody time by stitching their names onto their jackets.

“He’s up!” Dr. Lee exclaimed.

Becky nodded, “About ten minutes.”

The doc frowned and both of them knew what he was about to say. Becky cut off the protest. “I was told not to leave him, and no one was nearby. Not to mention, as long as you guys are doing your job, someone will be by within fifteen minutes. Still want to yell at me?”

The snappiness registered with David, making him wonder when she’d grown a backbone. But come to think of it she’d been growing it all along, just like she’d been adding those years to her face.

The doctor shook his head at her. He couldn’t yell. It was a southern thing, David saw, for the women to be able to lay you low and leave you with no good response.

But even if the doc couldn’t give Becky the what for, he could torture David. Coming over he started in with his stethoscope. He listened to David’s chest and back. He held his two fingers over



David's wrist, counting the pulse and feeling for its strength in a way that always seemed vaguely sexual. He was glad when the doc nodded and said he was good enough to get up.

*I could have told you that. How many times have you woken from a coma, huh?*

The snide remarks churned in his head, and probably across his expression, until the doctor started yanking off the EKG attachments, taking tiny patches of hair with them. "Ow!"

The smile he got said *suck it up*.

*Damn doctor.*

After he yanked every last sticker, the doctor turned to Jillian, taking stats and jotting things in her chart. Which, of course, he just had tucked under his arm. They were way too technically precise around here. Which was odd, because here and there were really the same place, and he hadn't seen a single chart on the other side. And he sure had a hell of a lot more to chart over there. The doc scribbled a few things, and David tensed.

But the two fingers against Jillian's wrist didn't rouse her. Neither did the thumb raising her eyelid to reveal an unfocused lake of blue beneath. David couldn't hide his shudder as he wondered if the docs had been doing that to him. The doctor smiled and left. And aside from being unhooked, it was like the man had never been there.

"I guess you're cleared for take-off." Becky's voice interfered with his thoughts again. Bringing him back to the fact that he had to hide what he was going to do.

With his legs wobbling beneath him, she helped him down. He was getting better at it every time. But hopefully this would be the last.

A few precariously balanced steps later he shrugged Becky off and said 'seeya' to her startled face. But better that she be pissed than suspicious. He wandered into the cafeteria forcing himself to eat something, even though his stomach rebelled at what he was about to do. All he could even pick up was a bag of chips, and he forced himself to munch them slowly, one by one, while he wound his way back out into the cold day. The red glow of sun hit him where it had made it's final bid to creep over the tops of the mountains while he had been in the cafeteria.

He tried - *tried* - to be normal, knew he was an asshole, and tried to put that into his walk. He tried to find the meds tent. And found it exactly where Jillian had said it would be.

David just wasn't sure how to get potassium chloride out of it without looking furtive. So he headed in, thinking he'd play innocent and act all confused if someone caught him and kicked him out.

The light inside was a too-bright fluorescent, and he was glad. He would be able to read the names on the shelves and bottles clearly. His only concern was that he might be casting a shadow on the outside.

He wasn't sure if he'd find it filed under the scientific 'K' or English 'P'.

It jumped out at him in the 'P' section after he'd checked every 'K'. Pocketing the bottle he scrounged for a needle. Knowing that if they saw him now he'd have less of a chance of bluffing his way out.

He found the needles, and a syringe, and fumbled with thick fingers to plug the two together. He'd contaminated the injection all to hell, and he knew it, but since he was going to kill her with it, did a little bacteria really matter? He bit his lip at the thought of actually, purposefully killing another human being. And not just any human: Jillian.

He drew up the solution into the syringe, realizing only after he did it that he'd forgotten to wipe the top with alcohol, and he'd contaminated the whole bottle of clear solution, too.

Why hadn't he watched ER more often?

He couldn't steal the whole vial. They'd count that it was missing, and Jillian's death might get investigated. Being here wouldn't mean much if he was in jail. And for a brief moment he thought about Jillian incarcerated on the other side. She might not have figured it out yet, but Jordan would be the one pulling the trigger for her. David knew it.

He couldn't in good conscience put the contaminated bottle back. He'd hurt others.

He squelched the laugh that threatened to bubble up.

After a minute of frantic searching for a way to right the problem without stealing the bottle, he squirted the solution out of his needle, wetting the grass at his feet. But it was such a small amount that it disappeared before he could account for it. He drew up more, again squirting it at the ground. After about ten times, he drew up a full syringe, carefully twisting the needle to get the solution out when it was low in the neck of the upside down bottle.

A sound outside made his neck snap straight. And for a moment he held rabbit-still, quiet except for the volcanic rush of his breathing, waiting while footsteps passed by outside with voices laughing and chattering.

His stale breath let out, the steel in his shoulders dissolving. He had to finish, and quickly. He'd give himself a heart attack and die. Then Jillian wouldn't. And he'd be dead here. Then they'd kill him on the other side.

God what a cluster-fuck they were going to have if anything went wrong.



David replaced the contaminated bottle exactly where he'd found it. It was there to be catalogued, but now too low for anyone to use. Someone would get pissed at whoever had left it, but no one would get hurt.

Except him!

He re-grabbed the bottle and wiped the fingerprints off it. *Stupid, stupid.* A clean bottle was a giveaway that someone had been intentional with the meds. He touched the glass to the backs of his fingers, thinking that would leave it not looking wiped, but not leading directly to his door.

Surely a DNA test would point to him, but they'd have to be pretty suspicious of him before they dragged out that artillery. Capping the needle and pocketing it, he listened at the tent flap, and, not hearing anything, stepped out into the still morning. With the syringe safely ferreted away, his brain wandered to what would happen after he killed Jillian.

His lab in Chicago waited for him.

The First had been kind and proud and supportive for twenty-seven hours in a row.

His body worked.

He could settle in there. Dig into his lab, and run core samples from the local oil wells for the rest of his life. David figured no one was going to come after him for a few rock plugs after the whole apocalypse thing.

The morning air bit at him as he walked back to the tent he and Jillian had shared only to find a tech pushing a medication into her IV, while she watched the numbers.

David stood quietly, wondering if he'd been beaten to the punch. Especially when Jillian's heart rate began to race, then slowly leveled and dropped off. The tech shook her pretty blond head, and turned away.

"Ack!" Her blues eyes jerked wide open at the sight of him, and her hand jumped up splaying perfectly manicured nails wide across her chest to slow her own racing heart. "I didn't see you there." Then the hand came out in a gesture halfway between a handshake and a request to have the back kissed. "Lucy Whitman."

David had to unclench his right hand from around the needle hidden in his jacket pocket and he grasped her fingers, making sure he didn't reveal anything. Just in case he had squeezed so hard he left an imprint of the syringe on his palm.

"What did you do to her?" He pointed at the still prone form, getting paler as she lay amidst the dark ribbons of her hair.

"We've been injecting potassium chloride into her every half hour." Lucy missed the shock that registered on his face and kept going. "Trying to raise her heart rate and maybe even jolt her out of it." The slim shoulders lifted in the shrug that seemed to be the new universal response. No one knew much of anything these days. At least the sun was still coming up regularly.

He schooled his voice to remain steady, grateful that he was standing behind Lucy, watching Jillian's lack of movement from over the tech's shoulder. "Won't that stuff kill her?"

She laughed, a soft airy sound that shot straight to his groin, as she turned to face him. Her red lips looked like they were good for more than just explaining medications, and David was grateful that he would stay here, where he was clearly functional.

"It won't hurt her in the concentrations we use. It's very dilute."

He focused on the words and their meanings, absorbing what she'd said and not just how she'd looked. By the time the oxygen was going to his brain again, she'd excused herself and left the tent to report on the patient.

David blinked a few times, searching for the way that this would help him. He wished he had Jillian's brain right now. But that would defeat the whole purpose. He didn't even realize that he was gravitating toward her until his hip was spiked by the slightly open drawer Miss Blonde must have left. *Son of a bitch!*

He stilled his hand just before he slammed it. Revenge never played well against inanimate objects, and he could see needles lying on a once sterile drape in the bottom of the drawer.

Dark marker, in very bad handwriting denoted that there were four KCl syringes and that the solution was very dilute compared to what he'd pulled straight from the bottle. There were also a few in varying concentrations of epinephrine. Although why the docs would want to give Jillian a 'fight or flight' response, he couldn't figure.

Pulling his own syringe from his pocket he compared the two. His was fatter and would never pass as one of those if he just laid it in the drawer. Plus it didn't have the bad handwriting on it. For some reason all the anal retentive people were over here. He might like that in his lab, he thought. But now he got himself back to the problem of making his syringe look like the ones in the drawer - the ready-made injections for Jillian.

Becky ducked her head in, and he quickly yanked his hand back behind him, hoping that he could hide the needle and that the second-grade maneuver had actually worked. But it seemed she didn't notice. "Lucy just came by and told me that it didn't work. Jillian's heart rate is dropping lower and lower." Becky's soft sigh came to him through the air that was suddenly too warm in the little tent with the tiny sun contained in the space heater. "Maybe next time."

"When is next time?"

His heart soared. And crashed. He might not figure it out in time.

"Maybe an hour. They're afraid they're losing her." Her lips pressed into a sad smile. But like everyone else, Becky had gotten used to the idea of losing people.

He tried a very un-David-like move, and hoped it would get filed under 'everything is weird these days'. "I think I'm just going to sit here with her."

He hoped that Becky understood that he'd like to do it *alone*. It worked too well. Doctor Sorenson's sweet smile held the belief that he was truly Jillian's lover, wanting to sit and hold her hand. And obligingly she ducked out while he held back the laughter that threatened from the irony of it all. And for a moment he just stared at the syringe in his hand.

He did sit vigil beside Jillian's bed for a while. At least it would have looked that way to anyone who stopped in. But his mind was churning, trying to figure out how to get his solution into one of those syringes.

Then he wouldn't have to pull the trigger himself. He could just wait until a tech picked up the right syringe and did the job for him.

He sat there staring at her, until he was startled by another tech beside him. He hadn't heard the kid enter, just jumped when the finger tapped his shoulder, and the young voice asked would he please scoot over so that Dr. Brookwood could be examined?

David blinked a few times and didn't say anything, just watched while the boy, who must have been no older than twenty, went through all the same motions of taking vital signs that the doctor had. He cranked up the oxygen, opened the flow on the IV a touch, scribbled notes in the chart and left.

David's own heartbeat set up a steady countdown. He had to do something quick, get that syringe traded out. He was reaching for the drawer when the tech burst back through the tent flaps again. The sun was up high enough that light filtered through all the pores in the tent, and the tent flaps let in just enough that a person who was paying a little attention would know that someone had come in.

David nearly jumped clean out of his skin, his senses hyper-alert with the work he was about to do. But the tech was paying no attention to him. As long as David was out of his way, the practiced movements came off like clockwork.

His eyes focused with fascination, David watched as the guy pulled the first syringe from the left of the row in the drawer. For a few brief moments he executed the precise rhythmic set up, yanking the needle cap with his teeth, he swabbed the rubber covered spot on the Y-tubing, and injected the full syringe. With his eyes transfixed on the machinery and the numbers it was blurping out, the tech's hands slid the used syringe into the red plastic biohazard box mounted behind the countertop.

Again David watched with perverse fascination while her heartrate spiked and then plummeted again.

The tech sighed in defeat and turned to leave.

David almost let him go, but blurted out at the last minute, stopping the tech. "Wasn't that fast? I thought it was going to be an hour before you tried again."

The tech nodded solemnly. "Her sats are too low. We've bumped it up."

David took a swallow, and tried his best to look like a heartsick lover. He hadn't tried to act since high school theater. His father hadn't come to see him in that performance either, and for a brief moment he reminded himself that this Eden had a snake. Swinging his focus back to the job at hand he started to ask how long it would be before they came back, but he stopped himself, knowing it would be soon enough. "I'm not sure if I can watch this. If I leave, can I just come back and sit with her?"

The tech tilted his head, and gave a sad smile. "Of course you can, Dr. Carter. We don't mind."

David made short work of plucking the left-most syringe from the drawer and squirting the contents onto the ground before carefully pulling the plunger from his own fat vial. He stuck the needle in the back and drew up the pure stuff, trying to splurt out the air bubbles, then delicately aligning it with the level on the other syringes.

He replaced it at the left-hand side of the drawer and carefully shut it. His feet had almost made it the tent door when he spun and went back - switching the pure syringe to the second spot.

It would be soon enough.

And he would be nowhere near when it happened.

Home beckoned.

• • • •

JORDAN'S HANDS HAD a fine tremor. He could read the same in Jillian's, but knew that hers was due to the medications. His was due to the fact that he was about to kill a man.

As they walked quietly back toward the tent where David lay, his brain was anything but silent. That was the tent where Jillian had spent so many hours, unmoving and unresponding. She wouldn't go there again. Not after this. She wouldn't be reminded of it, and neither would he. They would pack everything up and head back to Atlanta.

Landerly had flown out this morning, leaving only a note. There were a few lines that made Jordan believe that the old man knew what they were up to and was heading out of town to get himself a little more of that 'plausible deniability' he liked so much.

Inside his jacket pocket, Jordan's gloved hand made a warm nest where it curled around the syringe. Outside of his pocket he tried to keep himself relaxed and looking less than suspicious. But his lungs breathed in a little too deeply, and he forced his eyes to wander the landscape. Although the sky cut bright shades of blue above him the daytime hours were cold now, too. And the air smelled heavy with tiny shards of ice. Snow wasn't far away, and he wanted to be back in Atlanta before it fell.

He wouldn't be able to stand being trapped in this town when the ice came and made all the roads through the surrounding mountains impassable. It was the exact reason the government had built the town here, and the exact reason he had to get out. His heart hammered with it, and he wondered absently if he would suffer a major coronary at a relatively young age from all the stress he was enduring now.

The heat hit him first, signaling that he should pay attention. He had stepped through the tent flap Jillian held open for him, and he was assaulted again by the vision of this man lying on the gurney. When David was awake he was every inch holier-than-thou. Richer-than-thou. Better-than-thou. And funny and charming enough to be fairly likable anyway.

There was going to be a perverse satisfaction in pushing the plunger.

"Can we do it this time?" Her voice was the only organic sound in the tent. Barely loud enough to be distinguishable over the beeping and printing noises that provided a lush synthetic jungle.

Every time they had decided it was time to do it, they had talked themselves out of it. The last time, an hour and a half ago, they had talked themselves up to this. Their first concern had been that he was truly under. Not on some snap turnaround. When David had been out for just half an hour, they said he certainly wasn't awake on the other side yet. If they stopped his heart before he awoke over there they might truly kill him. At an hour and a half they gave him until three hours under, just to be sure.

David's vitals had taken the steady plunge they expected. He might well die on his own, they offered up all the possibilities, but Jordan knew that he and Jillian were just chickening out one way after another. And being smart, they were able to come up with really good arguments for allowing themselves to wait.

This was it though.

If they didn't do it this time, David might wake back up.

Jordan ignored thoughts that told him he might really be killing the man. And that the woman at his side was delusional. With his feelings for her he couldn't overlook his obvious bias. Yes, jail time was a definite option. Or perhaps he'd just suffer a simple lifetime of guilt.

He sighed as she pressed the Velcro on the tent flap together. "All right, keep watch." He pulled the syringe from his pocket, quickly clenching it between his teeth and swabbed the IV tubing.

"Don't you dare!"

He almost jumped, and nearly coughed out the syringe. "Wha?" It was all he could pronounce with the thing in his mouth.

"I'm doing it."

Removing the potassium chloride so he could speak, he braced his fists at his hips and stared her down. "Jillian, no."

"Jordan, yes." Her eyes were unrelenting, and matched her tone.

He felt his mouth open in protest. But as usual, Jillian's brain worked faster than his and she shot him down before he even got a good aim.

“It’s *my* life I’m buying. I’ll pay for it myself.” Fire leapt in her gaze and she lunged for the needle in his hand.

Only then did he realize that he was stronger and taller than she was, and he could win this argument even if her little tongue was sharper. He jerked the needle over his head.

“Don’t you *dare!*”

“Dare? It’s done.” He shrugged, keeping the needle high while she plastered herself to him and jumped, attempting to reach what was way over her head. While he controlled the needle, he could think at his own pace. “Let me do it. If anyone suspects anything, they won’t suspect me.”

“Bullshit! You two have been circling each other like caged tigers for weeks now. But I’ll be damned if I know why. Anyone with a brain in their head would suspect you.”

*Circling each other?* It was that obvious? Jesus. But the needle was still out of her reach, despite numerous jumps. So he had time to think.

“You’re clearly mentally deranged. For God’s sake, you think you’re going back and forth to another planet!”

That stopped her in her tracks. “What?”

“That’s what they’ll say, Jillian. You’re high up on the suspect list, too, you know.” He kept his voice soft, but not soothing.

“Then even if they convict me they’ll put me in the psych ward, I’ll be out in no time. Give me the damned needle.”

She jumped again. And Jordan fought for another argument, another hurdle to put in her path. But again she thought it through before he did. “I’ll scale you like a tree.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

And try she did. He almost laughed, it felt like junior high all over again. Except the part where the argument was about who got to kill David. That sobered him up.

Again as he opened his mouth to argue, the words that filled the air were hers. “You do it. I’ll just sit down,” she stopped the useless jumping and lowered herself into the corner chair, tucking up her legs and letting loose a languid yawn, setting off coils of alarm in him, “and go to sleep.” Her head drifted down against the pole, her soft lashes fluttering shut and then going still.

His heartbeat stopped with her eye movement. “Damnit, Jilly!” It was practically a yell. People would come from all around to see what was going on. They’d both get locked up and David would come back. All this arced through his thoughts as he grabbed her shoulders and violently shook her awake.

“Here!” He slapped the needle into her hand. She played dirty, but with that threat he had to let her win.

Even now she was blinking and re-orienting herself. Just like that, she had actually fallen asleep. And he couldn’t let her. Not until they were sure.

As he watched, Jillian forced air into her lungs. She awoke by sheer willpower, and stood on less than solid legs. But then she mustered up the sweetest *I win* smile he’d ever seen and he bit back the word that appeared at the back of his tongue. *Bitch.*

He stood at the threshold of the tent, hoping to hear through the Velcro closures if anyone was coming. And grateful for the excuse not to watch her. He heard no one, and so after a few seconds he turned around expecting her to be done.

But no. She came square into his visual field, burning into his retinas an image that he would see for the rest of this life. Long after Jillian was gone, he would remember that he had watched her kill David. She injected slowly, counting to make sure she kept the pace.



*Four-mississippi-five-mississippi-six-mississippi-*

He thought the sound was simply in his head, but then realized he could hear her voice faintly, her lips moving across the texture of each sound while her eyes stared at the readout screen. Just as it should, David's heart slowly picked up speed, passing normal, and plateauing at 110 before finally starting to slow.

Jordan knew what that meant, and sure enough, when he looked, Jillian had depressed the plunger all the way to the end of the syringe. But she didn't withdraw, just stood there mesmerized by the numbers. Jordan softly crossed the room to her, but she didn't notice until his hands closed over hers, grasping the needle and IV line tight in her fingers and separating the two.

Still she stood, just staring, until he decided to pull the needle from her hand before she dropped it. Jordan busied his hands shoving the syringe down into the sharps box, the red plastic probably having swallowed the last evidence of their crime. The drugs would break down quickly inside David, and given his condition, hopefully no one would ever suspect anything other than that his heart gave out.

But looking at Jillian, Jordan suspected a lot more.

Tears swarmed her face, marring her cheeks and dripping unceremoniously from her chin out of time with the slowing heartbeats. She didn't shake or sob, just swallowed her air in tiny gulps. He couldn't place his finger on it, but he could read it, something about the way she leaned in toward the man on the gurney, something in her eyes. She didn't feel guilty. She felt loss.

With the evidence gone, they could simply stay and watch. Jordan felt compelled to be certain it worked. He would never forgive himself if he came back and David was alive, or God forbid, awake.

He didn't control his hands so much as he felt them settle on Jillian's shoulders. Somehow that touch let loose what had only been the surface, and she began sobbing in earnest. Still, it took a moment before she turned and buried her face against him.

His arms went around her, a gesture of simple human kindness. He didn't really want to comfort her for the loss of a man he was glad had somewhere else to be. But the curiosity was too much. And the need to finalize it in his head was overwhelming. So he forced himself to get it out quickly. "You fell in love with him."

After the words came, he realized that he hadn't asked. He hadn't needed to. And he held her while she cried, and let himself kick his own ass for how he had fallen for her.

It was definitely time to go back to Atlanta. He realized now that he had a job waiting for him, with or without her. And that he couldn't simply pack her up and make her come with him. She had family to attend to. He had to get up to see his Dad more often. Call his father and tell him that the girl had made it, and that it hadn't all worked out in his favor but that he'd be okay in a while.

His skin itched in the restless way it did when he needed to act and hadn't for whatever reason. He hadn't itched going to Atlanta. The job offer had come through and he had simply thrown all his belongings in a few boxes and notified his student loans where he was moving and took off. There hadn't been time to *want* to go, simply the going. But now he needed to leave, and he was tied here, at least for a few more days.

He had to be sure that Jillian could sleep, and only sleep. Not slide into some brain-dead state and slip away. That she would wake up if she was roused, and make all those normal movements that she did while she was asleep.

"No."

The word startled him from his thoughts and, for a moment, from his restless urge to leave. “No, what?”

“No, I’m not in love with him.” Her voice was soft and low, but solid. He knew when she lied, and this wasn’t one of those times.

“Then why all the tears?”

At first she just sighed, and he could feel the movement against his chest. Her mahogany hair was loose and hanging heavy down her back, and teased him just under his nose. All of which reminded him that he had to pull away, that he needed to pack up and leave.

“I’ll miss him.” She jerked against him, and he thought it was a sob, but when she looked up the grin on her face was unmistakable. “I know he could be an ass, but I liked him.”

Jordan shook his own head, “Yup, that’s David. Too much money and too much charm.” *But at least I still have all my hair.*

“*Was David.*”

His body jerked as he realized the beeping had gone silent. The EEG showed no activity at all. The pulse-ox was slowly dwindling lower and lower and was already low enough that it was well below the amount of oxygen necessary for human life.

Jillian turned away and looked at the body for a moment before she began methodically removing all the electrodes and needles. She put a cottonball over the needle as she slid the IV out, but didn’t seem surprised when no more than a dot of blood welled from the site.

There wouldn’t be any CPR, no heroic measures. Not like if it had been Jillian that slipped away. For a moment the thought entered his head, wondering if he would have been able to push the medications into Jillian if she had asked him to.

Truth be told, he didn’t know. And he shoved the thought to the back parts of his brain, refusing to let it go any further.

At last her hand rested softly over David’s and she turned to look at Jordan, “It’s time to go tell everyone.” Tears still hovered at the edge of her eyes, and even though she had wiped them away, the tales of crying were all over her face.

*No one will suspect her.*

The thought was comforting even in its morbidity.

They left the tent side by side, and immediately ran into a tech headed their way, “How’s he doing?”

The timing fused through Jordan, they could have easily been caught. But he quelled that with the thought that they *hadn’t*. And that was all that was important now. It wasn’t like he was going to make this a habit and needed to be better prepared the next time.

“He didn’t make it.” Jillian’s voice hitched at the end of the sentence, giving credence to her sorrow.

The tech looked to Jordan and he offered a quick nod confirming what she’d said. “We unhooked him, he needs to be transported to the morgue. Would you set someone up to do that?”

“Of course.” The young man started to duck into the tent, but stopped himself. “Are you headed over to fill out the death certificate?”

Jordan nodded, even as he saw Jillian stiffen beside him. Neither of them had thought of that apparently. Well, it was a good thing they were desk jockeys for the most part. And luckily they’d been headed that direction anyway.

Half an hour later the certificate had been signed. Landerly had been notified, and he asked Jordan how Jillian was doing. “She’s awake sir. But I’m not sure how much longer she’ll stay that

way.”

“Keep her up.” Was all he said before he disconnected the line. And Jordan didn’t even consider it rude. His mother would have killed him if he’d done anything like that. But Landerly was just that way. And Jillian could easily become that way.

She stood and stretched, letting loose a long yawn. “Okay, bedtime for Bonzo, here.”

“No!”

She frowned against the violence of his retort. “Why not?”

“What if he isn’t finished?” Jordan couldn’t stop the words, “He isn’t us, he doesn’t know where everything is. He’ll be slower at getting it done. You haven’t felt anything-”

“Who’s to say I will?” She pushed against her back, calm despite his fluttering. “If that’s our criteria I may never sleep. And I’m already half nuts. Good night.”

“No, Landerly told me to keep you up.”

“Landerly can bite my ass. And I’ll be asleep so I won’t even feel it.” She shrugged her jacket back on, having shed it in the heat of the records tent. “Good night.”

Jumping to give chase, Jordan tugged on his own jacket and followed her out. “Just a few hours more. I’ll medicate you again.”

“No.” She stopped cold in the middle of the walkway and faced him, standing her tired ground. “That stuff felt like cocaine as best I could tell.”

“Then eat. You need food.”

Her eyes blinked, but slower than usual, causing panic to surge through him.

“I won’t eat cafeteria food anymore. Good night.”

“No. I’ll get you something good.” He waved a pointed finger in her face and watched as her eyes tracked it. “There’s a Chic-Fil-A just over that hill.” He pointed with one hand and grabbed her wrist with the other. “Let’s go.”

She resisted, but didn’t have enough body weight to slow him down. “We’re walking?”

“Yup. It’ll keep you awake.” He tugged and she stumbled along beside him, but he didn’t slow the pace. His own feet were keeping beat with the jack-hammering of his heart. He hoped David had gotten the job done. But he didn’t *know*. And the consequences were too severe if they were wrong. She would just have to keep up.

So she did. She didn’t utter a single word all the way up and over the hill. Only placed her order at the counter and bordered on falling asleep in the booth when he went back to get the food. The skeleton crew of the fast-food joint eyed her a bit. But her behavior wasn’t that odd considering everything else that had gone on.

Jordan made her chose a soda with caffeine and forced her to drink all of it. But he didn’t have to make her eat a single chicken nugget or waffle fry. Those went down all on their own. Her only comment the whole trip was, “I can’t believe this was right here and I didn’t know it.” But he was grateful that at least she wouldn’t be losing any more weight today.

He thought about weighing her when they returned to the tent town, but she was falling asleep on her feet, even as they paced her back to the tent. Jordan recognized that she had led him back to the tent she and David had shared. But they both stopped cold at the sight of the draped body on the gurney.

Jillian did an about face and walked off in a different direction for a few steps, before realizing that she didn’t know where she was going.

Jordan grabbed her elbow, “Come on, my tent’s over this way. I need to keep an eye on you anyway.” He pulled her through the white rows to another of the identical tents, and pushed her

inside.

He saw it with new eyes as she scanned the tiny square of space. The single gurney, the orange light shed by one of the standard space heaters, his duffle bag tossed into the corner, open with scrubs and one pair of jeans flowing out of it and across the once neat line of shoes that sat beside the bag. The countertop covered with squared stacks of folders.

Jillian laughed. There wasn't much energy behind it but it was an honest sound. "I would have known this was yours, it looks just like your desk back home." With that final statement she shed her jacket and crawled onto the gurney he had lowered to a normal bed height. For a few minutes they were quiet while he hooked her up to every available machine and set the alarms. When they were finished she adjusted covers while he grabbed folders and lowered himself into the uncomfortable chair in the corner.

He had been awake as long as she had, longer even, and his eyelids blinked in slow rhythm. The paperwork would keep him alert. But it was Jillian that kept him up. She rolled over, adjusted the covers, curled up in a fetal position, and rolled back. His own head lolled as he started to drift off, only to be pulled back by the soft rustle of Jillian's feet touching the ground. "I have to go to the bathroom."

He didn't say anything, just watched while she unsnapped electrodes and wires and slid back into her jacket and shoes before padding off into the daylight beyond the tent walls. Looking around he realized that it was very light inside the tent. But he couldn't be upset that she had stretched her awake time by another half-hour.

He dozed while she was gone, but jerked awake at the sound of the Velcro ripping. Without a word she slipped out of shoes and jacket and into wires and tubes and slid back between the covers, and began her restless tossing again.

His breathing evened and he felt himself slipping, just as her voice cut through. "Jordan. Wake up."

"Huh?" He used his legs to push himself upright and run his fingers through his hair. The daylight was the same shade and angle as he remembered it - only a few minutes had passed.

"Get up here. You're falling asleep in that chair and I can't." She held out her hand and waved him toward her.

It wasn't an invitation of the sort he wanted. It was Jillian, ever practical. But the thought wasn't unwelcome. "It's narrow, I can't have you rolling out."

"So put up the baby bar." Even as she said it, she pulled the release catch, tugging at the side rail. He reached out and, snapped the smooth metal easily into place. The back rail was already up, where he had left it to prevent him from rolling against the tent wall and thinking in his sleep that it was more solid than it was. The only option left was crawling up from the foot of the bed, and he made his way while Jillian shifted and adjusted the covers.

Within moments he curled behind her and draped his arm across her waist, waiting for her to protest. She didn't, just softly leaned back against him, probably completely unaware that he liked it. But she didn't curl into him because she wanted to, there just weren't other options in the tiny space.

With a few deep breaths he slipped off, consciousness growing frayed at the edges of his vision. Before he lost all contact he thought he felt Jillian's body relax, and he prayed that it was sleep.



Becky stood just behind the first row of mourners, draped in her best black. Her parents and Brandon stood beside her, having shown up just to show up. They were using any excuse to see her these days - even Jillian's funeral.

Her eyes skimmed the crowd. The Brookwood women formed a solid front on the other side of the gleaming casket, Jillian one of only two family members they had lost. All this ascension talk had been most difficult on the families that lost one or two. How could they say that their loved ones had been among the damned?

They hadn't even been able to visit Jillian while she'd been awake. They lived on a mountain just north of the Georgia border and had been iced in the entire time. They had spoken to her on the phone once or twice but it was all that they had managed. Of course, they had gotten a warm front, just in time to throw the first dirt at their daughter's funeral. Sometimes God seemed cruel.

Behind the Brookwoods, under the shade of a tall oak, David lingered at the edges. He had been at the edges since Jillian had died yesterday. The funeral had been put together quickly, with the mortuaries running at full speed and processing body after body. Not all of them got a full funeral. There simply wasn't the time or resources. There were talks of mass graves for the unclaimed at the morgues. But no one would hear of it. The bodies would have to stay in the coolers until the religious right and wrong had a service for each of the damned.

Jillian was important though. And her funeral got precedence, just like Jordan's had. Becky had attended it, too, just like she had attended so many others.

She hoped this would be the last, at least for a good long while.

The preacher said the final words, not even looking to his scriptures. He had the whole thing memorized by now. And he read it like he had done this twenty times already this week. He probably had.

Jillian's family stepped back away from the hole in the ground, the light reflecting off the tears in their eyes as they turned to go. There was no reception planned - no time, no group of friends - simply this spot in the cemetery with too many shiny new stones and too many unmarked graves, waiting for the stone-cutters to catch up with demand.

As the mourners parted, David made a tiny salute to her and turned away to duck into his car. He had a flight back to Chicago. He had booked it for yesterday evening, but Becky had convinced him to stay for his lover's service.

She wondered now if he was fleeing because Jillian wasn't here, or if he really didn't care. Becky wasn't stupid; she wouldn't put either option past him. There was also the vague possibility that he had killed her. If you could call it that. He might have set her free on the other side.

But Becky didn't know. She couldn't speculate. So she simply smiled and watched as the black car pulled away from the curb at a sedate pace. He was only a block away before he spun the tires and high-tailed it out to the airport; even from here she could hear the rubber squeal.

A hand touched her arm. "I'm so sorry about your friend." Her mother's voice came over her like old quilts.

"She's in a better place now." Becky said the words, the same ones everyone said, but she *believed* in a way she never had before. "So are Melanie and Aaron."

Her mother offered only a tight nod, to say 'thank-you, but no more'.

Becky wouldn't take that though. "Mom, Aaron and Melanie are together."

“Of course.” The hand patted her on the arm while her mother visibly disengaged from the conversation.

“Mom! Listen to me.” She took a deep breath and let it all fall out. “When Jillian would go into a coma, she would be awake somewhere else. With Jordan, her lab partner. And she said a little girl hacked her way into the CDC phone lines convincing the staff that she was a Doctor Sorenson.”

Her mother blinked, still not comprehending, still not wanting to. But Becky pushed, her mother was made of sterner stuff than this. “She talked to Jillian. Mom, it was Melanie. Jillian and Jordan drove out to the house and picked up the notebooks I left behind. They saw Aaron and Melanie.”

“When?” Finally she had her mother’s attention. Rapt green eyes, so like her own, fixated on her daughter.

“Three days ago.”

“But they were already-”

“*There*. Mom, they’re not here. But they aren’t dead.”

She felt the cold seep in as she watched her mother’s spine stiffen and shield her from belief. The disconnect was more powerful now, now that she had less siblings to fall back on. Her mother turned away. “That’s just silly.”

This time it was her hand that grabbed at her mother’s arm. But she wasn’t gentle. She didn’t follow the dictates of society. And she didn’t care. “It’s not silly, it’s true. Jillian described Aaron and the house to a T. She said Melanie decided to go to the biology magnet *even if it meant riding the short bus*. How would she have known?”

Her mother’s face took on the worried look of the convinced.

“It’s true Mom. They’re just somewhere else.”

“Then why aren’t they here? Why did God split up a good family?” A glaze of tears threatened at her mother’s eyes, and suddenly with that acceptance Becky knew what to do. Even though she didn’t know she’d been deciding.

“God split up a lot of good families, Mom. I don’t know why. But we’re together and they’re together. Aaron moved home to be with her.” She sighed. “And I’m moving home, too, Mom.”

“Rebecca!”

Arms were thrown around her with a joy that took her off balance. It made the other mourners stop and stare. But only for a moment. Things were odd these days and funerals were a dime a dozen. Black was getting a lot of wear, and a happy outburst at a funeral wasn’t something to be too surprised about.

“I may not move into the house. But I’ll be close.”

Her mother’s smile curved up, holding all the wishes a parent could have for a child.

“I’ll see if I can get grants from the CDC to study the species here. Or maybe go back to the University. See if Warden is still there or not.” Her mouth pulled up in a resigned grin.

If he was, she’d handle him. She had more clout now, maybe even some recognition.

She hugged each member of her family, then each member of Jillian’s. She told them the same thing: that Jillian was in a better place. But she didn’t elaborate. They looked like they wouldn’t want to hear it. Like they all had sticks up their asses. Then she sent up a little prayer asking forgiveness for her thought. And followed it with a second prayer that the sticks be removed, before turning to catch the car that was heading back into Oak Ridge.

Three scientists shared the midsized sedan with her. In the same tasteful gold that all the CDC cars had been. She declined a front seat and spent the short trip to the center of town staring out the

window at the landscape she knew so well - the patches of brown along the hillsides, the organic shapes of the Appalachian mountains rising up against the backdrop of too-blue sky.

And sure enough, even though no visible clouds rolled in, the color changed quickly and surely to grey during the short drive. When they exited the car they were treated to the first flakes of the first snow of the season.

With closed eyes, Becky stood at the edge of the high school field, and smelled the air she knew so well, felt the prickle of cold as it invaded her senses, and knew that she couldn't go back to Atlanta. Not for longer than it would take to pack her things.

She belonged here.

It was five o'clock, before her father managed to come get her. He simply hugged her and they were silent for most of the winding road home. But when they got there the front door opened to greet her with heat and laughter.

She went to put her things in Melanie's room, believing that Mel was here, even if she couldn't be seen. That by being in this house she was as close to her brother and sister as she could be. She took in a deep breath of the smells of little girl and clean ruffled curtains before heading out to have the spaghetti dinner they had held for her.

• • • •

JILLIAN TURNED, OR tried to turn, but something stopped her. She tried again, this time attempting to open her eyes as well. Neither worked. As she rolled forward, pins and needles shot up her right arm, as it reacted to being freed from her body weight. Her left shoulder hit something cold and metal. And, as grateful as she was that she could move, she jerked back, eliciting a grunt from the wall behind her.

*Jordan!*

"Jordan?" Her voice was mumbly, and right then she knew. She lacked the deep dry creak of waking from coma - she was *here*, where she had planned, hoped, to be.

"Jilly?" She smiled at the still asleep voice, and for a moment she could believe they were in a Florida hotel, checking out a little girl with a spider bite. But her IV tugged at the tape on her arm and her electrode snap stickers itched. And Jordan's voice became clearer. "Jilly!"

He shuffled his position and she shuffled hers to where she could smile at him. And he deserved a smile, damned if his hair wasn't sticking straight up and out.

He smiled again. "None of the alarms went off. And I set them pretty high. They'd have woken us both if you started slipping." Relief radiated from him in tangible waves. He didn't make any motions of resisting the urge to hug her, and before she knew it she was engulfed and squeezed, but she didn't mind.

But then his hands were everywhere, checking the pulse at her throat, then the radial pulses at each wrist, he looked into each eye separately then moved side to side to see if she was tracking him. She endured to make him feel better until he grabbed a stethoscope from the end of the bed.

She shoved at him, snapping one of the electrodes free, "Get your damn hands off of me! That's going to be cold as-" she didn't get to finish. The machine had reached its count and began wailing the alarm that its patient had dropped below reasonable levels, or removed an electrode, which was not acceptable.

Jillian slapped her hands over her ears, as Jordan scrambled to the head of the bed to disengage the wailing noise. The shrieking was loud enough that it just might have pulled her back had she started to slip away.



The sound stopped, leaving a ringing in her head that almost masked the sound of Jordan's heaved sigh. Just as she laid her head back down and felt some of the tension slip away, three techs ripped through the Velcro and burst into the room looking like white-coated avengers.

"Is everything okay?" They looked everywhere for the source of the alarm, stopping only when Jordan waved a hand from behind her and told them it was all fine.

It was then that their eyes stopped roving and settled on the two doctors sandwiched on one gurney. The taller tech with dark hair couldn't keep his eyebrows from raising. As Jillian turned her head away she saw Jordan's hand shooing them away, and the look on his face told them it wasn't any of their business.

The sigh settled deep into her lungs, making her grateful for the air even as she was frustrated. "Not again."

"Again?" This time it was Jordan's eyebrows that rose.

"Nothing." *Great.* On both sides now she had been found in the arms of one of her colleagues. It seemed life always had a way of catching up with her. But she fought the frustration by doing something. She yanked wires, freeing electrodes from their snaps and flat-lining all her readings. She sat up, rubbing her head and gently lifting the stickers there, before yanking the ones at the corners of her chest band-aid style. She gave little yelps while Jordan watched with a smirk on his face and a hand out that she slapped each used sticker into.

"I need a shower."

"I hesitate to let you go by yourself." He shook his hand over the wastebasket, freeing the stickers and letting them fall.

"Ahh!" She was a smart girl, she should be able to come up with a better protest than *that*. But before she could Jordan spoke again.

"I was kidding. It sounds like a good idea." He grabbed towels out of the cabinet and they bundled up, heading across the fields to the gym. She was thankful for the wave of heat that rolled over them when they opened the double doors and traipsed to opposite sides of the large wooden floor.

Only then did she realize that she hadn't brought a change of clothes, and she'd have to climb back into the scrubs she had slept in. *Not like anyone would notice*, it wasn't like she ever wore anything different anyway.

The hot water felt like a dream, and for a brief moment she let her eyes fall shut and stood quietly, thankful for the solitude. She hadn't been afforded any for over a week now. Everyone had been watching her with beady little hawk eyes waiting for her to slip back under.

After far too long she forced herself out from under the hot spray and tucked the towel around her torso noticing the red marks she had made from yanking the electrode stickers. As she padded carefully out to the locker area the door cracked just a little, no face showed, but she would have recognized Jordan's voice anywhere. "Jillian? What the hell were you doing in there? Surgery?"

"Enjoying the hot water." She waved her hand at him to shoo him back, even though he couldn't see it. "Now go wait for me."

She heard his chuckle as the door swung closed. She dressed and followed Jordan back out the door, where they were greeted by furls of tiny white snow attempting to warm itself in the heat of the gym. Everywhere outside the snow blew frantically. Up. Down. Sideways. It looked like Christmas morning, falling on the tiny tent town just down the hill from where they stood.

They walked through the flurries, Jillian with a soft smile on her cold lips, and as they got closer they could see heated discussions between people in bulky jackets. Jordan approached one of the

people, and whether it was a man or woman, doctor or janitor, was all obscured by thick down and fuzzy trim at the hoods. "What's the problem?"

"We have to move everyone out of the tents. They won't hold the snow, and if it melts on the tops it'll pool and leak and we'll lose millions of dollars of equipment."

She and Jordan looked at each other, and she blinked. The other people disappeared at the edges of her vision, and she spoke clearly and happily, free for the first time in forever it seemed. "Let's go home."

Jordan simply smiled.

Side by side they walked back to the tent, and Jillian reveled in her footprints. Tried to track who went where from the pathways already marked by busy feet. Later, while they were packing, the phone rang. Hoping to distract herself, she waved Jordan back to gathering his things. "Jillian Brookwood, CDC Disease Lab." Well, that hadn't come out sounding quite right, but the person on the other end didn't give her a chance to change it.

"This is Dr. Greer Larson, I believe we spoke once before. I'm looking for Dr. David Carter, is he there?"

"Oh." She kicked herself after the word slipped out. She knew better than that - you should never act surprised. But now she had to step up and tell him. "David passed away yesterday."

"Yesterday?!"

She explained, and waited patiently while he asked why he hadn't found his friend on any of the lists. She mentioned the waking and falling under, and heard the deep disappointment in the voice on the other end. He asked if she could give him a moment, and Jillian realized that David's ticket out of here was the loss of a very real friend. And knowing David, one of a very small number.

He came back on the line and started in with a deep breath. "I finally think I have an answer to that question you asked."

She started to say something brilliant, like *huh?* But he continued, "The cretaceous die-out could conceivably have all happened from an illness. In a matter of days. There isn't anything that says the dinosaurs died over time." There was a brief pause, and Jillian couldn't think of anything intelligent or comforting to say. Again it was Dr. Larson who solved the problem. "I don't know if that helps. I'm sorry if it's too late. But I wanted to pass that on."

She nodded, even knowing he couldn't see her. Then spoke in soft tones, "I'm sorry about David. He spoke highly of you." She remembered. She hadn't realized it at the time, but this was the only other scientist David had ever quoted or deferred to.

They hung up and she settled the phone back in its cradle, then waited silently on Jordan. Without speaking, they left the confines of the tent and the heat, then a little further stepped beyond the edges of the tent town into an explosion of white.

Snow clung in thick pieces to her gloves and jacket, the wind lifted her hair and sent it dancing. "Will we be able to drive in this?"

Jordan bounced the keys in his hand. "I'm from Minnesota."

They found the sedate CDC gold sedan in the parking lot and tossed the bags into the trunk before sliding into the seats. Jillian slammed the door and shivered, even through her jacket the leather of the seat felt frigid.

They warmed the engine for a few minutes. When Jordan didn't start a conversation, Jillian waited with him, silent even when he judged the engine ready and pulled out of the parking lot. She didn't need conversation, she was content just to watch the world float by in little clumps of white. Finally they merged onto the interstate, flurries blocking their vision even more.

She kept her mouth closed, not wanting to interfere with his driving, and let her brain wander. Although they were headed due south, the car's compass read 'north'. Even so, a cold, easy peace settled over her, a calm that had everything to do with the storm she left behind, so that even the storm she was in couldn't shake her.

After a while the flurries subsided to a world with clear air and a thin layer of white frosting. That gave way to a simple dusting of snow. And at last they emerged onto crisp, cold ground, with no signs of the winter they had left behind.

Not ten miles further, Jordan suddenly broke the silence. "We're getting close to Chattanooga." She looked to him, startled. And this time it was he who replied before she could form words. "Signal Mountain isn't that far out of the way. Do you want to stop to see your Dad?" "No." *He remembered.* "We never really got along. The family I talk to is all on the other side." Even while driving, he turned square to check her out for a moment. "Then why are you here?" Her mouth quirked up in a way that she couldn't help. "Let me rephrase that. My blood family is there. You and Landerly understand me a lot better than they ever did."

He smiled.

And she laughed at him. "I think you two may even like me."

Again the flash of true grin, one she hadn't seen in a long while. "That I do."

For a few minutes she just studied him, taking in the charming profile, the straight nose and brilliant eyes. His smile had faded, taking the boy into man. The mouth opened and his voice interrupted her thoughts. "What about David? I thought you two were getting serious."

"Oh no. David is . . . David. He only really cares about David." She shrugged.

"I thought you liked him."

"I do. I just accept him for what he is, and isn't."

Jordan nodded, eyes still in tune with the road ahead, not looking at her face.

Her voice was small when she spoke, realizing what needed to get said. The first words were always the hardest, and after that it would flow. "Thank you—"

"For what?" He looked at her full on again, teal eyes full of concern for whatever he didn't know.

"For taking care of me. The way Landerly says it, you busted your ass to save my life."

He reddened a bit, but spoke with pride. "Yeah, I did. And I'd do it again . . . you owe me big time."

Her laughter burst out of her, filling the edges of the car, and she wasn't sure if she saw something when he looked at her again. After the giggles died down, she settled back, they still had several hours to go. So she started in, knowing Jordan was the only one who would understand.

"If everything changed when the poles shifted, and some species wound up on one side of the shift but not the other, won't they evolve differently? The whole ecological structure has altered."

"That makes sense." He nodded, but didn't give any other follow-up.

"So, in a thousand years our descendants will have evolved differently from David and Becky's."

"I don't think Becky will have him."

She almost punched him in the arm, but held back.

He spoke again, even as he swerved the car around a tire scrap in the road, "I don't think David should ever reproduce."

Jillian rolled her eyes and steered the conversation back to where she wanted it. "So probably the same thing happened the last time the poles shifted. Some species went one way and some went the other."

She waited until Jordan nodded, acknowledging her idea. “Does that mean that there are dinosaurs somewhere?”

It made perfect sense, but she just wasn't sure she could wrap her brain around it.

**The End**

• • • •

THANK YOU FOR READING, Resonance, we hope you enjoyed it.

**Ready to read more from AJ Scudiere?**

When 8 year old Fortune goes missing for ten days, she's mysteriously returned unharmed. Her disappearance reveals secrets long hidden from her mother Mia and she might just be the key to uncovering the betrayals buried with Rafe's family. In those ten days, Mia and Rafe will learn everything they thought they knew was wrong.

"Fortune" is a two-book set that tells the same story from different perspectives. Read either book first!

**[Click Here For Your Fortune!](#)**

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

**[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)**

• • • •

AJ SCUDIÈRE— A BORN nerd, AJ was excited that her birthday often fell on the first day of school. As an adult, she continued on this geeky path, doing a thesis for an undergrad degree and then getting two more degrees. The latest is in Human Forensic Identification and Forensic Odontology.

The author of 20+ books, AJ has won 15 Best Suspense/Best Fiction of the year awards and had her work optioned for film and television. Her work is gritty and always walks the edge of reality.

Join AJ's email list at [www.ReadAJS.com/join-now](http://www.ReadAJS.com/join-now) and check out more books, sales, deals, and her latest giveaway.



# EDWIN DASSO: DEATH TARGET

---

DEATH TARGET

BY ED DASSO

**Author's Rating:**

• • • •

**Language: \*\*\* Sexuality: \*\* Violence: \*\*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Death Target (A re-imagined version of the author's previous work, Past Aghast Text Copyright 2006 Edwin Dasso. All Rights Reserved.

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold, given away to other people or replicated or distributed in any fashion without the express written approval of the author. If you would like to share this eBook with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to events, names, places or persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.





A medical suspense thriller that will keep you breathless.

**A**fter an emotionally wrenching experience in Iraq, army doctor Jack Bass is retired from the military, and takes a job as head of the department of anesthesiology of Southern Medical Center hospital. When two clinical specialists are brutally murdered, the chief of university police focuses on him as the main suspect because of his PTSD history. Jack struggles to find the truth...but isn't sure what it will be. Is he the psycho killer some say he is or is he being set up?



## Western Iraq Desert

Jack Bass, MD knelt on the hard wooden planks of the OR tent floor, rocking slightly from side to side. Though he'd wrapped the corpse he held in his arms in a clean white sheet, congealed blood now darkened the linen. Wet streaks made white tracks in the soot covering his face. The teardrops rolled down his cheeks and fell onto the gore-soaked sheet, creating random, salmon-colored specks on the crimson background.

His nostrils still burned from the gunpowder smoke—and the stench of death—he'd inhaled during the battle that had raged over the last twenty-four hours. He ignored the stinging of the small wounds on his face that still oozed blood. An occasional brief exchange of gunfire sounded from somewhere in the compound of the Army Level II Medical Treatment Facility Lt. Colonel Bass had commanded. He heard the commotion but remained motionless, despite the shouts of U.S. soldiers outside growing nearer the shredded remains of the tent.

He startled when the soldiers kicked open the doors of the OR tent, yelling as they entered, rifles held to their shoulders sweeping the interior. Jack still made no effort to rise, his head hanging heavily to his chest. Once they were all inside, the infantrymen quickly worked across the large triage area to where Jack remained on the floor. A few soldiers encircled him and halted.

“Clear!” a sergeant yelled from the door to an OR suite that he held open, peering inside. The sergeant stepped over to Jack, hovering over him, glancing at Jack's Lieutenant Colonel insignia. The sergeant let his rifle hang from its shoulder strap and gazed around.

“Any other staff around, sir?”

Jack didn't respond.

The sergeant focused back on Jack, nudging Jack's shoulder with his hand. “Colonel, sir...we're here to rescue you. You're safe now,” he announced. “You can get up.”

Jack raised his head slightly, staring blankly straight ahead, holding the lifeless body against his chest, sobbing softly as he continued to rock. A pale, flaccid arm protruded from beneath the bloody sheet, flopping slightly with each rocking motion, as if beckoning the soldiers closer...perhaps to tell them of the horrors of the past day.

The experiences of the last twenty-four hours had left Jack Bass feeling as if his soul had been ripped from him. He was now nothing but a shell, and emptiness filled the space where the essence of who he'd been as a man used to reside. He longed for death—longed to join the dead person he held. Longed to join those under his command he had been unable to save.

The sergeant smirked at Jack then pegged two privates in his squad with a glare.

“Get this guy squared away for exfil. I'm gonna scout around the outside perimeter.”

Two young privates gawked at Jack. They exchanged a quick glance and both shrugged. The soldiers pulled at the corpse Jack held but Jack pulled it even tighter against his chest. They quickly abandoned the effort.

“Medic!” one of them finally called out in exasperation.



(1045, Monday)

Gary Frigman, Chief of Police of the university that Southern Medical Center was affiliated with, was making one of his occasional unannounced late-night visits to the ER. He ignored the sideways glances from the medical staff, especially the women, as he snooped around. He'd heard the rumors about how these visits of his gave some of the women the creeps. He scowled. Not his problem. If they didn't like it, who cared? Tonight, he was looking for Dr. Misty Carrel, a new intern, about a parking violation.

He leaned back against the high counter of the front desk, his elbows perched atop it, holding in his pendulous abdomen ER staff and patients scurried about him. Every time a passing female glanced at him then pulled their smocks closed over their breasts, his face flushed hot. *Bitches—they'd be lucky to have a man like me.*

Eventually, he spotted Dr. Carrel approaching the front desk. He'd pulled her ID photograph up in his police database before he'd come up here, and he recognized her right away. She took a chart from a nurse then rushed down one of the hallways leading toward the exam rooms. After Dr. Carrel had disappeared around a corner, he turned to the nurse at the front desk.

"I need to talk to that Dr. Misty Carrel about a parking violation." He pointed toward where Misty had gone. "What room did she go to?" he asked in an official tone.

The nurse looked slowly up at Frigman, rolling her eyes. "Can it wait, Chief? She's seeing a patient," she replied tersely.

"I'll decide if it needs to wait or not, *nurse!*"

"Whatever. Room 14, surgery section," she replied then returned to making notes in a patient's chart. "Prick."

Although she'd mumbled that last bit, he'd heard her loud and clear. He stopped, twisting his head back toward her and scowling, but she kept her head down. No, it wasn't worth the effort to let her know who was the real boss around this medical center—he wanted to get at Misty Carrel. He ran his tongue across his lips as he thought about her.

Frigman opened the door to room 14 without knocking. Misty was wearing surgical scrubs, leaning over the patient as she examined him. Frigman's mouth watered as he ran his eyes over her shapely figure.

He cleared his throat loudly. "Dr. Carrel?"

Misty jumped and turned to face Frigman, confusion obvious on her face.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'm Chief Frigman, from the University Police." He hiked up his utility belt, but it slid back to its usual position under his belly.

"Uh. Okay." She cocked her head to the side. "I didn't know the police were involved in this case."

"We're not. I need to talk to you about a parking violation."

She blew out a heavy sigh, her curly blond locks fluttering as she shook her head. "Fine...but this isn't really a good time. As you can see, I'm in the middle of examining this patient—"

"I'll decide when it's a good time!"

Misty's mouth fell open, but she remained mute.

The PA system beeped. “Chief Frigman, please come to the ER front desk right away!” a tired-sounding woman announced.

Frigman craned his neck and looked up at the speaker in the ceiling as he listened. “Damn,” he muttered then quickly turned back to Dr. Carrel, his brows deeply furrowed. “You’ll be hearing from me again soon, *honey!*”

“Yeah, whatever,” Misty mumbled as she turned back to her patient.





• • • •

*(0100, Wednesday)*

THE LAB AT SOUTHERN Medical Center, one the busiest trauma centers in the United States, took on a morgue-like atmosphere in the wee hours of the night. A multitude of machines whirred, buzzed, and clicked as Sarah, a lab technician, settled into her chair at her workstation, ready to slog through her awaiting tasks.

“Did you get that medical student all set up back in the microscopy room?” her colleague, Debra, inquired from her workstation.

“Yeah. He said he was just coming off one of those forty-hour shifts—guy looked dead on his feet.” She chuckled. “With the low-level lighting in that room I’ll bet he’s asleep in five minutes.”

“Well, we’ll give Sleeping Beauty a wakeup call at the end of our shift if we need to.”

The lab door flew open and banged against the wall. A faculty doctor wearing a long blue lab coat rushed across the room, coming toward them with long strides. Dr. Jackass was well-known to them...and not in a good way. Sarah shot Debra a quick glance as they warily watched him approach. “Hey, girls, how’s it going tonight?” he called out as he approached, an obviously feigned smile on his face. “I came down to check on a stat blood type and cross request I sent down from the OR earlier.” He held up a small pipette of blood. “I was wondering if you could also run a hematocrit for me while I’m here?”

“Sure, I—” Debra replied.

“I *had* expected the blood units to be ready by now,” the doctor snarled. “But I’m sure you two have been too busy yacking.” He sneered. “As usual.”

Debra leaned close to Sarah and whispered. “What a prick.”

Sarah pushed Debra away and shook her head at her then snatched the paperwork from the doctor’s hand. “I’ll go check on this for you right away, Doctor.” She turned to Debra. “I’m sure my colleague will be happy to run your hematocrit while you’re waiting.”

“Yeah, absolutely thrilled,” Debra groaned.

• • • •

AFTER FIVE MINUTES of fruitless searching, Sarah slinked out of the large cooler where they stored the blood supplies.

“Damn! How am I going to tell that asshole that I couldn’t find the blood units on his request?” Sarah mumbled, closing the cooler door and leaning back against the cool stainless steel. She shuddered, more from the angst about delivering the bad news than from the cold metal pressing against her back. She looked nervously across the large lab room. The doctor still stood where she’d left him, but now he was alone.

Sarah scowled. *I’ll bet that jerk pissed off Deb and she left!*

“Oh, well, might as well get this over with,” she muttered then shuffled across the lab, keeping her eyes averted from the doctor.

As she neared him, Sara slowed. His lab coat was askew and had multiple blood spots on it. She hadn’t noticed them before, nor did she remember him wearing latex gloves...and they looked to be covered in fresh, red blood. *What the hell?* The creepy smile on his face made her shiver yet again.

“Your worthless partner left before she finished running that hematocrit for me.” He put his hands on his hips and glared at her. “I’m really in a hurry, honey—you think you could come over here and get it done?”

“S-sure, Doctor. R-right away.” *No!* She chastised herself for sounding like a wimp. *Don’t let this jackass intimidate you. Don’t give him the satisfaction.*

Despite her intentions to be brave, something about the guy made her skin crawl. She crept around the end of the lab bench, her eyes glued on his gory gloves. She looked down and shrieked. Debra was lying in a crumpled, bloody heap at his feet. She had multiple, deep gashes all over her upper body and head. A pool of blood covered the floor surrounding her. Sarah stood frozen, unable to tear her gaze from Debra’s mangled, inert body.

A vicious blow to the side of Sarah’s head knocked her back against the workbench, her flailing arms knocking over a rack of test tubes. The glass containers smashed into bits on the floor, scattering shards across the aisle. Her head was spinning like she had a bad hangover, and she fought to remain standing.



(0120, Wednesday)

Mark Quinn jerked his head off the cold, hard tabletop, his eyelids shooting open. His gaze darted around as his foggy brain tried to register where he was. He rubbed at his eyes, wondering if he had just dreamed he'd heard a scream. It had seemed so real. He stumbled from his chair to the window separating the small room he was in from the main lab, squinting as he peered into the large space. Sarah, the cute lab tech who had helped him earlier, was draped over a lab bench, clawing at the top of, struggling to pull herself upright.

"What the *hell*?" Mark whispered.

A man wearing a faculty lab coat, a crazed scowl on his face, his latex gloves covered in blood, stepped forward and rained a flurry of punches on her head. Her hands slowly slid across the surface of the lab table as she dropped. She fell from sight but her hands shot up, grabbing at her attacker's lab coat as she fought to pull herself up. She grasped his nametag, ripping it from the breast pocket. The man again hammered her head with vicious blows. She slumped, her hands sliding down his torso as she lost her battle to stay upright.

Mark pinched himself, like he'd done as a kid, checking that he was actually awake and not just having a nightmare. *What is happening?* He squinted, trying to get a clear look at the man's face but the guy had his back turned to Mark or he moved so quickly that Mark never got a clear view. Who *was* this guy? Was he a faculty doctor or just somebody who's stolen a faculty lab coat? The man suddenly stopped punching, his gaze shooting over in Mark's direction.

Mark dropped to his knees, cowering beneath the window. He shook his head hard. *No...I-I must be dreaming...maybe hallucinating. I've been awake forty hours, after all.* What was this guy up to? Why would his hands be covered in so much blood? And, where was the other lab tech Mark had seen earlier. *Had he seen me?* What should he do? He should intervene, but—what could he do?

Mark rose to a crouch and ambled toward the door and opened it an inch but stopped, paralyzed by indecision. His mind was still in a fog and he struggled to process what he'd just seen. Mark wiped sweat from his eyes, his gaze darting around the small room.

"Stop fighting me!" came a muffled yell from the lab, barely audible through the small opening in the door.

"W-why?" Sarah asked. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Nothing personal, honey. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Mark's heart jumped and he eased the door closed then moved back to the window, creeping his eyes to the lower edge, just enough to see over it. The man in the lab yanked a syringe from his pocket and flicked the cap off the needle, jabbing it downward. He then straightened, bent slightly at the waist, breathing heavily as he glared downward, his arms hanging at his sides. He then raised the large, empty syringe in front of his face, smiling as he gazed at it, before shoving it in a pocket. He wiped blood from his latex gloves onto his lab coat sleeves, leaving bright red streaks across the pale blue fabric. Mark swiped sweat from his eyes again. He had to do something!

Mark slinked back to the door, easing it open and crawling on hands and knees to the corner, peering around the edge of the wall. The guy was still standing there. Mark began to rise as he kept his gaze glued on the thug. Mark froze when the guy pulled a large, military-looking knife from beneath his lab coat, raised it above his head, and swung it viciously downward like some crazed samurai. A stream of bright red blood spurted into the air, spattering across the front of his jacket.

Mark ducked his head back, putting a hand over his mouth to muffle a shout. *No! I just want to wake up—this nightmare sucks!*

Mark's heart felt like it was going to pound right through his chest wall. He snuck another glance around the corner. The man swung again and again, wildly plunging the bloody blade downward, each thrust causing more blood to splatter onto his lab coat. The doctor's evil grin grew broader with each stab. Mark dropped to his knees, shaking his head. All he'd wanted to do was look at the stupid slide then go home to get some sleep! Now he wondered if he was going to survive the night.

Mark scabbled back into the small microscopy room, cautiously peering over the edge of the windowsill again. The doctor had stopped his hacking. He held the gore-covered knife at his side, gazing downward. His lab coat was covered with spatters of blood, making it look like a grisly, Pollock-like painting.

The man tossed the knife aside, stepped back, and removed his gloves. Suddenly, the killer started to turn toward the small room where Mark was hiding. Mark flopped to the ground beneath the window. A swirl of questions flew around inside his head. *Had he seen me earlier when he'd looked in my direction? Is he coming to kill me, too? Should I just stay hidden here or make a run for it?* Mark pushed himself so hard against the wall under the window, he thought he would crash right through it.

"Dammit! What should I do?" he hissed.

*There's just one more thing I need to do to finish this,* the man wearing the blue, faculty lab coat mused as he rushed toward the rear of the lab, smiling.



One of the killer's gore-soaked shoes slid on the floor as he rushed toward the rear of the lab. He lost his balance, flailing his arms wildly and an outstretched hand slammed hard against the pane of the microscopy lab window.

"Dammit!" The doctor quickly recovered then took a deep breath, standing still for a few seconds. *That would have been just great to slice my arm open on a broken window!* He gazed down at his blood-covered shoes then glanced behind him. A trail of crimson footprints led from the dead girls to his current position. He smacked his forehead and rolled his eyes. *Dumbass! Take off your shoe covers.* He peeled his surgical shoe covers from his feet and shoved them in a pocket. He glanced at the lab window, scowling at the bloody palm print splattered across the glass.

"Goddamit! Why don't I just leave my friggin' signature for them!" he growled.

He frantically looked around for something to wipe away the hand print. The sound of voices in the hallway outside the lab filtered into the room. He froze and listened.

"Double damn!"

The voices were getting closer. He swiped sweat from his brow with a sleeve as he wiped at the handprint, doing little more than smearing it around. What they'd said in the Army was true: the best plan went to hell as soon as the battle started! The handle on the main lab door clicked and the door opened a crack. He stared at the pink smear and groaned. It was time to go!

He crashed through the rear lab door, piecing together possible alibies even as he ran down the dark alley behind the hospital. He stripped off the blood-caked lab coat as he sprinted into the dark, letting it fall to the grimy pavement.

*This will still be all right,* he told himself.

"Sarah?" a female voice called out in the lab.

Mark's eyes launched open. He'd assumed the killer was after him next when the guy had slapped the window above where Mark hid. He started to rise from where he was crouched but suddenly stiffened. *Wait—what if someone thinks I did this?*

"Debra?" the woman in the lab called from the doorway.

Slowly, he began to rise again then shook his head and dropped back. *No!* Maybe they'd just leave. Then he could check on whoever had been attacked...though, he doubted there'd be much he could do for them.

The front door to the lab banged closed. Mark exhaled a long breath. He slithered up the wall to peek out the window. The place appeared deserted. *Good!* After a moment, he crawled to the door, opened it slowly, and paused to listen. He then scrambled on hands and knees to the closest row of lab tables and peered hesitantly around the corner. No one there.

Mark squatted, motionless, considering what his next move should be. *I can't afford to get sucked into a murder!* He twisted his head around, trying to work out the tight knots in his neck muscles. *I'd probably get tossed out of med school just for being a person-of-interest in a murder. And I'd never get accepted into another school...then I'd have nothing. Nothing! After years of working my ass off.* Though he wanted to bolt out the rear exit and run to his car, he kept envisioning Sarah, the cute lab tech who had been so nice to him earlier tonight. He had to try to help her. He'd call 911 and try to stabilize her if he could. He yanked his cellphone from his pocket, frowning when he saw there were no service bars. *Damn!* The lab was deep in a sub-basement of the hospital. He shoved the phone back into his pocket.

He'd just have to do whatever he could by himself. He crawled on hands and knees to the aisle where the attack had taken place. He stopped for a couple of seconds, mentally steeling himself, then glanced around the corner of the long cabinet.

"Oh, my god!" he muttered then threw a hand over his mouth. His eyes went wide as he stared. He had never seen so much blood—not even during a trauma case in the OR! Though Mark's time in the hospital had helped him overcome his usual urge to vomit at the sight of gore, the image before him caused bile to rise and burn the back of his throat.

It was probably a waste of time to check for a pulse, but he had to do *something*. He crawled next to Sarah's body, placing his fingertips on the ghostly white skin of her neck. He snatched his hand back, as if from a flame. *Dead!* He shot a glance at Sarah's coworker. No sense in bothering to check her for a pulse. Blood barely dribbled from her deeply slashed neck. Her head hung by a thin strand of skin and muscle, flopped to the side at an unnatural angle. Mark turned his attention back to Sarah.

A lump formed in his throat. She'd seemed like a really nice person. Why would someone want to do this to her? He slowly pulled her lab coat up over her face. A plastic ID badge fell from the folds of cloth, a man's smiling face looking back at Mark as he stared at it. He squinted, looking closer at the name and picture on the ID badge, his brows shooting up. *What? Who was Jack Bass?*

Voices came from the hallway near the lab entrance again. He needed to get the hell out of here, or he'd be, at the very least, a person-of-interest for the murder! Something he couldn't afford to have happen. He was already struggling financially to stay in medical school.

He snatched the ID badge from the floor. It might come in handy if he became a suspect for some reason. He raced to the microscopy room, grabbed his backpack, then bolted toward the rear lab door. He slipped on one of the fresh, bloody footprints left by the murderer and fought to keep his balance.

"Oh, Sarah, where are you, girl?" someone called out in a friendly, melodic voice from the main lab entrance just as Mark smashed through the rear exit.

Mark sprinted down the dark alley, praying he hadn't been seen.





Mark glanced back over his shoulder at the lab door as he ran. His feet became entangled in something, and he stumbled and fell hard on the rough asphalt, rolling twice before coming to a stop. He growled and tore at the cloth wrapped around his ankles. He started to throw it aside but stopped. Something wet and sticky covered the cloth. Something wet and sticky, *like blood*. He held it up to catch the glow of a nearby streetlight, and a shiver raced up his spine as he stared at the blue lab coat. Dark reddish-brown blotches covered most of the coat. *Did this belong to the killer?* He jumbled it into a ball then jumped to his feet and disappeared into the welcome concealment of the night.

As Mark worked his way through the dark parking lot, a university police car with lights ablaze sped into the ER driveway. As the vehicle rounded the bend, its headlights flashed across him. He crouched between cars and froze. His heart beat against his ribs, his breath caught in his lungs, and he gasped. Had the cop seen him? Tires screeched as the vehicle skidded to a stop. Was the officer going to get out of his car and come Mark's way? He slowly twisted his gaze toward the ER entrance, afraid to look. The campus cop hopped out of his squad car and was immediately besieged by a crowd of agitated, clamoring hospital staff.

Mark blew out a long breath then slowly rose. *Keep your cool, Quinn. Don't look guilty. Just keep a nice, casual pace over to your car.* He reached the car, sneaking another quick glance toward the cop before wrenching the door open, cringing at the loud creak of the rusted hinges. He tumbled into the seat and threw his backpack onto the passenger-side floorboard. His hand shook as he fumbled to slip the key into the ignition switch. Jesus, he was scared! He started the car, crouching low in his seat as he guided it slowly down the aisle. He stopped at the exit gate, his foot thumping on the floorboard as the gate bar crept upward.

"C'mon, c'mon, you piece of crap!"

As he drove the car through the gate, he twisted to take one last look at the cop by the ER and the mob surrounding him. *Good! Nobody looking this way.* He pulled onto the empty street and sped away. Several blocks from the hospital, he let out a long sigh, his shoulders slumping.

"What the hell just happened?" he shouted, squeezing the steering wheel tightly, his pulse pounding in his temples. "I can't believe what that asshole did to those girls! *Nobody* should die like that."

The short drive to his apartment complex seemed to take hours. Mark flicked his gaze up at the rearview mirror every few seconds, watching for the blinking red lights of a cop car to appear behind him. He pulled slowly into his apartment parking lot. After getting out of his car and quickly surveying the area, he dashed into his apartment. The blast of cold air that swept over him as he opened the door was a welcome sensation on his sweaty brow. He eased his apartment door closed, locked it, then leaned back against it. Weak, he slid down to the floor. He drew up his knees, resting his head on them.

"I made it...but now what?" he mumbled.



(0145, Wednesday)

Frigman waddled into the ER, stopping just inside the sliding doors to survey the area, scowling at anyone who met his gaze. He hated being called out in the wee hours. But when Bill Turrel, the officer on duty, had called, he was adamant that Frigman needed to get to the hospital ASAP. A noisy group of people crowded around Turrel near the front desk. The guy looked relieved when he spotted Frigman.

“Hey, Chief.” He waved him over. “Chief! Over here!”

Frigman frowned and hiked up his gun belt, which immediately slid back down, then sauntered toward Turrel. The boisterous crowd quieted as they turned toward Frigman, and then they all scurried away, the female staff pulling their sweaters tight over their breasts. Frigman glared at every woman who covered her bosom. *Bitches!* He stopped in front of Turrel, pulled off his cap, and ran his fingers through his greasy, tangled hair.

“Why the hell did you call me in, Bill?” He shoved the hat back onto his head then poked Turrel in his chest hard enough to make him stumble backward. “You better have a damn good explanation for this,” he growled.

Turrel grimaced and rubbed at his chest. “Uh...I hate to break the bad news to you, boss, but it looks like we may have a couple murders on our hands over in the lab.”

“You’re jerking my chain, right, Bill? Is this some kinda prank?” He scowled at Turrel. “It ain’t funny if it is.”

Turrel ran a finger inside his collar, pulling on it as he twisted his head around. “No, boss! These people”—he waved an arm around at the ER staff—“say there are a couple of bodies all hacked up in there.”

Several of the people milling nearby turned toward Frigman and nodded in unison.

“It’s horrible!” one of the nurses cried into her hands as she held them over her face. “I just went down there to get a lab result that was overdue, and...oh, God...those poor girls!”

Frigman sighed dramatically then turned back to Turrel. “All right, let’s go check it out.” He poked Bill in the shoulder. “But no one else goes in there until I give the all clear.” He started to walk away but stopped suddenly, spinning back to Turrel. “And don’t call any outside law enforcement unless I tell you to.” Frigman turned to the small group, jabbing an index finger at each person. “Everybody keeps a lid on this until I’ve had a chance to check it out.” He glared at each of them. “Capiche? I don’t want the damn hospital rumor mill here running overtime!”



Frigman inched open the main lab door just enough to wedge his head through the opening, shooting a quick glance around the interior then cocking his head to listen. He twisted his head back toward Turrel. The man stood there behind Frigman, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Relax, Bill! You look like some schoolgirl who has to pee rather than a police officer.” He pointed at the floor. “You stay here. I’ll call you if I need you.” Frigman narrowed his eyes as he glared at Turrel. “Remember...nobody comes in here! Not even you.”

“Consider it done, boss.”

Frigman pushed the door open and crept in, stopping just inside, his gaze crawling over every nook and cranny. The automated lab machinery whirred and clicked. Frigman slinked from one row of lab tables to the next, quickly peeking down the aisle between them then moving to the next. He wrinkled his nose. *Is that blood I smell?* He pinched his nostrils. He hated the smell of blood. Shit made him want to gag.

He peered around the corner of the next aisle and froze, his eyes shooting wide. *Well, that explains the smell.* The odor became overpowering, and he fished a handkerchief from his pocket and held it over his nose. Two women were lying on the floor in the middle of a large pool of congealing blood. As if on cue, he gagged. Both had multiple long, deep slashes covering their bodies. *Jesus! Looks like somebody took a machete to them!* One had an arm nearly completely severed. The other had her neck nearly sliced through, her head hanging sideways, held in place only by the shoulder it had sagged onto.

He tiptoed to them, quickly touching each, the coolness of their pallid skin telling him they’d been dead for some time. He searched under and around the corpses as much as he could without disturbing them. He arched his brows when he spotted a large, gore-covered Ka-Bar knife lying on the floor, partially hidden under a bench ledge. *Military knife. Nice touch.*

He quickly explored the rest of the lab, rifling through trash bins and storage closets. Something was wrong—there was something missing. He stood in the center of the lab, turning slowly, scanning the entire room. It had to be here somewhere. He startled when Turrel called out from the entrance doorway.

“Hey, boss. Got a minute?”

“I told you nobody comes in here until I give the okay!” Frigman yelled.

Turrel winced and lowered his eyes to the floor. “Sorry, boss, but...I-I have a lady here who thinks she saw someone running out the back door...j-just before she found the bodies.” He raised his eyes hesitantly. “Just thought you might want to talk to her.”

Frigman rested his hands on his hips and glared silently at Turrel for several seconds. “Yeah. Sure—send her in.” He shook a fist at Turrel. “And keep the hell out of here—like I told you, moron!”

Bill backed through the door, his gaze focused on the ground. After a few seconds, a young nurse slinked into the lab. She didn’t announce herself. Didn’t say a word. Her gaze constantly darted around the room as she stood silently just inside of the door, leaning against it as she chewed at a fingernail. Tears had caused her mascara to seep from her eyes, leaving long black streaks across her face, making her look like a frightened zebra.

Frigman eyed her up and down. *Sheesh! Looks like I got a crybaby on my hands.* He sidled toward her then stood silently before her for a few seconds, staring at her. She swiveled her head

around constantly, looking everywhere but at Frigman. A couple of tears spilled from her eyes, and she swiped at them, further smearing her mascara.

Frigman glanced at her nametag. “So, Debbie, is it?”

She jumped. “Y-yes...D-Debbie.”

“And you’re a nurse here?”

She nodded, making makeup-stained tears fall onto her white smock.

“Well, Debbie, why don’t you tell me what you saw? Be as specific as possible, and don’t leave out any detail. Think you can get your shit together enough to do that?”

Her mouth hung open a few seconds as she glanced at his face. “Y-yes.” She gnawed again at a fingernail.

He pulled a small notepad from his pocket and huffed. “All right...tell me what you think you saw.”

“W-well, I’m working in the ER tonight...” She shrugged, a wan smile flashing across her lips. “I’m new, so I’m still learning—”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s great, Debbie. Welcome aboard and all that crap...but I don’t need your life story—just tell me what you saw.”

Debbie stole a glance at Frigman’s face, stifling a sob, tears now cascading down her cheeks. “S-sorry, sir. Well, when I came into the lab earlier to check on a lab report that was overdue, I saw someone running out the rear door.”

“And?” Frigman wagged his hand for her to continue. “What did this person look like?”

“I-I don’t know. They were running out the back door just as I came in.” She stuck her hands in her pockets and looked away. “All I saw were the coattails of their lab coat—but I’m sure it *was* a lab coat.” She snuck a quick glance at him. “I think it was a man, though.”

“That’s it? That’s all you got for me?”

“I-I got scared when I didn’t see anyone in the lab...a-and nobody answered when I called out. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I started looking around. It didn’t take long before I found them.” She threw her hands over her face and sobbed. “It was terrible!”

Frigman rolled his eyes. “All right, Debbie, keep yourself together.” He jabbed a finger at her. “So, you didn’t actually see who it was running out the rear door, but you’re sure they were wearing a lab coat and it was a man? Is that right?”

“I-I think so. They were too big to be a woman...”

“How big?”

She shrugged.

*Jeez! What an idiot!* “Anything else, Debbie?” Frigman asked, stuffing his notepad back in his pocket.

“Y-yes.” She peeked through her fingers, stealing a quick glance at his face. “I know I shouldn’t have looked around after I found the girls, but...I wanted to make sure there was no one else hurt that I might be able to help—”

“Very admirable, but you’re right—you shouldn’t have wandered around a crime scene. What else you want to tell me?”

“I-I’ll have to show you.” She pointed to the rear of the lab. “It’s back in the microscope room in the rear of the lab.”

Frigman looked in the direction she was pointing. “All right, show me what it is you think is so damn important—but be quick about it,” he grumbled.

She led Frigman to the rear of the lab, turning her head away as they passed the aisle where the two bodies lay on the floor. She held the door to the microscopy room open, stood in the doorway, and pointed at a microscope on a table.

“I don’t know if it’s important, but that scope still has a slide on it...and its light was still on when I came in—like someone left in a hurry,” she mumbled then looked timidly at Frigman. “The clipboard next to it has a name on it—I’d guess it belongs to whoever was using the scope.”

Frigman shoved his way past her, his belly pushing her aside as he squeezed through the door. He snatched up the clipboard, gazing at the name at the top. “Huh—Mark Quinn.”

“Looks to me like he left in a big hurry...like, maybe, running out the back door? Maybe after he killed those girls,” Debbie murmured.

“Want me to pick this Quinn guy up for questioning, boss?” he asked, pointing at the clipboard.

Frigman and Debbie both jumped and spun toward Turrel. The man stood right behind them in the doorway to the little room.

“Dammit, Bill!” Frigman glared at Turrel. Not only had he disobeyed a direct order, he’d scared the shit out of Frigman by sneaking up on him like that. “No! And what the hell are you doing in here? How many times do I have to tell you to stay out in the hall?”

“I just wondered what was going on—you been in here a while.” He fiddled with his badge. “You, uh, think we’re gonna need some outside help on this, boss?” he mumbled.

“No! I don’t! Now get your ass back out in that hall. And don’t you *dare* call anybody!” He jabbed an index finger into Bill’s chest. “In case you’ve forgotten, we’re state police officers. I don’t need any damn ‘outside help’.”

Bill walked away, and Frigman turned to Debbie, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder. “You can beat it now, girlie.”

She turned, but Frigman shot out his hand and grabbed her shoulder, spinning her back to face him.

“I want you to keep this to yourself. Understand? If you blab, I might have to lock you up.”

“Y-yes sir.”

Frigman watched her closely through the window that looked out into the main lab. She scurried around the periphery of the room, staying as far from the two bodies as possible. He pulled out a chair and plopped onto it, resting his forehead on the palm of his hand.

“This night is not going well at all.”





(0600, Wednesday)

An alarm clock blared. Mark shot upright on his bed, shocked from his slumber. His eyes flew open, and his gaze darted about the room. His shoulders sagged, and he blew out a long breath. He was at home in his own bed, where he'd been since he'd gotten home a few hours earlier, though he didn't feel the least bit rested. He sat there a few moments, rubbing at his eyes as his grogginess cleared. Memories of the prior evening hit him like a slap of ice-cold water after diving from a high board. Had those events really happened? Or had he dreamed them up in a nightmare? He threw his legs over the side of the bed.

"*Had* to be a nightmare," he mumbled. "But it seemed so friggin' real." He shuddered.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the dresser mirror and groaned. He was still wearing the clothes he'd worn yesterday, and dark circles rimmed his eyes. He stripped and stumbled out of his room, rubbing his face as he headed to the bathroom. He tripped over his backpack, his gaze instantly zeroing in on the piece of blood-covered lab coat hanging out of the top.

"Sonofabitch! It wasn't a nightmare!" He flopped back against the wall, burying his face in a hand and shaking his head slowly. "What do I do now?"

He couldn't not show up for rounds—that would surely draw attention to him...especially with the prick senior resident on his team. If he went, though, would he do or say something that would raise suspicion? He slapped a hand against the wall.

"I can't afford to get sucked into this!" He pushed off the wall and shuffled toward his bathroom. Maybe a cold shower would help him think.

• • • •

MARK STOOD UNDER THE uncomfortably cold water, his head hanging as the icy torrent goaded his mind into awakening. After a few minutes, he snapped his head up. It was a temporary solution, but what else could he do right now? He'd hide the evidence in the attic then go to the hospital—try to act like everything was business-as-usual. He'd let things settle down for a few days and see what developed before deciding what to do next. Then he would think of some way to anonymously tip off the police about what he'd seen—maybe put the evidence somewhere they'd find it.

He dressed in a hurry then dragged a chair over to the attic opening. As he was placing the lab coat and gloves into the musty space, he noticed a dried, bloody fingerprint on the inside of one of the latex gloves, clearly defined in the talc powder that always lined them. He gingerly placed the gloves atop the lab coat then glanced at his watch.

"Crap! I'm running late for hospital rounds."

As per his usual morning routine, he sorted through his backpack, checking to see that he had everything he'd need for the day. His throat tightened. "Where the hell did I put my clipboard?"

The clipboard contained his patient list, notes for all the tasks for the day, as well as the results of various labs and diagnostic tests for his patients. He dumped the contents of the backpack onto the table.

"Where the hell...?" He smacked his forehead with a palm. "Dammit! I must have left it in the lab last night!"



(0630, Wednesday)

“I am so tired!” Jack Bass grumbled, putting his feet up on the desk in the OR anesthesia office and yanking off his sterile cap. “I’m too old for this crap!”

He was starting to wonder what had possessed him to accept the chairman position for the anesthesia department at a major academic medical center. It had seemed like a good career move after he’d retired from the Army, but it was proving much more demanding than he’d expected.

Last night, his first call night on the new job, was worse than he’d ever expected to experience in a civilian role. He’d managed plenty of penetration injuries during his Army service but had somehow forgotten that penetration injuries also ended many arguments among inner-city dwellers in major cities. Having to handle the usual cases of one redneck beating on another over a woman, or some dirtball stabbing another person during a robbery was bad enough. But then the night took a turn for the worse—a couple of gangs began “debating” sales territory. Apparently, their approach to negotiating involved using Uzis and Berettas.

“Must’ve been a full moon last night. All the crazies were out!” Jack mumbled, stirring powdered creamer into his now cold cup of coffee. He took a sip, cringed, then set it aside. He eyeballed the pizza still sitting in its box on the desk then shrugged and pulled a piece loose. He bit into the cold cheese and stale crust, chewed, swallowed, then threw the rest back into the box.

“Cold pizza for breakfast worked just fine back in college, but I think my tastes have matured since then.”

He pushed the box aside and started writing notes in patient charts, his eyes growing heavy. He rested his head on top of the stack of charts, his thoughts drifting back to the previous night.

• • • •

THE ELEVATOR DOORS leading from the ER to the OR suite creaked open, and a surgery intern shoved a patient in a wheelchair out of the car.

Eyes wide, the intern glanced around frantically. “We need to get this guy in an OR, stat!” he shouted.

A young Hispanic man slumped in the wheelchair, barely conscious but writhing and groaning, a large machete buried deeply in his skull.

Jack and the anesthesia chief resident on call, Ed Thomas, came running from the anesthesia workroom.

“Well, *this* is something different,” Ed commented as he gawked at the patient.

Jack and Ed hurriedly examined the patient, then Jack turned to the surgery intern.

“Relax—he’s stable,” Jack said calmly then pointed. “Take him to the prep area and put him on a gurney while the OR team gets a room set up. I’ll call the neurosurgeon while you go find someplace to stay out of our way.” Jack took a step then stopped and turned back. “Next time, call and warn us before you bring up a serious case like this—it’s poor form and bad medicine.” He poked the intern in the chest. “Don’t do it again.” He waved at Ed then pointed at the patient. “Get him ready and into Trauma Two ASAP.”

A short while later, the case was started, and Jack stood next to Ed at the head of the OR table, peering over the drape to watch the surgeons.

“This is definitely a strange one. He’s gonna have a splitting headache tomorrow,” Jack quipped then snorted.

The OR circulating nurse glanced nervously at Jack, and chuckled half-heartedly.

Jack met their gazes and shrugged. “Sorry. Weak humor is a bad habit of mine.” He turned to Ed. “This guy looks stable—you okay if I go check on other cases?”

Ed scanned the patient’s vital signs on the multiple digital displays. “I think we’re cool, Dr. B. Go ahead.”

Jack hustled down the hall toward the next OR.

“Stat chest coming up from the ER!” A voice blasted over the PA system.

“Sonofabitch!” Jack growled. “Stat chest” could mean any of a variety of injuries, but they were always critical, complex cases. Jack ducked his head and stepped through the door into the next OR. “Everything okay in here?”

The anesthesia resident turned to him and nodded.

“Good...sounds like I’m gonna be tied up for a bit,” Jack said.

“I heard,” the resident said, pointing at the overhead speaker.

Jack spun and trotted to the department’s front desk. “What’s up?” he asked Janice Dwyer, the OR’s head nurse.

“They’re on their way up from the ER with a gunshot wound to the chest.” She shrugged. “Sorry, that’s all I know. Should be here any second.” She jabbed a finger toward a hallway. “I’ve got a crew setting up trauma OR three, and I called the blood bank to give them a heads up.”

“Got it—I’ll go check on the room.” He turned away then stopped and turned back. “You’re good at managing this chaos.”

Janice smiled nodded curtly. “Thanks. See you back there.”

He nodded, his gaze following her for a couple of seconds. *She reminds me of Lori.*

Jack rounded up medical staff and assigned them various tasks to prepare for the case. A ding announced the arrival of the ER elevator, and he went to stand before it. The doors hadn’t even opened completely when a gurney carrying a thrashing, moaning young man shot out. Several medical personnel holding equipment or IV bags surrounded him, all yammering directions.

Jack ignored the chatter and focused on quickly assessing the patient. The strong scent of alcohol on the man’s breath was overwhelming and the bandage on the upper left anterior rib cage was saturated with bright-red blood. Crimson tendrils spilled from it down his chest wall and soaked the white sheet beneath him. Another wound was low on the right rib cage. *Damn! That’s likely through the liver. Going to be a lot of blood loss during this surgery!* He hurriedly wadded up a piece of sheet and pressed it firmly onto the wound, running alongside the gurney as the patient was rushed into the OR.

The surgeon, Dr. Scott Barris, and a senior surgery resident stood at the OR table, prepped and ready. *Good. We’ve got a good attending surgeon.* The patient was transferred to the OR table and the surgeons made an incision immediately after the surgical drapes were in place. After pumping in several units of blood, the patient eventually stabilized, and Jack took the opportunity to make a quick round and check on the other active cases.

“Dr. Bass, call the front desk—stat!” a voice blared over the PA system.

In the middle of inserting an arterial line in another unstable trauma patient, Jack twisted his head around to the OR circulating nurse. “Call the front desk and tell them I’m up to my ass in alligators—whatever it is will have to wait a few minutes.”

The nurse no sooner hung up the phone when another page blasted out. “Dr. Bass—sorry, but I really need you to call me *now!*”

Jack secured the arterial line in place and gave the resident a thumbs up then vaulted to the wall phone and called the front desk.

Janice answered on the first ring. “Jack, I know you guys have your hands full back there, but I just got a frantic call from the ER. Sounds like there’s a big shootout going on between a couple of gangs. The paramedics called from the scene—they said there are no less than a dozen wounded at the scene.”

“Can’t they triage them elsewhere?”

“I asked the same thing. The other hospitals are all overflowing, too.” She took a deep breath. “Get ready...sounds like you’ve got at least half a dozen stat chests on the way up soon. I’ve got my crews setting up rooms four through six.”

This night was going to hell in a handbasket. “What the hell are we supposed to do for staff? We’re spread thin already!”

“I’ve called a few people at home—they’re on their way in. Anything else I can do to help you?”

Jack grunted. “Send me back to a battlefield—it’s not so crazy there.” He started to hang up then put the phone back to his mouth. “We need more blood units in OR two, and everybody else is going to be busy setting up—I guess I’ll have to go get it myself.”

“Be fast about it!”

“Trust me, I’ll make short work of it. Bye.”

He sprinted toward the staircase that led down to the subbasement where the lab was located, formulating a triage and staff assignment plan as he ran.



(0650, Wednesday)

• • • •

JACK SHUDDERED, SHAKING himself from his reflections. *Well, that sucked. Hope I don't have another night like that any time soon.*

“Dr. Bass, what should I do with this last body?”

Jack jumped and spun toward the intern standing in the doorway of his tiny office. “Huh?”

“Remember? We had too many bodies for the morgue to handle last night...we've been storing them in that little cysto OR. I can't find a place for this one, though.” She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder.

Jack clambered from the chair. “Let's go see if we can make some room somewhere, Misty.”

Jack pushed the gurney holding the bloody corpse as Misty guided it. They stopped at the door to the small OR, stood shoulder-to-shoulder, and gazed inside. Two gurneys were pushed together with six blood-spattered bodies stacked across them like cord wood.

“Jesus! Really?” Jack mumbled, staring. Darkened blood pooled beneath the stack of bodies. He stared at the ripples running across the surface with each drop of blood that fell from the gruesome pile above. The splashes reverberated in the small room like a little waterfall in a cavern.

Jack began to shake, his eyes glazing over. *No! Not now!*

• • • •

JACK'S MIND TOOK HIM back to Iraq. He held his combat helmet in place on his head as he sprinted toward a landing med-evac helicopter. The armored vest he wore over his scrubs chafed his armpits as he ran. He skidded to a stop beside the helicopter, twisting the handle and throwing open the door. A medic leaned over a bloodied soldier, holding an IV bag high. He nodded at Jack.

“Hey, Doc.”

The medic jumped to the ground next to Jack, put the IV bag on his shoulder, and grabbed the handles of the stretcher, then he turned to look at Jack.

“This guy's got a bad sucking chest wound.”

Jack threw back the blanket, gazed at the gaping wound a second. The guy wouldn't be able to breath worth a damn until that got fixed. Jack pulled the cover back in place. “We've got OR two waiting! Get him in there now!” Jack waved an orderly over. “Help get this guy to number two. Right now!”

Jack stepped aside as the stretcher was carried off then hopped up into the helicopter cabin, snapping his gaze around the inside. *What the hell?* He leaned into the cockpit, tapped the co-pilot on the shoulder, then jabbed a thumb in the direction of the cabin.

“What the hell's up? That's no way to transport wounded,” he yelled over the screaming of the turbine engines.

The co-pilot spun to him, met his gaze, then leaned to look around him at the pile of bodies stacked against the rear wall of cabin. He snatched his headphones off and put his mouth near Jack's ear.

“They're all dead, Doc. We're just bringing the bodies back.”



Jack twisted back around, staring at the pile of bodies, his gaze following the drops of blood dribbling from the pile and forming a large red puddle on the metal floor. A shudder shook his entire body. He'd seen far too many young warriors who were beyond his help by the time they got to him. He shook his head slowly, disgusted. Why would men choose war as an answer to disagreements so often?

• • • •

“DR. BASS? HEY, DR. Bass—you okay?”

“Get those men into OR two, soldier!”

Misty's eyes widened, and she stepped back. “Uh...should I call someone else to help me?”

Jack panted heavily, his head snapping around, his throat constricting. He was drowning! He couldn't breathe!

Misty tapped him on the shoulder and hopped back. “Dr. Bass...you're freaking me out!”

Jack spun toward her and swiped saliva from his lips. Misty took another step back, bumping against the gurney. Jack held his hands over his ears then shook his head hard, his eyes refocusing.

“What?” His entire body shook. He sucked in a deep breath.

“Do...you need some help?”

Jack hung his head. “No...no. I'm okay. Not enough sleep lately. Are we done in here?” he mumbled.

Misty stared at him. “Uh...you were going to help me stack this last body on top of the others.”

Jack looked at the corpse then at the stack of bodies and bobbed his head. “Yeah...sure. Let's do it.”

Misty shot repeated, furtive glances at Jack as they carefully moved the corpse. Once they had the body positioned and covered with a fresh sheet, Misty scampered over to the door then stopped, gazing back at Jack.

“Thanks. Bye.” She spun and bolted away.

Jack grunted, frozen in place, still staring at the mound of carnage.



(0740, Wednesday)

Dr. Lamar Waymon entered the OR suite, stopped at the front desk, and glowered at Janice. “Where’s Bass?” he demanded.

“I don’t know, Dr. Waymon.”

“Then go find him, you dumbass!”

Janice muttered something unintelligible, stood, and walked away.

Waymon looked around his former domain with a sense of pride and ownership. He’d built this damn department...and as far as he was concerned, he still owned it. The medical center’s board of directors had felt differently, though, and had removed him as the Anesthesia Department Chair several months prior. He considered the concerns they’d expressed about him to be nothing more than exaggerated nonsense. He didn’t feel that the hiring of that know-it-all punk, Bass, hadn’t helped the situation, either. He shook a fist in the air.

“I’ll show those bastards they made a big mistake when they removed Lamar Waymon from his throne,” he snarled.

Waymon snapped his head around. Where had that idiot nurse disappeared to? He growled then stormed off toward the OR anesthesia office. When he entered the office, Jack Bass was sitting in a chair, his feet on the desk, looking dazed.

Janice stood beside him, gazing down at him, a concerned expression on her face as she tapped on his shoulder. “Dr. Bass.”

“Hard at work, I see,” Waymon said. “I bet you left all the bad cases from last night for me to finish up today, eh, Bass?”

Waymon considered himself above being assigned on-call duty, but Jack Bass had insisted all faculty be on that roster—including himself. *What a martyr!* Truth be told, Waymon hated taking care of these patients. He considered them nothing more than unappreciative lowlifes, and the world would be a better place if he just let them die.

Waymon snorted and scowled. “You look horrible!”

Jack slowly sat upright in the chair, turned his gaze to Lamar, then looked down to his chest. Lamar wrinkled his nose. Bass’s scrubs were caked with dried blood, and sweat soaked much of his shirt. Jack shook his head like a dog shaking off water after a bath, then he glanced back up at Janice. His eyes went wide, and he frowned.

“Janice? When did you get here?”

She turned to Waymon, jabbing a thumb over her shoulder at Jack. “There he is, Lamar.” She stepped to the door, stopped, and spun back. “And don’t ever call me a dumbass again, or I’ll make a complaint to the board.” She jabbed a finger at him. “Something you really can’t afford to have me do.”

Jack turned to Waymon, yawning and stretching. “Thanks, Lamar. Good to see you, too.”

Waymon swept his hand at Jack. “Not much of a role model for trainees, looking like that.”

“Well, we were kinda busy last night, Lamar.” He stared up at Waymon and arched an eyebrow. “I really didn’t have the time or inclination to fret over how I’d look for you this morning.”

Waymon stabbed a thumb over his shoulder toward the OR suite. “Doesn’t look like you were very busy—”

Jack bolted from his seat and stared into Waymon's eyes. "Why don't you just follow me, Lamar. I'll *show* you what we've been up to all night. One picture is worth a thousand words—and the picture I'll show you might just save me from hearing a thousand words of bitching from you."

Waymon rolled his eyes. Bass could be so overly dramatic. Such a martyr. He snickered. "Going to shoe me all the patients you killed?"

Jack waved Waymon after him. "Let's start in the cysto OR."

Jack held the door open to the darkened cysto room then flipped on the light. The fluorescent bulbs flickered then flooded the room with a bright glow. Waymon grunted at the sight of the corpse pile. He turned to Jack and smirked.

"Did *any* of your patients actually manage to survive?"

"That's it, Lamar! I've had it!" Jack spouted. "I'm tired, and I'm disgusted." He poked Waymon hard on the shoulder. "And I really don't feel like listening to any of your petty bullshit this morning. I don't know why you've got a bug up your butt for me, but that's your problem, not mine!" Jack glared at Waymon for a few seconds then took a deep breath. "Now...do you want my report or not?"

*What a thin-skinned hothead.* Waymon turned and sauntered away. "I don't really need you to report anything, Bass. I can see the results of last night." He stopped and turned back to Jack. "Don't forget, I was doing this when you were still just—"

"Save it, Lamar! Don't want to hear it." Jack brushed past Waymon. "We can get along or not—I don't really give a shit! Believe me, though, I feel no compulsion at all to put up with any of your crap!" He stopped and glared at Waymon. "And if I hear of any attempts on your part to cause divisiveness in this department, you're fucking history. Got it?"

"Screw off, Bass!" Waymon replied. *You young punk!* "Nobody talks to me that way!"

"I just did—deal with it."

Jack spun and dashed from the dank, smelly room. "I don't need *anything* from you, Bass!" Waymon yelled after him.

Jack made his way toward the locker room. As he passed the front desk, he stopped. Janice sat in her chair, toiling over paperwork.

"Great job last night, Janice—I was quite impressed with how well you managed the chaos."

She looked up from her papers. "Thanks. I was impressed with you, too—you've obviously done this sort of thing before."

Jack stared at her a few seconds then hung his head. "Yeah...you might say that," he muttered.

"Sorry you got the baptism by fire experience last night. That was one of the worst nights I've seen in my time here."

Jack snorted. "Looks like my usual call-night black cloud has followed me here." Jack flashed her a smile. "Have a good day, Janice."

Jack stepped toward the locker room, anxious to shed the bloodstained scrubs and take a long, hot shower. *Then I'm going to go home and have myself a big drink of something strong!*

"I overheard you and Lamar in the cysto room...the intercom was on." She winked at him "I'm sure you'll come to love him as much as we *all* do," Janice said.

Jack stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder at her. She wore a Mona Lisa smile. He guffawed.

"I'm sure I will." Yep. He was going to like Janice just fine.



(0930, Wednesday)

Every time Mark looked over his shoulder during work rounds, he caught his jerky senior resident, Dan, staring at him. Did he suspect something? *Am I giving myself away somehow?* Mark glanced at his wristwatch. It was already nine thirty, and he hadn't heard anything unusual. That was encouraging. Maybe he'd luck out after all. *Maybe it's a good time to sneak down to the lab and grab my clipboard.* Hopefully, no one had stumbled onto it since last night. Mark took a deep breath, approached Dan, and nodded his head down the hallway.

"I'm heading down to the lab to check on the results of the thyroid studies we did on Mrs. Abercroft," Mark stated. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You can go, but you'll stop by coffee-and-donut rounds on the way back—bring me a couple of Krispy Kremes and some coffee," Dan replied, jeering at Mark. "Scut puppy."

"Sure, fine. Whatever."

He couldn't afford to let his supervisor get under his skin today. Dan already acted like he knew something was wrong. Mark wasn't going to be maneuvered by the jackass into somehow giving himself away. He spun and marched to the elevator. When it arrived, he climbed on, tapping his fingertips against the metal wall of the elevator as it rattled down to the sub-basement.

He stepped off the elevator and headed down the hallway of the catacomb-like floor toward the lab. He rounded the corner near the lab entrance and stopped so abruptly he almost stumbled. A university cop stood at the door, one hand resting on the butt of his pistol. Mark's face flushed hot, droplets of sweat immediately forming on his forehead. Should he just duck back around the corner? The policeman turned toward him, slid his sunglasses down his nose, and peered over them. Mark's heart began a wild gallop, and he ran a finger inside his collar, pulling it away from his neck as he twisted his head around. *Stay cool. Don't act guilty.*

"Need something?" the cop asked.

He pointed at the lab door. "I-I'm a medical student—I-I'm just here to check on some lab results for one of my patients." Sweat dribbled from his armpits, tickling at his ribs as the droplets trickled down his sides. Damn! He was going to give himself away! The cop was looking at him like he already knew Mark was guilty of something.

"I-I'm a little late for rounds, Officer—can I just go in and get the labs? It'll only take me a minute."

The cop arched an eyebrow, staring silently at Mark for several seconds. He stepped aside and nodded at the door. "Go ahead. Just don't touch anything...and stay away from the yellow crime scene tape."

"Crime scene! What crime ever happens around here—somebody steal a test tube?"

"It's no joke, boy!" The cop slid his sunglasses back up over his eyes and looked down his nose at Mark then jabbed a finger at him. "And it's none of your damn business what happened. Just get your ass in and out of there fast."

"Y-yes, sir."

Mark lowered his head and sped past the officer. He scanned the lab as he strode toward the room where he'd left his clipboard. The techs on duty shot him quick, strained glances then resumed their tasks. Mark glanced sideways down the aisle that was cordoned off with yellow crime scene tape,

cringing when he saw the large blood stains on the floor. He shook his head slowly and groaned. *Nope. Definitely wasn't just a nightmare.*

His chest tightened with each second he remained in the lab. He struggled to control his breathing, yearning to finish his task and get the hell out of there—before what little composure he was managing to hold onto crumbled like a sugar cube in a cup of hot coffee. He quickened his pace, rushing into the small microscopy room. He stood near the door, his gaze darting about the room. Where was it? *Crap!* He scurried around the room, looking on tabletops, under tables—in every nook and cranny he could spot. No clipboard! He stared at the microscope he'd used last night, swiping sweat from his eyes.

“I could have sworn I had it right here next to this scope!”

Had someone found it? His guts twisted into a painful knot. Did the cops already have it? Had he just been kidding himself about avoiding getting involved in the murders? His gaze shot toward the techs, who were visible through the window. *Should I ask someone if it was found?*

“Damn it!”

He hurried out of the small room, holding his head down as he raced past the techs. His legs felt like lead, and it seemed to take forever to reach the door. Mark shot a quick glance over his shoulder toward the techs then yanked open the door to the hall. The cop was just on the other side, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at Mark. Mark jumped, his mouth falling open. *He knows!* He backed up a step.

“Find what you were looking for?”

Mark choked then swallowed. “Um, no—I-I mean, yes. Yes, I did.”

The cop cocked his head. “Kind of a nervous type for a doctor, aren't you?”

“Uh, oh, well, uh...just a little distracted today.”

The cop grunted and stepped aside. Mark wanted to run. Wanted to bolt down the hall, up the nearest stairs, and run away. Never come back. *No! Control yourself, dammit!* He ducked around the next corner, panting as he stopped and leaned back against the wall. He banged his head repeatedly against the hard, cool surface. *Now what do I do?*





Mark shuffled down the hospital ward hallway toward the nurse's station, his head hanging, a flight of thoughts and questions assaulting his mind.

"Hey, scut puppy!" Dan stepped out from a patient's room right in front of Mark, blocking his way.

Mark startled. "W-what?"

"Cops are looking for you, scut puppy." Dan cackled like an old witch, pointing to the far end of the hall.

Mark lifted his gaze and looked, groaning when he saw a morbidly obese university cop conversing with the charge nurse.

"What did you do—kill a patient?" Dan spun, waving an arm and pointing at Mark. "Hey, Chief Frigman. Here he is—the criminal you've been looking for," he shouted.

Mark's gaze darted from Dan to Chief Frigman. The cop waddled hurriedly down the hall toward him, the charge nurse following on his heels. Mark's heart pounded, and his mouth suddenly became parched. Sweat poured down his forehead, dripping from his brow. He twisted his head around, looking for the nearest door to a staircase. Should he run? Clearly, they had something on him—this visit surely wasn't a coincidence. He turned back to Dan, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"Dan, you best shut the hell up, or I'm going to kick your smart-mouthed ass right here," he growled.

Dan backed a couple of steps away, stared at Mark a few seconds, then puffed out his puny chest.

"Oooh, I'm scared, tough guy."

Mark balled his fists and stepped toward Dan, but the scrawny jerk spun and rushed away, casting quick glances over his shoulder as he scurried down the hall. Mark turned to Frigman. *Damn!* Frigman held Mark's lost clipboard under his plump arm. Sweat from Frigman's armpits had begun to soil some of the papers that were clipped on it.

"You Mark Quinn?"

Mark's shoulders sagged. "Y-yes, sir."

"This your clipboard?" Frigman held it out, putting the tip of an index finger on Mark's name label.

Mark nodded slightly. "Uh...looks like it, yeah. Thanks for returning it."

Frigman glared at Mark. "I'm not 'returning it', boy. I'm taking you with me so we can have a little chat." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "I already told your supervising resident and the charge nurse that you'll be with me the rest of the day."

The cop grabbed Mark's arm, squeezing tightly enough to make Mark wince.

"Let's go," Frigman said.

Mark sheepishly raised his gaze to the charge nurse. Her face was pale, and she repeatedly licked her lips as she returned his gaze. She put a hand gently on his shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Mark. I'm sure Chief Frigman just needs some information."

She had always treated Mark well—taken him under her wing. Mark nodded then hung his head.

"A-am I under arrest?" he mumbled.

Frigman slowly leaned his head forward, peeking over his sunglasses at Mark. "Should you be?"

"N-no, of course not! I haven't done anything wrong." *Why do all these university cops wear sunglasses inside?* Maybe they were fans of the movie, *In The Heat of the Night*. Weird.

Frigman stared silently at him for several seconds. “For someone who hasn’t done anything wrong, you seem kinda nervous, boy. C’mon.” He tugged Mark behind him down the corridor.

• • • •

FRIGMAN SHOVED MARK onto a cold metal chair in an interrogation room in the small university police headquarters building then paced silently around Mark, glowering at him. He stopped in front of Mark and rested his hands on his hips, hooking his thumbs in his gun belt.

“So, Mr. Quinn, do you know where we found your clipboard?”

Frigman’s voice sounded distant. Mark had never been in a police station, let alone in an interrogation room. How had this happened? What had he done to deserve becoming involved in such a horrendous situation?

Frigman kicked Mark’s chair. Mark jerked back, but before he could say anything, Frigman bent down, rested his hands on the arms of the chair, and brought his face inches from Mark’s. His hot breath wafted across Mark’s face. Mark squirmed, twisting his face away from the sickening smell of stale Fritos and unbrushed teeth.

“Wake up and pay attention! I asked if you know where we found your clipboard?”

“N-no, I have no idea—I lost it recently. No idea where. I’m glad you found it. Thanks.”

“Don’t play games with me—you know damn well where we found it!”

“No—really, I—”

“We found it in the lab—the same place we found two murdered women!”

Particles of food mixed with spittle flew from Frigman’s mouth onto Mark’s face. Mark tried to push farther back in his seat but had no more room. He leaned his head back, twisting it from side to side.

“Oh. That must be why the crime scene tape was in the lab today.” Mark shook his head. “I can’t believe there was a murder right there in the hospital lab! Who was—?”

“Cut the crap, boy!” Frigman stood straight, arching an eyebrow as he regarded Mark. “How’d you know about the crime scene tape?”

“I saw it when I was in the lab earlier today.”

“*What?*”

Mark shrugged. “The officer at the door said it was okay.”

“Godammit, Bill!” Frigman mumbled, his face flushing.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing! Just shut up unless I tell you to talk!” Frigman leaned on the chair arms again. “I know you were in that lab last night when those women were murdered—don’t try to bullshit me.”

Mark smiled feebly. “Well...I admit I was down there looking at a slide a few days ago. Don’t remember what day it was...”

“Uh huh.” Frigman paced around Mark. “Do you usually wear a lab coat at the hospital?”

“Well...yeah. Medical students are required to.”

“And what color is *your* lab coat?”

Mark stared up at Frigman. Where was he going with this line of questioning? “White...medical students can only wear white lab coats.” Sweat was running into his eyes, causing him to squint and blink frequently.

“Need a towel, Mr. Quinn?” Frigman asked, sarcasm underlining his words.

*Relax, Quinn!* Mark chided himself, fighting to remain focused.

“Let me explain how I’m putting this little story together.” Frigman stopped in front of Mark, jabbing a chubby index finger at him. “You were looking at a slide in the lab last night. A witness says they saw a man in a lab coat run out the rear door of the lab.”

Frigman again leaned on the arms of the chair. Mark fought back the urge to gag at the smell of the man’s fetid breath.

“You see where I’m going with this, boy?”

“Uh...not really...”

Frigman slapped his palms on the armrests. “Dammit! Stop screwing around! You don’t seem to understand; you’re in hot water, boy! Deep in hot water!”

“Okay, *okay*. I was in the lab Tuesday afternoon. I was looking at a slide from one of my patients. That’s probably when I left my clipboard there. It had been a long night. I was tired, and I guess I forgot it there.” Mark looked up and shook his head. “But I-I don’t know anything about any murders...and I didn’t see anything unusual when I was in the lab.”

Frigman scowled at him for a couple of minutes. Mark turned his head from side-to-side, trying to evade Frigman’s horrible-smelling breath.

“All right, Mr. Quinn, let me see if I have this straight. You were in the lab the day of the murders.”

“Maybe.”

Frigman stabbed a finger at Mark. “Shut up! You say you didn’t see anything unusual, and you don’t know anything about any murders. Does that about sum up your statement?”

Mark squirmed and nodded. “Yeah...that sounds about right.”

Frigman glowered at him. “Okay, Mr. Quinn. I’m not going to arrest you...*today*. You are a person of interest for these murders, though. You know what that means?”

Mark shook his head. “No,” he managed to squeak, even though his throat felt like it had a boa constrictor wrapped tightly around it.

“It means I don’t want you going anywhere outside this city.” Frigman paused, and his dark, beady eyes locked intently on Mark. “It also means that we’re going to be keeping a *very* close watch on you.” Frigman paused again for a few seconds then poked his finger in Mark’s chest. “Got it?”

“Y-yes sir.”

“Go on—get outta here.” Frigman waved a hand at the door.

“Can I get a lift back to the hospital?”

“No. The walk’ll give you time to think.”

Mark sighed deeply as he descended the front steps of the police station. *Life just sucks sometimes!* He kicked at a rock on the pavement and punched the air.

“Why is this happening to me?” he blurted. “Even if I don’t get arrested, I might get thrown out of med school.” His shoulders slumped. “Then I have nothing!”

“That boy knows something,” Frigman muttered as he watched Mark through the window blinds. “And I’m gonna find out what.”



(0600, Friday)

Jack stood in front of the large whiteboard that hung on the OR suite wall near the front desk, absorbed in reviewing the day's schedule and making mental notes about how to manage the caseload.

"Hello, Dr. Bass—I see you're an early riser, too."

Jack jumped and spun. A weighty police officer stood behind him, holding out a hand. His belly lapped over his gun belt, and sweat stains rimmed his armpits, despite the cool temperature in the OR suite. His tie was knotted loosely beneath his open collar, which dug into his meaty neck. Heavy jowls hung below his thick, pouty lips.

"I'm Gary Frigman, Chief of the University Police here at Southern Medical Center."

Jack arched an eyebrow as he appraised Frigman. "Uh...nice to meet you, Gary." Jack reached out slowly and shook Frigman's hand. The sweat on Frigman's palm coated Jack's hand, and he jerked it back then wiped his hand on his pants. Jack hated slimy handshakes!

"Sorry I haven't been by before to meet the new Chairman of Anesthesia—"

"I'm kinda busy, Gary. Nothing personal, but I don't have time for a social call." Jack crossed his arms over his chest. "Can we do this another time?"

"Actually, I prefer 'Chief Frigman'."

"Yeah—whatever. Can we do this another time?"

Frigman hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and cocked his head. "No! I have a few questions I wanted to ask you about an incident here at the hospital."

Jack twisted his head around on his shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck, his pulse quickening. What the hell was this guy up to? Jack's bullshit meter was reading in the red and he didn't want to deal with this right now. "What incident? What're you talking about? Did I park in the wrong spot?" Jack quipped.

Frigman scowled. "I have more important things to worry about than where some damn *doctor* is parking! This is serious business, and I don't care for your jokes!"

Jack leaned back against the wall and stared silently at the officer. "Then why don't you cut to the chase, Gary."

"Are you aware of the crime that took place in the lab the other night?"

"Yes. Rumor is there was a murder. Sounds crazy—is it true?"

"Goddamit," Frigman mumbled.

"I didn't catch that, Chief—what did you say?"

"I said, that's right. It was actually a *double* murder, and they were killed in quite a grisly fashion."

"Okay, I'm sorry to hear that, but...what's this got to do with me?"

"The murdered women were sliced up pretty badly." Frigman took a step closer to Jack and stared into Jack's eyes. "We found a military-style knife at the crime scene."

Jack shrugged. "Okay."

"You were in the army, weren't you?"

"I was...a lifer, in fact. Medical Corps."

“Hmmm. Interesting.” Frigman rubbed his chin. “We believe the murders took place early Wednesday morning—”

Jack shoved himself off the wall, forcing Frigman to back up. “Look, Gary, like I said, I’m really busy. I don’t need a rundown on the details—but can you be a little less cryptic, and tell me *specifically* why you’re here bothering me?”

Frigman’s face turned red. “Fine!” He thrust a finger at Jack. “I need you to tell me where you were early Wednesday morning! Very early.”

Jack dropped his mouth open then guffawed. “You’re kidding me, right? Are you pranking the new guy?”

Frigman shook his head, his jowls flopping. “I don’t kid about murder, Doc. Now...tell me where you were.”

Jack’s face flushed hot, and he balled his hands into fists. “Are you implying that *I* am a suspect?” He leaned down, putting his face close to Frigman’s. “What kind of jack-ass, Barney Fife police work is this?”

Frigman backed away and held his hands out in front of him. “Calm down, Doc—”

“Kiss my ass! How dare you accuse me of something like that! What evidence could have *possibly* led you in my direction?”

Frigman puffed out his chest. “Look here, Dr. Bass, I’m the Chief of Police, and you’ll talk to me with respect. I’m here doing my job. I have information that points at you, and I’m investigating that lead.”

“What ‘information’? What are you talking about? And be specific!”

Frigman rolled his eyes. “I already told you—we found a military knife at the crime scene. We believe it was the murder weapon.”

Jack glared back at Frigman for a few seconds then stepped toward him. Frigman backed up, and Jack took another step. Frigman took another step back.

“That is pure *bullshit*! That’s not a lead—it’s grasping at straws!”

Jack poked his finger in Frigman’s face and jutted his jaw out.

“I’ve heard the scuttlebutt about you, Gary.” Jack prodded him again. “You need to understand something—I’m not some naïve student nurse you can bully. Don’t try to pull your bullshit Kojak routine on me! I won’t put up with it.”

Frigman squirmed against the desk, turning his head from side-to-side. “Okay, okay...sorry if I came on a little strong.” He pushed at Jack. “Can you give me a little space?”

Jack blew out a long breath and backed away.

“Thanks.” Frigman took his hat off and swiped sweat from his balding head with a sleeve. “I didn’t mean to insult you—but I do have a job to do. That means following up on every lead I get. Nothing personal.”

“No, of course not!” Jack snorted. “Why the hell would I take such an accusation personally?”

Frigman eyeballed Jack then flashed a toothy smile, revealing bits of something orange stuck between several teeth. “Let’s start over, Doc. Can you answer a few quick questions, at least?” He pulled a pad and pen from his shirt pocket.

“If they’re quick...maybe.” Jack backed away and crossed his arms over his chest. “Shoot.”

“Well, I was talking with that OR head nurse the other day. She mentioned something she saw you doing the morning after you were on call recently.” Frigman jotted in his pad, glancing fleetingly at Jack then back at his pad. “The morning of the murders.”

Jack smiled wryly, cocking his head to the side. “And what might that be, Chief?”

“She told me she saw you napping at your desk that morning. Said you were all sweaty and moaning.” He locked gazes with Jack, a smug expression on his face. “Made me wonder—did you do something that night that might have given you nightmares?”

Jack didn’t respond for a few seconds as he mulled over the comment. Was this clown serious? He burst out laughing. “You gotta be shittin’ me, Gary! You came here to question me about some murders because I was groaning in my sleep? Oh, man!” Jack shook his head and laughed again.

“It’s not funny, Bass!”

“I’m not laughing at the murders; I’m laughing at *you*. The fact that you came to talk to me because I was moaning when I napped is *laughable*.” He stifled another snicker. “That was the morning after a terrible call night here. I was exhausted and was grabbing a little cat nap at my desk because I’d been up all night.” He put his hands on his hips and glared at Frigman. “I gotta tell ya—it’s a hell of a stretch for you to make a connection between that and those murders.”

“And you have witnesses who know where you were at all times?”

“Yeah, Gary, plenty of them.” Jack arched an eyebrow as he locked gazes with Frigman. “What I’m really curious about, though, is why the hell you’d make such a ridiculous attempt to consider me a person-of-interest. What’s the hidden agenda here?”

Frigman remained silent, shifting his weight quickly from one foot to the other several times, then he jutted his chins.

“Well, Doc, I heard you had a rough go in the Army when you were over in Iraq. Heard you’d even been locked up for a while in a nut ward for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome—PTSD.”

“How the hell did you hear about that?” Jack snarled through gritted teeth. “That’s confidential personal health information. You looking at it without my permission is a federal offense!”

Frigman waved a hand dismissively, like he was shooing away a fly. “Never mind how I heard about it.” Frigman closed his notepad and slid his pen into his pocket. “I’ve heard about PTSD. Heard it can make a person kinda wacky. I’ve even heard that somebody with PTSD might do things without realizing it. Bad things.”

Jack glared at Frigman for several seconds, his pulse pounding in his temples, his body tensing. He wanted to grab this clown by the throat and shake some sense into him. “You should know I’m going to file a complaint with the DoD about you gaining access to my files.”

Frigman shrugged nonchalantly. “Yeah, whatever. You wanna tell me about your PTSD?”

“I have nothing to hide, so...yeah, I’ll tell you about it. I was hospitalized for a short time after I returned from Iraq. Why, is none of your business. As far as PTSD making somebody wacky, that’s pure crap! There is no clinical credibility to such claims.” Jack jammed a finger at Frigman. “None at all! That chapter of my life is closed...and PTSD is no longer an issue for me!”

Frigman shrugged and put his notepad in a pocket. “Not so sure I agree with you on that, Doc. Seems to me it might still be lingering if you’re having nightmares,” Frigman said. “Meanwhile, I’ll be checking out your alleged witnesses.”

Jack raised his finger at Frigman. “Gary, you better be—”

“Thanks for your time, Bass.” Frigman snorted. “Wish I could say it was a pleasure.” He turned and waddled toward the door. “Do me a favor, Doc—don’t leave town any time soon,” he called over his shoulder.

Jack stood frozen for a couple of seconds, his mouth still hanging open, his finger still raised. *What the hell was that all about?* He lowered his hand and slowly closed his mouth. His shoulders slumped. *Damn! I guess the cat’s out of the bag.* Before long, the whole damn hospital would know

about his PTSD. He looked toward the front desk. Janice was shooting quick, nervous glances in his direction.

“Oh...hi, Janice. How you doin’ today?”

She looked up, a thin smile flashing across her lips. “Jack...I didn’t mean to eavesdrop...” She repeatedly clicked the pen she was holding as she glanced down at some papers. She slowly turned her gaze up to Jack. “But I heard what Frigman was saying to you.”

“And...is it true? Did you rat me out?”

She rested her head in her hands and shook it slowly. “That lardass! He promised me that was a confidential conversation! I didn’t think anything of it when I saw you moaning in your sleep...” She twisted her face up to his, her lip trembling slightly. “If I’d known he planned on using it against you...”

“Don’t worry about it; you didn’t know.” He leaned on the counter in front of her. “Maybe it’s time, though, that I told you my story—straight from the horse’s mouth, as they say. Doing anything for dinner tonight?”

“Not really.” She shrugged quickly. “I guess we could go grab a quick bite.” She growled softly. “That clown Frigman is *such* a jerk!”

“Yep. Can’t argue with that. Actually, my first impression of Chief *Wiggam* is that he’s a flaming jackass.”

Janice laughed out loud. “I see you’ve heard his nickname, huh?” She giggled again. “How can anyone who has watched *The Simpsons* look at him and not think of Wiggam?”

“You got that right,” Jack replied, smiling. “How about I just swing by here at the end of the day, and we’ll pick a place to grab some dinner?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“See ya later. Looking forward to dinner.”

Jack ambled toward his office, a jumble of thoughts racing through his mind as he wiped sweat from his brow. He blew out a long breath. Was he just kidding himself about PTSD no longer being an issue for him? He had to admit he did still have memory lapses during some of the bad flashbacks.





(*That evening*)

There was an air of awkwardness as Janice and Jack sat at the restaurant table, struggling to start up a conversation. They took sips of their drinks, gazed at the menu or around the room between furtive glances at each other, and smiled wanly when their eyes met.

“Never been here before.” Jack pointed his beer bottle around the patio of the dumpy restaurant.

“I hope it’s okay.” She picked at the label on her beer bottle. “I-I thought it might be a place you’d like.”

“I like the ambiance—early American plank tables are one of my favorite furniture styles.”

Janice chuckled. “You know, Jack, you have a good sense of humor...but you keep it well-hidden at work. I’m glad to see you’re not *always* as intense as you are in the OR.”

Jack’s face flushed. “Well...I guess everybody’s gotta have fun *sometimes*.”

She smiled as she watched him over the rim of her glass. “Yes. Yes, we do.”

• • • •

BY THE TIME THEIR MEALS arrived twenty minutes later, Jack felt much more at ease. “*No kidding?*” Jack asked, setting his beer on the table. “How long were you in? What years were you active? Where were you stationed?” He took a deep breath and shrugged. “Sorry, I’m kinda going off, aren’t I?”

Janice giggled. “A little. Well, I’ve been out about eight years. I was in for four. I spent most of my time in the States but did do a one-year stint over in Frankfurt, Germany.”

“Well, I’ll be go to hell! Our active time overlapped, and I did time at Frankfurt, too!” He wagged a thumb at himself then her. “I was a lifer—I’m surprised we never bumped into each other somewhere.”

“Big Army, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Jack took a swig of beer. “I *figured* you might be ex-military based on some of the things I’ve seen you do at the hospital. The Army taught us all to do things the ‘Army way’, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, but it was good training that’s been useful.”

Jack gazed at her, arching an eyebrow. “So...why’d you get out?”

“I just got tired of trying to fix broken young bodies only to have them sent back out to get broken again.” She snorted. “Those that *could* be fixed, anyway.” She turned her face down. “Too many couldn’t,” she mumbled.

“Roger that,” Jack said then stared blankly into the distance.

“So...you were career Army. That surprises me—you don’t seem a lifer type.”

Jack shrugged quickly. “Didn’t exactly plan it that way. I got into ROTC in college to help pay my school bills. Then ROTC offered me a scholarship for medical school, so I spent four more years in. By the time I finished my medical training, I owed the Army eight years of service.”

“Why stay for twenty then?”

“Guess I got caught up in some interesting assignments. Before I knew it, I had over ten years in...got regular promotions, didn’t know of any interesting job opportunities in the civilian world...” He took another swig and sighed. “Didn’t really have much of a civilian life to go back to so just decided I’d put in my twenty.”

“Sounds like another story there.”

Jack looked away. “Yeah...one I’d rather forget...” he muttered.

“Okay. I won’t push.”

Jack turned his eyes back to Janice and smiled. “I met some great people in the Army, did some interesting work, and got to see the world.” He gently swirled the beer in his bottle. “Hope I’m not boring you too much,” he muttered.

She put her hand on his arm and flashed a smile. “I’m glad you shared with me—it helps me get to know you a little better. And trust me, you are anything but boring.”

He shrugged. “Meh. Your opinion.”

Jack resisted the comparison that kept prying its way into his thoughts—Janice reminded him of Major Lori Darden, the only woman he’d ever let himself love as an adult. Memories of Lori triggered the usual pang of torment, and he knew to shut those thoughts down before they led to the predictable melancholy. Jack felt a wave of relief when the waiter arrived with their meals. Keeping his mouth full of food would give him a reprieve from feeling pressured to talk. They both picked at their plates a few minutes, then Janice set her fork down and gazed at Jack.

“You said you wanted to tell me some things about your past? I get the sense I haven’t heard the most important part yet.”

Jack swallowed, almost choking. Had he made a mistake offering to fill her in? Should he follow through? He lifted a forkful of food toward his mouth then slowly set it down on his plate and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He cleared his throat and met her eyes.

“I-it may help you understand some things about me.” He blew out a long breath and looked around the dining area. “This isn’t easy for me to talk about...I hope you’ll bear with me.”

Janice nodded. “Of course, Jack.”

Jack surveyed her face closely. “Also, I’m telling you this in strictest confidence. I hope you’ll honor that.”

“Whatever you say won’t go beyond me.” She put a hand on his shoulder and gazed into his eyes. “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

Jack forced a smile then blew out a long breath. “Okay, here goes.” He looked away and growled softly. “I don’t know how that ass, Chief Wiggam, got access to my confidential medical information, but I *will* find out.” He turned his eyes to her. “Anyway, I want to give you the complete and correct information—hopefully, I’ll relieve any potential concerns you might have about me.”

“He’s a prick,” Janice interjected quickly.

“Yep. Anyhow, he told me about you spotting me napping a little restlessly the other morning after call. You were a nurse in the Army, Janice—I’m not going to try to bullshit you. After my last deployment, over in Iraq, I was diagnosed with severe PTSD. Spent a month on the Walter Reed Psych ward.” He took a sip of beer then locked gazes with her, wondering what her response was going to be.

“Did something bad happen?”

“You might say that. But I can’t talk about it.” He grimaced and stared at the tabletop. “I-I just can’t.” He was silent a few seconds. “I got a stamp of good health when I was discharged from Reed.” He shrugged quickly. “I might still have an occasional flashback, but mostly, I manage my PTSD well.” He paused briefly to look at her, but she had a deadpan look on her face. “There’s no denying I still have nightmares—that’s likely what you witnessed the other morning.” He leaned back and ran his fingers through his hair. “I guess all the gunshot victims we had that night must’ve triggered something.”

Janice slowly folded her napkin then looked askance at Jack. "I hate to admit it, but...Frigman did tell me about the psych ward," she muttered. "He used that as a reason to ask me to keep an eye on you..."

Jack slapped the table. "*What?* That jackass!"

She touched his arm again. "Don't worry, Jack. I know PTSD can be rough."

He nodded slowly. "During a particularly bad episode, I may...*wander* in my sleep." He turned to her, looking into her eyes. "But I want to reassure you...that's about it. It doesn't turn me into some crazed killer." A flash of doubt flew through Jack's mind, and he quickly shook it away. He didn't always remember his wandering. Sometimes, he only knew about it because he later discovered something he'd done while in one of his PTSD dazes. "We okay?"

Janice sat quietly for a few seconds, surveying his face. She placed her hand atop his, squeezing gently. "It took guts for you to tell me about this...especially since we barely know each other. I'm touched."

Jack slowly slid his hand from under hers and moved it to his lap. "Well...I just don't want you to have any undue concerns."

"I do know about PTSD from my time in the Army. I know you're not some maniac killer. That's just Hollywood BS. I don't have *any* concerns about you." She wrung her napkin, twisting it tightly. "It pisses me off that Frigman took what I told him and blew it all out of proportion."

Jack's shoulders sagged. "Good. That's a relief."

"I like working with you and hope that will continue to be the case. Believe me, if I have any concerns about you, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks. Feel free to chat with me any time about any concerns."

"We're good, Jack."

Janice bit into her burger, gazing at Jack over the top of the bun. Her first impressions of him had been good. The more she got to know him, the more she liked him. It really took some guts to share what he just did with her. She did have a nagging curiosity, though, about just how bad his PTSD might really be. The nurse in her told her he was downplaying its seriousness.



The two men sat opposite each other at the desk in the office. Little illumination filtered in through the large office windows from the lights around the sprawling Southern Medical Center campus, casting dim shadows about the room.

“It was not a good idea for you to come here tonight. I assume the visit is for good reason?” the man sitting behind the desk stated.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, boss. Relax. It’s nothin’ bad. I just thought it was important to give you an update—in person,” the man across the desk replied.

“Fine—get to it then.”

“Looks like he might have an alibi—don’t know if it’ll hold up or not, but he’s got a story. Any ideas for planning next steps?”

The chair creaked as the man behind the desk leaned it back. “I’m managing my part of this just fine. We’re about to get a nice big one coming in, and we can’t afford to have it blown because of any undue attention.” He leaned forward, propping an elbow on the desk. “That’s *my* plan.”

“What about what I just told you?”

“That’s *your* department! I’m not supposed to be involved in that part of this gig...and I don’t want to be. You’re the one who let this get screwed up, and you need to clean it up—with no loose strings!”

“I didn’t screw this up, boss! Our other partner wanted to get more directly involved, and *he* screwed up. I’m not taking the heat for him.”

“Okay, okay.” The man behind the desk threw his hands up. “Now’s not the time to start bickering! I’ll talk to him—you just figure out a way to clean up this mess so we can get back on track. Am I clear?”

“Yes...I think it’ll require doing something about this Quinn kid, though.”

“Whatever! I don’t really care, and I *don’t* want to know any details. Just do what you need to do.”

The man in front of the desk reclined in the overstuffed leather chair. “Consider it done, boss.”



*(Two weeks later)*

Jack sighed as he placed the form he'd just signed atop the others in the out-box sitting on his office desk. He hated the administrative duties that went along with being chairman of a large academic department. He much preferred being hands-on in an OR or ICU, teaching, rather than filling out requisition and budget forms. Teaching was the real appeal of this job for Jack, not the title or status.

One of Jack's least favorite tasks was going through the mountains of mail he received each day. He grabbed his letter opener and snatched up the first envelope. Procrastinating a little more, he stopped to admire his letter opener. It was quite unique, and sometimes, he wondered what people might think if they saw it. It was a razor-sharp US military-issue Ka-Bar knife. Gold-plated and inscribed with a simple, "Dr. Jack Bass – Thank You," it had been presented to Jack by an Army Ranger colonel whose life he'd helped save when the colonel had been involved in a helicopter crash during a training exercise. Jack had been among the first responders and had pulled the officer from the burning wreckage.

He slid the blade under the envelope flap and deftly slit the paper with a flick of his wrist.

"Back to work, Bass."

He worked his way through the pile, eventually getting to a thick manila envelope.

"That's weird." He flipped it over. "Stamps but no postmark." *No return address, either.* He grunted then sliced it open, set the knife aside, and extracted the contents. He skimmed through the sheaf of papers. There was no cover letter to explain the materials, so he wasn't quite sure what he was viewing. He pressed the intercom button.

"Mary, do you know anything about this manila envelope with no return address on it? Any idea where it came from?" he asked his assistant.

"I noticed that one, Dr. Bass, and wasn't sure what to do with it. It's not a standard interdepartmental envelope, so I don't think it came from anywhere on campus. I thought it was US Mail because of the stamps, but I couldn't find a postmark. I called our campus mail delivery person, and they didn't remember if it was in their USPS bundle or not. So, sorry—I just don't know where it came from."

"Mary, as usual, you're right on top of things. Thanks."

Jack stroked his chin, perusing some of the forms he'd extracted. After inspecting the entire heap, he began organizing the different forms and letters into piles of similar content. One pile contained copies of letters from different government agencies and foundations, all of which appeared to be grant announcements. The dollar amounts ranged from \$10,000 up to a couple million dollars. Some of the letters were addressed to the president of Southern Medical Center, a few were addressed to Dr. Lamar Waymon, and several had the addressee blacked out.

The next stack contained financial spreadsheets and monthly budget statements for the anesthesia department from the past few years. Several line items on the spreadsheets had been highlighted with a yellow magic marker. What was that all about?

The third pile confused him most. There were a number of what appeared to be deposit slips for several bank accounts in the Cayman Isles. The account numbers and account holder's name had been redacted. He didn't recognize the names of the financial institutions. *I can't imagine these are banks*



*used by the medical center.* Jack finished looking through the paperwork then leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together on top of his head.

“What the hell is this stuff, who sent it to me...and *why?*”

He gazed at the stacks of papers for several minutes, trying to decipher their meaning. Somebody must have thought this stuff was important enough to send, yet, the sender hadn't provided any explanation. What did they expected Jack to do? He held a finger to his lips. *I'd best not trash these just yet.* He assembled the papers, inserted them back into the manila envelope, then placed it into his miscellaneous file.



(2330, Monday)

After another torturous night on call, Mark was dead on his feet, and the thought of crawling into his bed at home consumed his thoughts. He threw his backpack across the car and onto the passenger seat then plopped down behind the wheel. He rested his head briefly on the steering wheel then started his car.

He pulled onto the busy street running along the edge of the medical center, looking in his sideview mirror for an opening in the traffic so he could change lanes. His eyebrows shot up. Was that a cop car that just pulled out of a side street? His gaze darted from the traffic in front of him to his rearview mirror. Sure enough, a patrol car soon pulled into the lane right behind his car. *Damn! Now what?*

Mark swallowed, his hands trembling as he gripped the steering wheel. He tried not to be obvious but repeatedly up at the rearview mirror. Whenever he changed lanes, the cop car followed. Whenever he turned onto a street, the cop car followed. Whoever it was, they obviously weren't worried about being discrete.

Mark finally pulled into his apartment parking lot and whipped his car into a space. The cop car pulled in right behind his car and stopped. Mark reached to gather his things but then stopped, staring into the mirror, waiting to see what happened. He sat for a couple of minutes, but the cop didn't get out of his car. Mark snatched up his backpack, sighed, and climbed out. As he locked the door, he snuck a glance at the driver in the cruiser. It was the campus cop who had been guarding the lab door the other day! What could he possibly want?

Mark walked to the back of his car and began working his way around the rear of the cop car. When he tried to step behind it, the patrol car zipped backward a few feet. Mark froze and stared at the back of the driver's head. *What the hell is this clown doing?* Mark tried again to step behind the car, and the driver repeated his action. *Screw this!* Mark moved up to the passenger window, leaning down to look in at the cop. The driver slowly turned his head toward Mark, smirked, then pointed an index finger at him, making his thumb like a pistol hammer and pretending to shoot Mark. The cop car then sped off.

Mark stood with his mouth hanging open, watching as the car careened down the street, smoke billowing from its rear tires. Mark's heart thumped against his ribs. *What the hell was that all about?*



(2330, Thursday)

“Gee-od, I can’t believe how fast these weekend call nights come around,” Jack complained, plopping down in the creaky, old office chair in his office.

His past few call nights had been far better than his first at Southern Medical Center, giving him hope that the black cloud that historically hung over his head on call nights was finally dissipating. Actually, Jack had been looking forward to this night because some of his favorite anesthesia residents were rotating through the service this month. He’d hoped some cases would come through the OR that would provide interesting teaching opportunities.

Jack quickly grew bored with sitting in the office and decided to prowl the OR Suite. As Jack passed the front desk, he did a doubletake. Janice sat at the desk, reading a newspaper. He leaned casually on the counter in front of her.

“To what do we owe this great honor?” Jack teased. “I didn’t think you worked nights.”

Her middle finger slowly rose, but she didn’t speak, and she continued to hold up the paper in front of her face.

Jack guffawed. “Gonna be a long night I see—I’m getting abused already.”

Janice lowered the paper, smiling broadly over it. “I hate being interrupted when I’m reading such interesting news,” she stated sarcastically. She folded the paper and tossed it aside. “I was wondering when you were going to get here to keep me from dying of boredom. And to answer your question, I don’t work nights. I offered to cover for Amy tonight so she and her husband could go out for the evening—it’s their anniversary.”

“You’re *so-o-o* nice—”

“Yeah, yeah, can the sarcasm, Jack. You know us old maids don’t have a social life, anyway.” She pointed at her shoulder. “It’s going to be a long night, so why don’t you come around here and give this old maid a shoulder rub.”

Jack smiled as he worked his way around the counter to stand behind her. “And what do I get in return for a good back rub?”

Janice twisted in her seat and looked up at Jack with a wry smile on her face then turned forward, settling into the chair.

“In your dreams, buddy,” she replied in a deadpan tone.

He guffawed. “What are you accusing me of?”

She chuckled. “You’re such an old perv, Jack.”

Jack smiled down at her. They had become friends over the past few months, even going out for dinner several times, always having a great time together. They were both serious when it was time to be serious at work but still enjoyed joking with each other now and then. There was even an occasional prank...when they had the time and energy for it.

“Slow night, huh? Hope it stays this way,” Janice said.

“Me, too,” Jack replied. He finished kneading her shoulders then sat in a chair next to her.

He pointed at the newspaper. “Can I have the sports section, please?”

“You gonna rub my back some more?”

“Maybe—*after* I recover from the rejection you just gave me...and finish the sports section.”

“Jeez, you’re high maintenance.” She handed him a section of the paper.

“Oh, my god! We sound like an old married couple, don’t we?” Jack said, snorting. “How pitiful.”

Janice looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “Yeah, how...pitiful,” she muttered softly.

He leaned back in the chair and put his feet up on the desk then buried his nose in the paper, looking for articles about his favorite sport, auto racing. Jack soon finished scanning the paper, set it down on his lap, and sighed. He turned toward Janice.

“So, what’s new with you?”

Janice set her paper down, too. “Well, have you seen my new car? It’s a red—”

The phone on the desk rang.

“Damn, hold on a minute, Jack!” She picked up the receiver. “OR, Janice speaking.” She listened a moment. “Uh huh. When? Okay, we’ll be ready,” she said then hung up. “We jinxed ourselves by talking about it being a slow night...when are we ever gonna learn?” She jumped from her chair. “Got a stat chest on the way up. Multiple gunshot wounds. Pretty unstable is all they told me. Let the games begin!” She dashed down the hall.

• • • •

THE STAFF HAD JUST finished preparing Trauma OR 1 when a gurney containing a blood-covered patient crashed through the double doors into the room. Jack was at the head of the table with his chief resident, Ed, and a junior anesthesia resident, Dirk. They were both exceptional, and he’d hand-picked them for this case.

Jack visually assessed the patient as the staff transferred him onto the OR table. The young man’s shirt had been cut away so there was a clear view of the three bullet entrance wounds on the front of his chest—two on the left side and one on the lower right. Very dark blood oozed profusely from the right-side bullet hole. *Damn! That one went through the liver—this is going to be a long, bloody case.* Jack spun to the circulating nurse.

“Call the blood bank. Tell them to set up twenty units...and be ready to prep more!”

“Any big lines in?” Jack asked the surgery resident who’d accompanied the patient from the ER.

“A sixteen and a fourteen gauge, I think,” the surgery resident responded breathlessly. “Guy’s pressure bottomed out down in the ER—sixty over palp last I heard, so we brought him right up.”

Jack could barely feel a pulse in the radial artery as he checked for a place to put the arterial line. That was not good.

“Barely have a pulse here—better get the cowcatcher setup ready, Ed.” The cowcatcher was a special IV tubing set that would allow them to infuse multiple units of blood through a single, large IV. “We’re probably gonna be pouring a lot of blood into this guy,” Jack called over his shoulder.

Dirk was untangling and organizing the IV bags.

“C’mon, Dirk, let’s get that blood under pressure!” Jack snapped, pointing at the unit of blood hanging on a pole. Jack slid the catheter into an artery on the man’s wrist, hurriedly connecting it to the monitor tubing. “Ed, what’s the pressure from the art line?”

“Fifty over zero.”

“Okay, I’ll watch the monitors—you get a Swan introducer into his internal jugular ASAP!”

The Swan introducer was the largest bore IV available. Putting it directly into the large vein dumping directly into the heart would allow them to quickly infuse massive amounts of blood and fluid.

“Dirk, get that cowcatcher hooked up to the central line as soon as it’s in—and put every unit under pressure!”

Dr. Scott Barris burst through the doors into the OR, only one of his cowboy boots covered with a sterile bootie, the other shoe cover still in his hand.

“Hey Jack. What’s up?” Scott spun toward the circulating nurse, holding his arms out in front of him. “Gown and gloves!”

“Multiple GSWs, bilateral thorax entrance wounds, probable liver injury, BP’s 50 over nothing—and we’re struggling to keep it *that* high.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Scott gaped at the surgery residents standing near the foot of the OR table. “What the fuck are you guys waiting for? Gown up, dammit!”

As soon as the sterile drapes were in place, Scott sliced through the skin of the man’s chest. Jack moved to the head of the table to help hang units of blood.

The double doors suddenly flew open, smashing into the wall behind them. Everyone but Scott jumped and spun toward the commotion. Two young Latino men stood in the doorway, the MAC 10 machine guns in their hands pointed at the medical staff.

“What the hell’s all the racket?” Scott asked.

“Shut up, gringo!” screamed one of the Latino men.

Scott turned slowly, peering over his shoulder at the two young men dressed in gangbanger colors. He then looked over his glasses at Jack, who responded with a shrug. There was a deathly silence as the two Latinos sauntered into the room, pointing the barrels of their guns alternately at several people. One of the Latino men moved to the head of the operating table and ripped the drape off the patient’s head.

“It’s him!”

Scott continued working inside the man’s chest. “What the fuck are you doing? You just ruined my sterile field!”

One of the men shoved Scott away from the table. “Shut the fuck up, old man!”

They took positions a few feet to one side of the operating table.

“Everybody away from the table—*now!*” the one who’d shoved Scott screamed.

“Hold on there, hombres! This guy’s gonna *die* if we stop now!” Scott said, stepping toward the OR table.

One of the Latino men fired a short burst into the ceiling.

“That’s the *idea*, gringo. Now get the hell away from the table or *die with him!*”

Jack’s gaze darted from one gangbanger to the other then to Scott and the medical staff. What the hell should he do? Going bare-handed against two automatic weapons didn’t bode well for survival.

“Yeah, asshole, we shot him to kill him and he *will* die—*now!*” the other Latino chimed in.

The last comment triggered something in Jack’s head. Something unwelcome. Unpleasant. His throat constricted, choking off the air from his lungs. He recognized the early warning signs of a PTSD flashback as he fought the intensifying panic. *Not now!* His whole body began to tremble. He shook his head hard. *No! I can’t afford to get distracted by this right now!* Shadowy images tickled at the fringes of Jack’s mind.

The Latino men exchanged a quick glance. “Let’s do it!” the Latino man wearing a red bandana said.

Both of them blasted away at the patient on the table. The deafening roar of the guns echoed off the tiled walls. The patient’s body danced around on the table, torn apart by the shower of slugs. There was a sudden silence when the guns had emptied.

Jack spun to look at the monitors. The blood pressure plummeted to zero, and the EKG tracing was nothing but a flat line. *You got your wish—he’s dead.*

Jack twisted back to the killers, the shadowy images in Jack's mind taking form. He battled them, but visions from the OR in Iraq hammered at his consciousness, flashing through his mind, just as quickly displaced by his current reality. It was like watching an old-time movie, scenes strobing between his past and the present, swirling together in fleeting, spectral visions. Jack's resistance crumbled. The Iraqi major stood before Jack, holding a pistol against Lori's forehead, a mist of blood and brains flying from the gaping wound in the back of her head. The voice of the Iraqi major taunted Jack, his words echoing. "*I shot her to kill her, and she will die—now!*" Jack's face flushed hot, and every muscle in his body tightened, an overpowering hatred bulldozing through his mind. Jack snatched a syringe of a paralyzing drug from the top of the drug cart and slipped down behind the large anesthesia machine.

"Dr. Bass, what're you doing?" Ed whispered.

Jack did not acknowledge the question.

One of the Latino men bolted toward the doors, waving an arm at his partner. "Let's go, Mano!"

The second Latino didn't move. He stood there, glaring at everyone in the room. After a few seconds, he ejected the empty clip from his machine gun and reached into his back pocket for a fresh clip. As he pulled out the new clip, the staff in the room gasped in unison, huddling together and backing away.

"C'mon, man, we gotta get the fuck outta here!"

"Too many witnesses!" the shooter in the OR yelled back as he fumbled with inserting the fresh clip into his gun.

Jack sprang from behind the anesthesia machine. He swung the syringe downward, plunging the needle deeply into the back of the neck of the gangbanger who was reloading his gun. The man dropped the ammo clip he'd been holding. Jack jammed down the plunger with his thumb but was shoved away before he could inject all the contents. The Latino bent to recover the ammunition clip from the floor. Jack lunged again from where he was sprawled on the floor, stabbing the needle deep into the man's thigh, injecting the rest of the drug.

The Latino swung the butt of his gun around, the metal smashing into the side of Jack's head, stunning him. A warm rivulet of blood flowed down his forehead into his eyes, blurring his vision. The Latino finally got the full clip inserted into his gun, but his hands were trembling. He glared down at Jack, pointing the gun at him.

"What did you inject in me, you *asshole*?" he screamed. He attempted to pull the bolt back on his gun to chamber a round. He fidgeted with it for several seconds, the shaking of his hands getting worse by the second. He glared at Jack. "Tell me!" He wobbled, his legs soon shaking as much as his hands. He scowled at Jack then brought the gun to bear on him.

Jack crab-crawled backward until he was wedged against a wall.

"You gonna *die*, gringo!"

The Latino pointed his gun at Jack's chest but struggled to hold it steady, his arms and hands shaking wildly. He fired a few rounds, but his wavering aim resulted in the bullets smacking into the floor near Jack then ricocheting into the wall. Chips of tile pelted the side of Jack's face, prickling like bee stings.

The gunman set his jaw and squinted down barrel at Jack. His arms slowly dropped to his sides, and he lost his grip, the machine gun falling to the floor near Jack's feet. The young man dropped to his knees then fell limply forward, his face smacking wetly against the cold granite floor.

Jack shot a fleeting glance at the gangbanger lying on the floor then looked up at the other killer still standing in the doorway. Jack scrambled for the machine gun. He snatched it up, staggering as he



stood.

The man in the doorway turned and left, letting the doors swing closed. Jack burst through them an instant later. The gangster had made it halfway down the hall. He turned his head to look over his shoulder, and his eyes shot wide as Jack raised the gun in the fleeing murder's direction. Jack pulled the trigger. The explosion of gunfire pounded at his ears. Brass casings bounced wildly against the walls, scattering on the floor at Jack's feet. Chips of plaster, ceramic tile, and ceiling flew everywhere as the wild spray of bullets cascaded over the area at the end of the hall where the young man was running. Jack held the trigger until the clip was empty. The man disappeared around the corner at the far end of the hall.

After several seconds, Jack stumbled back into the OR. His medical colleagues gasped, collectively backing up a step when Jack moved toward them. What was wrong with them? *Why are they looking at me like that?*

"Dr. Bass...Dr. Bass! Are you okay?"

Jack's ears were still ringing, and it took several seconds before the voice calling his name finally registered. Someone was shaking him by his shoulders.

"Dr. Bass...*Jack*...it's Janice—are you okay?"

Jack shook his head, reality gradually elbowing aside his hallucinations. He glanced at Janice then at the gun in his hand.

"What the *hell?*" He dropped the gun to the floor, looking at it in disgust. He glanced up into Janice's eyes. She looked afraid. *Afraid of what? Me?*

"Wh-what happened?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, but you scared the hell out of us!" she stated then threw her arms around him, pulling him close and burying her face in his chest. "Don't ever do anything like that again!"

Janice held Jack's trembling body close. Though she had just witnessed an incredible act of bravery that had probably saved all their lives, she also recognized that Jack seemed to have been in a different place during his actions. When he'd come back into the OR, his eyes were red and bulging, large veins standing out on his forehead, foamy saliva trickling from the corners of his mouth. *What the hell just happened to him? Was that one of his PTSD flashbacks? He seemed so out of control.* Janice leaned her head back and looked up at his face. *Could something like this have happened down in the lab the night those techs were killed?*

Although she didn't want to admit it, she'd developed feelings for Jack...but she didn't want to be hurt emotionally if the authorities discovered he'd murdered those two women. She shook her head slowly and backed away from Jack. *I just can't believe that's true! I don't care how bad his affliction is—he's no killer.*

She turned to the staff.

"I'm going to call the police."



(0600, Saturday)

Jack sat at his breakfast table, the new day's sun casting an orange hue across the polished top. He watched the birds flitting about the azaleas in his back yard as he sipped casually at a cup of coffee. He glanced at the clock display on his microwave and groaned.

"So much for sleeping in..."

In a case of unwelcome déjà vu, he again found himself on a forced medical leave while psychiatric staff "evaluated" him. Unfortunately, they had called the Department of Defense and had gotten access to Jack's military medical records, learning what had happened to him in Iraq and the impact those events had on his mental health. Of course, that led to certain conclusions about Jack's actions in the OR shooting a couple weeks prior.

The psych staff told him how he'd scared his medical colleagues that night. He had no recollection of his actions in the OR but couldn't believe his coworkers had felt threatened by him. His inability to clearly remember the events from that night troubled him deeply. The psych staff told him that his psychiatric history gave them concerns about additional similar and unpredictable actions. Jack hadn't missed the subtle references to the recent lab murders that peppered their conversations.

Even though he still didn't understand what all the ruckus was about, he knew it was a waste of time to complain about any of this. He'd been down this road before and knew complaining would be a waste of time. Just like after he'd returned from Iraq, they wouldn't listen. What was done was done. There was nothing he could do to change his situation.

So here he sat. Bored. Perplexed.

"So much for that simple civilian life I'd planned," he grumbled, standing and shuffling over to the coffee maker. Jack refilled his favorite coffee mug emblazoned with "World's Greatest Doctor," a gift from his previous coworkers. He glanced at the label and snorted.

"Maybe it should read, 'World's Craziest Doctor'."

Jack shook his head hard. *Enough mental masturbation and self-flagellation.* He took a sip of his hot brew. *I think I'll sneak into the office and get caught up on work so I'm not so swamped when I finish this medical leave.*

• • • •

(One hour later)

JACK HURRIED INTO THE hospital, leaving his sunglasses on as he rushed through the maze of hallways, hoping he could get in and out without being noticed. He paused outside the entrance doors to the OR suite, peering through the small windows to see if any staff were milling around. *Good! Nobody in sight.* He pushed the door open just enough to stick his head through, quickly scanning the area again, then he tiptoed to his office. A wave of relief rushed over him as he entered, closing the door behind him. He leaned his back against the door and wiped sweat from his face.

"Sheesh! Relax and get a grip on yourself, Bass."

He sat at his desk, soon becoming immersed in working through the backlog of paperwork.

A knock sounded on the door. Jack jumped but sat quietly, his gaze glued on the door, hoping whoever was there would just go away. There was another knock, harder this time.

“C’mon, Bass, I know you’re in there! I watched you on our surveillance cameras when you snuck in,” Frigman bellowed.

Jack hung his head, his shoulders slumping. *Well, this day just went down the crapper.* He slowly opened the door, sweeping his arm dramatically toward a chair.

“Chief Frigman, so *good* to see you! Please...come in.”

“Can the sarcasm, Doc,” Frigman stated tersely. “I watched you slink into the hospital—wondered why you’re sneaking around early on a Saturday morning.” Frigman sat on the offered chair, which squeaked loudly under his weight. He scanned the office then looked at Jack. “What’re you up to, Bass?”

“What am I up to? Why...*nothing*, Gary. Just trying to get caught up before I come back to work next week. That’s all.”

“Uh huh,” Frigman replied, regarding Jack through narrowed eyelids.

“I’m sorta busy—do you need something, or is this just a social call?” Jack asked.

“You think you’re pretty clever, don’t you, Doc?” Frigman stared at Jack for a few seconds. “Actually, I came here to ask you some questions...and I don’t have time for your cynical bullshit.”

Jack shrugged and raised his hands at his sides, feigning innocence.

“I heard about how you went crazy in the OR—attacking people with drug injections, shooting machine guns...” Frigman shook his head slowly and jutted his chin. “Heard about the wild look on your face.” He snorted. “Heard you scared the crap outta your coworkers—some of them thought you were going to shoot them, too.”

Jack’s pulse pounded in his temples, heat spreading across his face and down his neck. He clenched his teeth but remained silent. He wasn’t going to let Frigman bait him.

Frigman shifted forward in his chair, leaning a pudgy forearm on the desk. “I also had an interesting chat with your shrinks. They told me you don’t remember what you did—*situational amnesia* I think they called it. Heard of it, Doc?”

Jack nodded.

“I asked the shrinks if PTSD could ever cause situational amnesia—let a person do something without their being aware of their actions.” He jabbed a finger at Jack. “You know what they told me?”

Jack waved his hand dismissively then picked up a piece of paper and gazed at it. “No. What?”

“They told me that it was rare, but there are cases like that in the textbooks. Can you *believe* that, Doc? Someone with PTSD can be violent without any memory of it—no recollection of their actions at all. Crazy, huh? Oops—no pun intended,” Frigman said then laughed mockingly.

Jack wanted nothing more than to throw Frigman out of his office. Instead, he took a deep breath then released it slowly, fighting to remain calm. “Hmm. Well, thanks for the medical lecture, Gary. What’s that got to do with me?”

Frigman hopped from his chair, knocking it to the floor, and shook a fist at Jack. “This is what it’s got to do with you—I think *your* PTSD might be more of a problem than you want to admit! And I’m tired of you playing games with me!”

Jack stared silently at him a few seconds then picked up another piece of paper and gazed at it. “Believe me, I’m not interested in playing games with you,” he responded impassively. “Frankly, I’d be thrilled if I never saw you again.”

“You asshole! I *know* you murdered those lab techs, and I’m gonna find a way to prove it!” Spittle flew from Frigman’s mouth onto the paperwork on Jack’s desk. “And you’re not going to hide behind any insanity plea because of your stupid PTSD!”

Jack gave Frigman a deadpan look, glancing quickly at the saliva-speckled papers then frowned at Frigman. “Please relax, Gary. You’re messing up my papers.”

Frigman growled, his face reddening. “I’m going to keep digging, Bass. Until I find something. Now, do you have anything different to tell me about what you were doing the night of those murders, or are you still sticking to your original story?”

Jack stifled a laugh. “I think you watch too many Kojak reruns.” He smiled leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head. *I’m not giving this clown one more bit of information...or my time.* “I already gave you a statement. It stands—as is.”

“I’m gonna get you, Bass.”

Jack bolted from his chair and leaned over his desk, resting his fists on it. “*Why, Gary? Why are you so hell-bent on pinning this on me?*” He took a deep breath and slowly lowered himself into his chair. “Never mind. I’m sure you have your stupid reasons...” Jack pinned the cop with his gaze. “But I think this is harassment.” He stabbed a finger at Frigman. “And if it continues, I’m going to the medical center president and have him intervene. *Comprende?*”

Frigman snickered. Jack shook his head. What a condescending prick...

“You just do that, Doc.”

Jack had had enough. “Anything else, Gary? I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Not now, Doc. Just remember—I’m watching.”

“Yeah, got it. You’re watching.” Jack stood, rounded the desk, and opened the door. “Good-bye, then.”

“*See ya, Doc,*” Frigman said over his shoulder on his way out the door.

Jack slammed the door. “Always a pleasure, Gary.”

He set Frigman’s chair upright then sat, again working through the mail. He froze when his gaze fell on an overstuffed, unmarked manila envelope.

“Aw, crap. Not again.”

He flipped it around. It was just like the last one he’d gotten—no return address or postmark. He slit it open and dumped the papers onto his desk. The contents were similar to the ones he’d received in the last packet, but this time, there were several newspaper clippings, as well.

He arched an eyebrow. “That’s interesting.”

He read the newspaper articles. They were obituaries for two past faculty members of anesthesia department. One was for Dale Wallace, MD, who had died during a mugging in the parking lot at Southern Medical Center late one night. The second was for Bev Costas, MD, who was found dead from a narcotics overdose one morning in the women’s OR locker room.

“Whoa! I thought these stories were just urban legend.” He rubbed his chin. Two dead faculty members in a short period of time. Why wouldn’t Waymon have told him about something this serious?

Jack unlocked a desk drawer and thumbed through the miscellaneous section. He located and pulled out the manila folder he’d placed there a few weeks ago then dumped the contents onto his desk next to the newly received bundle. He spent the next several minutes organizing the two sets of contents. There were the same types of spreadsheets and deposit slips in both envelopes. The dates on the second set of documents were highlighted with yellow magic marker. The sender seemed to be trying to tell Jack something, but he’d be damned if could figure out what. He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

“I wish whoever sent this would just point out what they’re trying to tell me.” He leaned back in his chair, staring at the piles of papers. *Hard to believe this is all coincidence.* “But why send all this

stuff to me?”

Jack locked the papers in his desk drawer then propped his elbows on his desk, resting his chin on his clasped hands. What should he do? After a few minutes, he snatched up his cellphone and scrolled through his contacts, looking for his friend, Wes Watley. Jack dialed Wes’s number.

Jack and Wes had met when they were in the Army and stationed together in Germany. Wes was a CID investigator who’d been involved in the investigation of strange events that had happened to Lori and Jack when they were stationed there. It had turned out that their commanding officer at the time had a serious grudge against Jack and Lori—serious enough to try to kill them. Repeatedly. Wes and Jack had saved each other’s lives on several occasions and consequently, had struck up an enduring friendship. After getting out of the military, Wes had joined the FBI and was now a SAC up in the northeastern US.

“Wes Watley.”

“Hey, Wes, it’s Jack Bass. How’s it going?”

“Doin’ great, Jack. Movin’ up in the world and makin’ a difference,” Wes joked. “How are you doing?” There was silence for a few seconds. “I heard you had a rough go of it after what happened in Iraq.” Wes paused again. “I-I know how much you loved Lori.”

“That I did. Very much..”

“I’m really sorry I didn’t drop by when you were in Walter Reed.”

*Damn! How the hell did so many people know about my time at Reed?*

“Yeah...life goes on. But it’s over and done with. I retired from the army after that little fiasco. Took a position a few months ago as chairman of the anesthesia department down here at Southern Medical Center. That’s kinda why I’m calling—I wanted to pick your brain about some strange goings on here.”

“Uh oh—scary words when uttered by Jack Bass,” Wes quipped. “Ask away.”

Jack described the events that had taken place during the few months since his arrival at Southern Medical Center, telling Wes about the murders, the harassment and accusations by Frigman, and the anonymous mail he’d started receiving.

“Jack, I don’t know what’s going on down there, but it certainly sounds weird. Wanna hear what I think you should do?”

“Hell, yes! That’s why I called.”

“First, much as I hate to say it, go out and get a good lawyer. Don’t worry—from what you’ve told me, it’s unlikely you’re at any real risk...but you need a lawyer to keep that Frigman clown at bay. Don’t talk to him again without your lawyer present. Second, send me copies of those papers you’ve received. I’ll take a look at them and nose around to see what I can find out, especially about the offshore accounts. Third, try to find out who’s sending you the information and why.”

“I wouldn’t have a clue where to start.”

“It’s probably somebody closer to you than you think. Be discrete and selective before you start asking questions, though. Lastly...watch your back, Jack—I know how your luck runs, and I’m more than a little nervous about this. It sounds like there’s something bad happening down there and it’s making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.”

“Me, too. I’m wondering what the hell I’ve gotten myself in the middle of...this time,” Jack said then sighed loudly.

“I don’t know, ol’ buddy, but I’m glad you called me. Actually, I think I’ll give my colleague down in that field office a call and fill him in—see if he wants to check around the medical center.” There was a short silence. “And, Jack, seriously—watch your back!”

“Thanks, Wes. I really appreciate the help. I wish this call had been about a more pleasant topic.”

“Well, Jack, when you call, I’ve learned not to be surprised by anything. Send me that stuff ASAP, and I’ll give you a call as soon as I’ve reviewed it. Bye.”





Jack scurried through the hospital on his way to the parking lot, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Was Frigman watching again—observing Jack’s every move over the surveillance cameras? What if Frigman caught Jack carrying the documents he’d just discussed with Wes. He resisted the urge to look up at the security cameras, though he’d love nothing more than to flip off each of them as he passed by. Despite his efforts to remain calm, Jack arrived at his truck with his shirt sweat-soaked and his hands shaking. He fumbled with his keys and briefcase.

“Hey, Jack.”

Startled, Jack spun, dropping his keys. “Oh...hey, Janice.” The warmth of a blush spread up his neck and across his face. *Why am I being so nervous around Janice? I need to relax.* He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “You spooked me.”

“Sorry, Jack, I didn’t mean to.” Janice smiled as she watched him pick up his keys. “It’s good to see you.” She pointed at his briefcase. “Is this a sign you’ll be coming back to work soon?”

“Yep. Next week.” He nodded toward the hospital. “Just thought I’d slip in quietly on a Saturday and get caught up with the paperwork backlog.” He flashed her a quick smile. “What’re *you* doing here on a Saturday?”

“I don’t have a life, either,” she said then chuckled. “I’m doin’ that paperwork thing, too.” She glanced at his shirt, a look of concern covering her face. “Why are you sweating so much? It’s usually freezing in the hospital.” Her brow knitted. “Are you okay?”

“Uhhh, sure...I’m fine.” *I wish that was true!* There were actually too many weird things happening that Jack didn’t have an explanation for...and that bothered him. A lot.

She leaned an elbow on the hood of his truck and cocked her head. “You’re a terrible liar, Jack Bass. Is there something I can help you with?”

He sighed and looked at the ground, rubbing the back of his neck. “That prick, Frigman, came to my office while I was in there. Accused me again of those lab murders. He told me he’s watching me with all the security cameras...he’s really getting me paranoid.” He shook his head slowly. “I’m *really* unhappy with myself for letting him get to me like this.” He slapped the side of his truck. “He’s really pissing me off! I just don’t need this sort of bullshit right now!”

She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. “Relax, Jack. Everybody on this campus thinks he’s a jerk. My staff like you and are looking forward to your return. Granted, some of them are a little intimidated by you, but they still respect you and enjoy working with you. Ignore Frigman. He’s a jackass.”

He shrugged and remained silent, kicking softly at a rock near his foot. He knew Frigman was a jackass—that wasn’t what was bothering him so much. *I wish I knew why he was bugging me so much about these murders.* But he didn’t want to bother Janice with these concerns. Jack had always been independent. Figured things out for himself. He wasn’t going to change now.

“Hey, I have an idea. If you don’t have plans for the rest of the day, how would you like to come out to my lake house? We can have some beer, grill some brisket, and cruise around the lake in my boat. Just chill out the rest of the day. You in?”

Jack smiled broadly. He couldn’t remember the last time he did something like that. “Well...if you’re sure you want the company, hell, yes!” Jack opened his truck door and threw his briefcase on the seat then turned back to her. “You have a lake house and a boat? Cool! I’ve been dying to get out

on the lake ever since I moved here. I found a great meat shop where we can get a good brisket, and I \_\_\_”

“Whoa, slow down, cowboy.” She giggled. “You just be my guest today. I was planning on working out there this weekend, anyway, so the fridge is already stocked,” she said.

“Well...okay. How do I get there?”

“If you can leave now, you can just follow me.”

“Then let’s blow this Popsicle stand! What kind of car are you driving?”

“That red convertible SL right over there.” She pointed at a nearby Mercedes.

Jack’s glanced at the car then back at Janice and arched an eyebrow. “Okay—shouldn’t be hard to spot *that* in traffic.”



As he pulled up to the lake house, Jack gawked at the beautiful, contemporary-style stone house on a waterfront lot. There was a dock off the back yard, a nice-looking runabout sitting on its hoist. Janice met him as he climbed out of his truck.

“Wow! I’ve always dreamed of a place like this—I’m jealous,” Jack said, nodding at the house.

“Thanks, Jack. It’s my refuge from a crazy world.” She smiled at him. “I can tell by the look on your face you’re wondering how I could afford all of this on a nurse’s salary.” She took his hand and pulled him toward the house. “My husband did quite well in business, and as much as I hate to say it, he also had a very good life insurance policy.”

“Oh.” Jack had dealt a lot with death but still never knew what to say in response to such news. “I didn’t know... I-I’m sorry.”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the ground. “I still miss him a lot, but it’s been several years. I’ve kinda learned to cope with it.”

“Yeah, losing a loved one can be a little rough sometimes...” he mumbled, thinking back to the death of his mother. She’d been beaten to death by Jack’s father during one of his drunken tirades. Jack’s chest began to tighten, and he shook his head to rid the memories...for now.

Janice raised an eyebrow, a look of curiosity on her face as she glanced at him. She led him to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “Corona or Miller Lite?”

“Corona would be great.”

She handed him a beer and a lime then extracted a knife from a drawer. “Would you do the honors?”

“Sure.”

“While you’re slicing the lime, I’ll get the grill fired up and put the brisket on. Then we can go out for a cruise on the boat.” She dug around in the fridge.

“Actually, if you’ll put the boat in the water, I’ll get the brisket going,” Jack said. “Smoking brisket is a specialty of mine—got any mesquite chips?”

“Everything’s out by the smoker; you’re welcome to use whatever you find there.” She stopped at the door and nodded toward the boat. “Do you water ski?”

“Um, yeah, but I didn’t bring any swim trunks...and I’m too old to skinny dip.”

Janice laughed. “Though I might like to see you ski naked, I think my husband’s trunks would fit you. Want to try them?”

“Well...okay. You sure you don’t mind?”

“Not a bit.” She pointed toward a hallway. “There’s a box in the guest bedroom closet that has Hank’s name on it. Help yourself.”

Twenty minutes later, Jack smiled as he gazed at the glowing coals under the brisket. Just right. He closed the smoker lid and wandered down to the boat.

“Hop in, Jack.”

Janice wheeled the boat out onto the lake, settling in at a slow pace. Jack slouched down on a bench seat opposite her, nodding and smiling as she pointed out some interesting sites on the waterfront. Occasionally, Janice looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. He wasn’t sure if it was the beers or the setting, but a relaxing warmth enveloped his mind, reminding him of being held in his mother’s arms as a young child. He smiled broadly and closed his eyes. He would have been happy to stay there forever. Just forget the hospital and Frigman. Forget the world.

They arrived back at the house late in the afternoon when the sun sat low in the sky. *All in all, a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon*, he thought as he secured the boat.

“I wish I could’ve talked you into skiing, Jack.”

“I didn’t want to embarrass myself.” He shrugged. “Besides, I really enjoyed just putt-putting around the lake.”

She finished raising the boat on the hoist. “Me, too. Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“If you get the brisket off the grill, I’ll get the side dishes. I thought we could just sit on the back deck to eat—the view of the sunset is great from there.”

They went into the house and loaded their plates, grabbed some cold beers, then sat at the table on the deck. Jack kept his mouth full of food, a convenient excuse not to talk. He’d always been horrible with small talk, especially with women. He’d soon emptied his plate and hopped from this chair.

“I’ll go get us some beers.”

When he returned, Janice had moved to a wooden swing and was smiling demurely at him. She patted the seat next to her.

“Come sit next to me, Jack.”

He swallowed. “Uh...sure.” He sat on the far end of the swing. Jack had always been uncomfortable being in intimate situations with women. The physical and verbal abuse his father had rained upon Jack when he was a child had made him grow up timid. Even if his father wasn’t beating him for no reason, he’d tell Jack that he was a worthless excuse for a human being—someone that nobody liked. So, Jack had learned to avoid being around people...other than his mother. She was always loving. When he was a child, people called him shy; as an adult, some people labeled him distant and withdrawn. Except for Lori. She had seen through all of that. She’d learned the story of his childhood. Understood why he acted as he did...especially when a woman was trying to get closer to him, emotionally, or even physically.

They swung gently for several minutes in silence. Jack squirmed, running a finger up and down the chain that held the swing. He watched the golden orb of the sun setting, sneaking quick glances at Janice.

She turned and looked directly into his eyes. “You seem a little nervous—you doin’ okay?”

“It’s, uh...it’s been a while since I’ve had one-on-one time with a woman.” He shot a quick glance at her. “Guess I’m a little out of practice...”

“Something to do with the lost loved ones comment you made earlier?”

He stared into her eyes for a few seconds then looked away, shrugging.

She put a hand on his arm, and his whole body tensed. He wanted to jerk his arm away but knew that would be rude. A bead of sweat trickled down his brow. “Jack...just relax. I get it—I’m a little ‘out of practice’, too.” She slid across the swing and leaned against him, pulling his arm around her shoulders. “Is this all right? I’m getting a little chilly.”

He nodded. “S-sure.” His chest was tightening. *Jesus, Bass! Relax! You’re acting like a little schoolboy.*

“I guess I’m acting silly, aren’t I—like a kid, I mean?”

“I don’t think you’re silly at all. I’m enjoying this.” She lifted her head from his shoulder, turned her face to him, and smiled. “I hope I’m not making you uncomfortable.”

He shook his head. “No.” He wanted to jump up and run away! “Well...maybe a little.”

“Want me to move back to the other end?”

He pulled her close and shook his head. “No. It’s not because of you...it’s just me. I like you being next to me.” He sighed. He loved the feel of a woman’s warm body next to his. Other than his mother and Lori, though, he’d always avoided it because it made him so uneasy. “You’re right—I just need to relax.”

“Good.”

Janice settled her head onto his shoulder and put a hand on his chest, caressing it softly. They rocked gently, watching the magenta and orange streaks of the sunset fade into darkness.

“I hate to risk ruining the mood, but...do you mind if I ask you something about work?” Jack asked.

“Awww, you *will* ruin the mood with that topic.” She shrugged. “Go ahead, though. I’ll answer whatever I can.”

“Did you know Bev Costas and Dale Wallace?”

Her body tensed, her hand on his chest freezing in place. She remained silent for several seconds.

“Yes...I knew them.” She squirmed and took a sip of beer. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, somebody sent me some newspaper clippings of their obituaries. I’d heard vague tales around the hospital about some faculty members who’d died under strange circumstances but never heard any details—figured it was just the rumor mill churning.” He shrugged. “Seems someone wants me to know more, though.” He removed his arm from her shoulders and turned toward her. “You hear much about their deaths?”

Janice remained silent for several seconds, her mouth falling open a bit. “I don’t know any more than anyone else does—it was all kept very hush-hush. Dr. Waymon refused to talk about it.” She grunted. “The jerk yelled at anyone who brought it up in his presence. Chief Wiggam didn’t seem to think their deaths were suspicious—just swept it all under the rug. If anyone asked about it, he told them it was none of their business.”

“What’s the scuttlebutt on what actually happened?”

She turned toward him, looking into his eyes, then turned away and sighed.

“I’ll tell you—but you didn’t hear this from me.”

Jack smiled at her and ran a finger across his chest “Cross my heart.”

She slumped back on the swing. “Dale Wallace was a young and promising assistant professor in the anesthesia department. He died from a brutal mugging in the hospital parking lot late one night as he was leaving work.” She chewed at her lip. “Some of us were concerned there was more to the story, though.”

“How so?”

“He was quite outspoken about fixing things in the anesthesia department that he felt needed to be fixed.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t sound like something that would result in his being murdered.”

She glanced at Jack and rubbed her forehead. “It wasn’t just that. He’d started acting paranoid, almost scared, for several weeks prior to his death.”

Jack rubbed his chin and arched an eyebrow. “Hmmm. What about Bev Costas?”

“She was found dead only a couple of months after Dale’s demise. The official word was that she died of a narcotics overdose. Supposedly, several empty vials of morphine were found near her body, and she had large amounts of morphine in her blood at autopsy.” She twirled a lock of hair around a finger and looked into the night. “None of us bought into that story. I asked the pathologist who did her autopsy, and Bev didn’t have the needle tracks that are typically found on an IV drug abuser’s body.”

He'd even checked between her toes. Nothing. She only had one injection mark on her entire body. He felt that was very odd."

"That's strange for several reasons." Jack crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in the swing. "And what did Waymon have to say about her death?"

Janice snorted. "He said it was all 'mere coincidence'. Tried to convince the OR staff that the rumors were only conspiracy theories. He downplayed everything." She huffed. "What a crock of shit! He even put forward the hypothesis that she may have overdosed intentionally because of the death of her secret lover, Dale Wallace." She shook her head. "Sheesh! What a jackass!"

"I'm not surprised."

She growled softly. "Bev had two young children, for chrissakes! She always seemed a very dedicated mother. She just wasn't the type to throw that all away just to get high! On top of that, none of us believed Bev *could* overdose, even if she was using, her being an expert with the dosing of morphine, and all."

"Makes sense."

"Anyway, Waymon continued to reassure the staff that it was all an 'unfortunate coincidence' and that everyone should just get on with their jobs." Janice glanced at Jack. "The way he said it, though, made it sound like there was an 'or else' on the end of his statement. Staff didn't dare raise any further questions. Nobody wanted to risk the wrath of Dr. Waymon."

"So...everybody just let it drop?"

She shrugged. "What else could we do? We were all running a bit scared of Waymon...the university police didn't seem concerned..."

"Can I ask one more question?"

"Depends on what it is."

"Did you know them well? Were they good people?"

She turned to him, a mix of incredulity and confusion on her face, then turned away. "Personally, I thought of them both as exceptional people and good doctors. I was really shocked by their deaths."

"It all sounds very weird."

"Yeah, *very*, Jack. Look, I'm not trying to be difficult, but...I really don't want to rehash all of this. Many people, including me, got really paranoid about all that stuff. Some were afraid they might be the next unexpected death if they asked too many questions. Call it goofy if you want, but I'm *still* scared."

"Sorry I brought up such a sensitive subject—I was just curious." He was silent a few seconds. Should he ask? Had he already pressed her for too much information? "You think those deaths might be related to these recent lab murders?"

Her head snapped around, and she searched his eyes for several seconds. "You're not the only one wondering about the possibility of there being a connection...and it's got people frightened again. Please"—she grabbed his hand—"just keep your distance from all of it. Just leave it alone."

"Well, Janice, I wish I could just ignore it." He blew out a long breath. "Unfortunately, Frigman has accused *me* of the murders, and, well...looking the other way when something bad is happening is just not my style." He stared straight ahead, setting his jaw. "Something stinks around that place, and I need to find out what."

"Just be careful, okay? I'd hate to see you get hurt...or *die unexpectedly*." She rested her head back on his shoulder and was silent for several seconds. "Jack, I can't believe I'm actually bringing this up, but...I do know Dale Wallace's widow. I could see if she'd be willing to talk with you. Maybe she knows something I don't."

“Absolutely! I don’t want to cause any trouble for you or anyone else. I just need to figure out what’s going on.” He paused for several seconds. “Subject closed. Now, what do you say we just get back to enjoying this beautiful evening?”

She smiled as she looked up at his face then snuggled a little closer. “That sounds *much* better.”





Jack and Janice chatted about a variety of topics over the next few hours. Jack set his empty beer bottle on an end table and glanced at his watch then scooted forward to the edge of the seat.

“Whoa! It’s after midnight. I’d better get going.” He clambered from the swing and turned back to her. “Let me help you clean up before I go.”

Janice grabbed his hand and pulled him back onto the swing, her eyes searching his. “Don’t worry about cleaning up; I’ll take care of that tomorrow.” She smiled awkwardly. “You know, we’ve had a few beers tonight...and it’s a long drive back to town. Don’t you think it’d be safer if you just stayed here tonight? I have a guest room you’re welcome to use. I-I’d really feel better if you didn’t drive back tonight.”

“I’d hate to impose...”

“Don’t be silly—if I thought you’d be imposing, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Well...if you’re sure it’s okay.”

“Done. C’mon, I’ll show you the guest room.”

She grabbed his hand and led him into the house. Her warm, smooth skin felt good in his hand. *Watch it, Bass! You don’t want to get hurt...again.* When they reached the doorway of the guest room, Janice turned to face him.

“Well, here it is.”

She moved her face up to his and put her hand behind his neck, drawing him closer. A shiver ran down the back of his neck as her lips touched his. Jack tensed. The feel of a woman’s lips on his felt good. He should stop her. Not let himself give in. His mind raced. Her lips felt so good. He kissed her back. *What should I do?* Her lips parted and her tongue probed Jack’s mouth. He gave in, lifting her and pulling her close, their tongues intertwining wildly. After a moment, Janice pulled her head back, took a deep breath, and stroked Jack’s chest.

“You know, Jack...you don’t have to stay in the guest room.”

*Damn! I shouldn’t have done that! I-I can’t let this happen again...* He set her down, pulled her hand from his chest, and held it in both of his hands, gazing into her eyes. He hadn’t noticed before—they were a shade of green similar to Lori’s. A breath caught in his chest, and he stepped back.

“Janice, I-I can’t. Sorry. It’s got nothing to do with you—I’m very attracted to you and hope we can get to know each other much better...” He rubbed the back of his neck as he gazed up at the ceiling. “It’s just that I’m still getting over the loss of someone who was very close to me. The only woman I’ve truly loved as an adult.” He turned his eyes down to hers. “It’s just too soon... I-I’m not ready to risk feeling that kind of pain again.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t be sorry! It’s *very* appealing to think about going into your room and making passionate love for hours...” He shrugged and rubbed a toe on the carpeting. “I just don’t think I’d be a very good partner tonight.” He looked up and stroked her face softly. “I hope you understand.”

“I won’t say I’m not disappointed, but, yes...I understand. Do you want to tell me about it—your loss, I mean? It might help to talk about it. It sure helped me when I lost my husband.”

He shook his head. “No. I-I just can’t yet—it still hurts too much to even think about her death.” He pulled Janice against him, wrapping his arms around her for a couple of minutes. “Tell you what. To pay for my spending the night, I’ll get up early and make a nice breakfast for us,” he whispered into her ear. He backed away. “Flapjacks or eggs?”

“Since you’re cooking, I’d like both.” She laughed softly. “And don’t forget the bacon, coffee, and toast.”

She gazed up at him, the twinkle in her eyes causing a spasm in his chest. Lori’s eyes twinkled like that. He turned his head away. *No! Don’t look!*

“Consider it done, boss,” he mumbled. He gave her a quick kiss on her forehead then turned toward the guest room door.

“Sweet dreams,” she said as he stepped into the room.

Jack froze, unwanted images from Iraq suddenly flying through his head. He grunted. “Yeah...right. Sweet dreams.” He flopped down on the guest bed and stared at the ceiling. A shudder trampled across his body, causing the whole bed to shake. *Damn! I was afraid this would happen!* He shook his head hard. *Get out of my head!* The icy tentacles of his psyche’s sprites groped hungrily at his mind. He fought against the images that were playing through his brain like a movie. He flopped restlessly on the bed, groaning as he tried replacing the horrible images with more positive ones. He could not let himself fall asleep! He knew what the outcome would be.

His battle was futile. The late hour, large meal, and alcohol ganged up on him like a bunch of playground bullies to overpower his will, and he drifted off to sleep.



Jack writhed on the bed, soon becoming entangled in the sweat-soaked sheets, the dreams soon becoming his reality.

• • • •

*(Fifteen months prior, Southwestern Iraq desert, dusk)*

LIEUTENANT COLONEL Jack Bass, MD, commanding officer of the U.S. Army Level II Medical Treatment Facility based in the southwestern part of Iraq, was walking and joking with the head nurse of the unit, Major Lori Darden. They had just finished a forty-two-hour stint of treating a constant onslaught of battle casualties, the Med-Evac helicopters ceaselessly pounding the air as they'd landed and taken off. They had finally treated the last of the injured and were exhausted, in a state of goofiness that commonly followed such an extended period of high-stress activity.

Though it would be hard for many people to imagine how anyone could laugh and joke at a time like this, for Jack and Lori, it was a form of stress management. Like most well-seasoned battle trauma surgery veterans, laughter was preferable to the alternatives of crying about the wasted young lives...or drinking themselves into a stupor.

Though they loved each other dearly, they had agreed to put any long-term romantic plans on hold until they had a lifestyle that was more conducive to a stable relationship. In other words, after they left the armed services. Despite their absurd schedules and time apart, though, they shared an unbreakable emotional bond.

In addition to some stateside assignments, this was Lori's and Jack's second combat deployment together. Despite Jack's efforts to dissuade her, Lori had taken steps to make certain she would be assigned with Jack on this deployment. He was thrilled to have her company, both on a professional and personal level, but he was not happy she was there...in harm's way.

They entered the tent that served as Lori's quarters, intending to have a quick nightcap before catching some much-needed rest.

"Kahlua and cold decaf work for you?"

"Talked me into it, you silver-tongued devil."

Lori reached into her locker, dug out her ubiquitous bottle of Kahlua, then poured some powdered decaf coffee into a couple of used Styrofoam cups. She held out the cups containing the liqueur and powdered coffee, and Jack poured some water from a canteen into them. He took one then sat next to her on the edge of the bed.

"Cheers," they both said as they touched cups.

They sipped on their drinks and cringed but soon drained the cups. They snuggled up next to each other on Lori's small bed, and before long, the fatigue and liqueur lulled them to sleep.

• • • •

*(Early the next morning)*

LORI'S AND JACK'S HEADS both snapped up. They exchanged a quick glance.

"That sounds like AK-47s!" Jack muttered, throwing his legs over the side of the bed.

"It sure as hell does!" She grabbed her helmet from a hook near her bed. "And it sounds like it's coming from within the camp!"

“What the hell?” Jack grumbled, pulling on his scrub shirt. They were miles behind the front lines. How could this be?

The sounds of a firefight escalated quickly, one staccato of gunfire answered by another. Confused voices were calling out from multiple directions. Jack jumped up, threw his shoes on then bolted toward the door. Lori sprinted out the door right on Jack’s heels. She tapped him on the shoulder, and he stopped, twisting toward her.

“I’m heading to the OR triage area,” she said.

“Keep your head down and no heroics!” Jack yelled after her as she sprinted away.

“Same goes for you!” she hollered over her shoulder.

“I’ll let you know what’s going on as soon as I know something!” Jack yelled then spun and crouched down, cautiously working his way toward the gunfire.

Jack soon came across an injured US soldier and hoisted him onto his shoulders. He trotted toward the OR tent, his legs feeling like they were going to explode as he ran the last few steps. He crashed through the doors, the severely wounded man now hanging limply on his shoulder. Blood-spattered nursing staff broke away from their tasks to help him maneuver the young man onto a nearby gurney. Jack moved to the scrub sinks to wash the soldier’s blood from his arms and hands. As he rinsed, Mitch Sanders, the unit trauma surgeon, stepped next to Jack.

“What the *hell* is going on out there, Jack?”

“I don’t know, Mitch, but it’s got me worried,” Jack replied, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I grabbed the worst-injured guy, but...” He stopped scrubbing and looked at Mitch. “Judging from the number of casualties I saw on the way over here, our defense ranks gotta be getting pretty thin.”

Someone slapped Jack on the back of his head, and he spun. He turned to see a disheveled Lori scowling at him.

“I thought I told you no heroics! You scared the shit outta me when you took so long to get here. Then you come flying in covered in blood!” She shook her fist in his face. “Don’t do that shit!”

“Sorry.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Relax. I’m fine.” He waved his hands over himself. “None of this blood is mine.” He looked past her at the busy triage area. “What’s the status here?”

“It’s a cluster.” She pointed a thumb over her shoulder. “What’s up out there?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. I ran across that shot-up kid before I could figure that out.”

Lori frowned. “All right. Well, we’ve got plenty for you to do here.”

Jack dried his hands and followed her into the triage area. He got busy, tending to the casualties, cocking his head to listen as the gunfire outside waned then stopped abruptly. A din of mumbling worked through the staff. He looked around, the staff returning his gaze with hopeful looks. He finished securing the ABD bandage to a gunshot wound then stood slowly, blowing out a long breath.

*I guess people are expecting me to show some leadership...*

Jack motioned to two medics. “George, Walt, get your armor on and get some stretchers ready—we’ll start a search detail for wounded ASAP.”

“Yes, sir.” They both responded, scrambling toward the locker where personal armor was stored.

Walt approached the exit but the door smashed inward, knocking him onto his ass. Several armed men burst through the door, firing their AK-47 rifles into the air as they jostled into the tent. Jack took a step toward them but was knocked to his knees by a rifle butt jammed into his stomach. He tried to stand but an Iraqi soldier smashed his knee into Jack’s face. He fell back to the floor.

One of the soldiers went to the entrance doors, held one ajar, and yelled something outside. A few seconds later, a man sauntered in, surrounded by armed fighters. Jack looked up from the floor. *This*

*must be the big cheese.* Lori approached the man who'd just entered, standing in front of him with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

“What the hell are you doing? We have wounded that need to be cared for!”

The man slapped her hard across the face, knocking her to her knees. Jack jumped up and took a step toward Lori's attacker, halting instantly when he felt the barrel tip of an AK-47 pressed against the side of his head. He shot a glance at Lori. Blood flowed from her nose. Jack's pulse pounded in his temples, and he growled. He took another step toward her. She shook her head, held out her hand for him to stop and mouthed, “No.”

Lori clambered to her feet, jutting her chin out defiantly as she glared into her attacker's eyes. He raised his arm again. He started to swing his hand toward her, stopping suddenly when there was a loud shout from the doorway. He glowered at Lori then slowly lowered his arm. He stepped to the door, and the man there whispered something into his ear then disappeared outside. The commander turned back to the interior, a sneer on his face.

“I am Major Ahmad, Commander of the Western Brigade of Republican Guard Fighters, and you infidel invaders are now my prisoners. Do *exactly* as I say, and I may show mercy toward you—I may even spare your lives,” he stated in heavily accented English. He ran his gaze over the medical staff. “Who is in charge here?”

“*I* am,” Jack yelled, stepping forward. “Lieutenant Colonel Jack Bass, US Army Medical Corps.” He pointed at the armed fighters dispersed inside the tent. “I strongly protest this unprovoked attack on unarmed noncombatants.” He hoped his voice sounded more commanding than he felt.

“Shut up! You are an infidel member of an invading army.” He stepped in front of Jack, shoving him in the shoulder. “I don't care about your protest!”

“But...we're just Medical Corps staff.” Jack waved an arm around the triage area. “And we have several wounded here that need immediate attention.”

Major Ahmad glared at Jack in silence for a few seconds then cast a gaze about the room of wounded, a look of disgust on his face. He turned to his second-in-command and muttered something, sweeping his arm around the room. The soldier immediately turned to his troops and yelled a command, pointing at the wounded. Several fighters took up positions near the wounded, pointing their rifles at them.

The Iraqi Major then turned to look directly into Jack's eyes, a demonic grin on his face. He uttered a single word, and his soldiers fired point blank into all of the wounded US soldiers.

“Well, Colonel Bass, it appears you no longer have wounded to concern yourself with.” The Major laughed. “Now you can give me your *full* attention!”

Lori lunged at the major. “You sonofabitch—”

He drove the butt of his AK-47 into her stomach so hard Jack felt her breath blow across him, even where he stood, a couple of feet away. Jack rushed to her side.

“Leave the whore be!” the major yelled.

“Screw off! And don't call her a whore, you asshole! She's a nurse and an officer who holds the same rank you do.” Jack gently brushed Lori's hair from her face. “You okay?” he whispered.

She nodded, still gasping for breath. Jack turned from her and glowered up at his captor.

“All right, you've made your point—you're in control. What do you want from us?”

“Let me begin by explaining to you that all of your defense forces are dead. Your lives depend on you doing as I say. Listen closely and I will tell you exactly what you will do—I will say it only once then you will follow my instructions to the word or suffer the consequences!” he rattled off, spittle flying from his lips

Jack gave a slight nod. “Go ahead.”

“First, you will provide medical care to my wounded fighters.”

“That’s not a problem—” Jack started to respond.

The major back-handed Jack hard across his face. “Do not interrupt me!”

Jack’s face flushed hot, and he balled his fists, fighting the urge to grab the major by the throat and squeeze the life from him. He rubbed his face, taking a step toward the man. Lori tugged on his arm.

“Jack, please...just relax,” she whispered.

He glanced at her then turned slowly back to the major. “My apologies, Major. Please...continue.”

“I will provide you with a radio, which has been tuned to the frequency of your regular Army command headquarters. You will tell them that you are under attack and require immediate assistance.” A grim smile, showing his darkly stained teeth, slinked across his face. “Meanwhile, my freedom fighters will prepare a surprise reception for your fellow infidels.”

Jack shook his head. “Nope. I’m sorry, Major, but I can’t help you with that. I’m happy to provide care for your wounded, but I can’t voluntarily expose my staff to any combat situation—we are noncombatants,” Jack stated, doing his best to try to maintain a commanding tone.

Lori stepped up next to Jack, grasping his hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. That signal told him she agreed with his decision, which made Jack feel a little more confident.

The Iraqi major whipped his pistol from his belt and pointed it at Lori’s forehead.





He shot Lori point blank, brains and blood splattering the side of Jack's face. She dropped next to Jack like the proverbial sack of rocks. His mouth hung open, his mind frozen, unable to comprehend the surreal scene, even as he looked at the pieces of her skull dribbling down his arm. The Iraqi major stood glaring at Jack for several seconds then shrugged.

"Allah's will be done!" he yelled, raising his gun and spinning to face his men.

They all raised their rifles and chanted.

He turned back to Jack, slipping his pistol back into his belt. "One less American whore," the major muttered, smirking at Jack.

Jack's eyes darted from the major to Lori where she lay in a heap at Jack's feet. Her normally beautiful strawberry-blond hair was matted in a tangled mess of brains, blood, and bone. He fell to his knees, his lips trembling. A sob exploded from his lips.

"No-o-o!" he howled. His chest felt as a knife had been plunged into it. He reached toward her. The hot, hard steel of a gun barrel pressed against the side of his head.

"No! Do not touch her! I shot her to kill her. She will die—now!"

Jack reached to stroke her face. The hammer on the major's pistol clicked, the hot steel of the barrel tip gouging deeper into the flesh of Jack's head.

"As you have just seen, Colonel, I think nothing of killing you infidels. I'm sure Allah is singing my praises right now for having ridded the world of another American whore. If you do not do as I tell you, you will join your whore friend in hell!"

Jack's heart slammed against his ribs. He fought back tears as he glanced around the room at his staff. Horror showed on each of their faces, many with their mouths hanging wide. He quickly slid a finger down on Lori's neck to feel for a pulse. Nothing. His breath caught in his throat. His brain felt like a roaring inferno, consumed by a desire to kill Ahmed. Kill him with his bare hands. He glanced again at his staff. What would happen to them, though? He knew the likely outcome. He slowly stood, tears cascading down his face.

A trickle of blood wormed across the floor from Lori's twitching body, touching Jack's foot, as if even in death Lori was reaching out to him. He jerked his foot away as if the blood was acid. Jack turned to the major, glaring into his eyes. He'd never imagined being able to feel the depth of hatred he felt at that moment.

"You will now follow the instructions I gave you, Colonel."

"Kiss my ass, you dirtbag!" Jack snarled. "Go ahead and pop a cap in my head, but I won't lift a finger to help you cold-blooded bastards!"

"Pop a cap...?" The major looked puzzled. "I don't know of what you speak, but obviously, you need more convincing."

The major stroked his chin. One of his colleagues, who had several large gaps between his few remaining brown teeth, looked at Lori's limp body, licking his lips. He walked over and whispered something in the major's ear. An evil smile crept across the commander's face, and he nodded then threw back his head and guffawed.

A chill ran down Jack's spine.

"Well, Colonel, my men are going to give you a special show. I hope it will convince you of just how serious I am."

"What the hell are you and *Grunge-mouth* there up to?"

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough.”

The major nodded at his colleague, and the man rushed out the tent doors.

Two soldiers wrestled Jack into a chair, securing him with surgical tape and gauze, then took turns slapping his face and spitting on him as they laughed. Several other grimy soldiers soon entered the tent. Jack’s eyes shot wide as he watched them hurriedly gather around Lori’s limp form and rip the clothing from her body. Jack’s eyes darted between the group of men and the major. He shook his head vehemently.

“No! My God, *please*, no—I’ll do whatever you ask, but don’t do that to her!” he yelled. “Wasn’t killing her enough? Don’t defile her like this!”

Jack’s face stung from another slap. The major grabbed a large bandage pack from a nearby table, roughly stuffing it into Jack’s mouth then winding surgical tape around Jack’s head to affix it. He put his mouth close to Jack’s ear.

“Too late, Colonel. My men now have expectations that must be met—enjoy the show,” he hissed.

Jack flailed against his bonds, his muffled screams lost amid the excited prattle of his captors. The soldiers took turns raping Lori’s corpse, laughing and glowering at Jack while they performed the repulsive act. Jack twisted his head and closed his eyes, but the major and his second-in-command held his head, prying his eyelids open, forcing him to watch. Another surge of loathing flooded through him like flowing lava, his muffled cries turning into body-shaking sobs. Tears streamed from his eyes, tumbling onto his captor’s hands. The major snatched his hand away like it had been burned.

He jabbed a finger at Jack. “Look, men! Look at this disgusting coward—an American commander who cries for a whore!” He spat on Jack’s face.

The veins in Jack’s neck bulged, his pulse pounding like kettle drums in his head. A hot flush leaped up his neck and covered his face. *To hell with any Hawkeye Pierce stereotype. If an opportunity presents itself, I will do whatever is necessary to save my colleagues...and avenge Lori’s death.* He didn’t care if he died doing what he wanted to do next. His reason to live was gone—nothing would ever refill the void Lori’s death had left in his soul. He focused on only one thing—exact his revenge on these men for what they had done to the woman he loved.

The last of the soldiers stood from Lori’s corpse and hoisted up his pants. The major snickered and leaned down, his face in front of Jack’s.

“My men need some rest. As you have seen, they’ve been working quite hard.” The major guffawed derisively. “I’ll give you until morning to change your mind, Colonel Bass—then we start doing the same to the rest of your whore nurses.”

Still bound to the chair, Jack was thrown onto the floor of a storage locker next to an OR. The door’s lock engaged, and the bustle outside his prison slowly subsided. His gaze flitted around the closet, his mind churning furiously about what to do.



(0130 next morning)

Jack rocked the chair he was tied to until he was able to roll to his back, giving him a better view of the room. He needed to find something to cut himself loose. He twisted his head around, struggling to search the room. *Bingo! A cast saw. Thank God it's plugged into its charger.* He maneuvered his chair into a position where he could kick at the shelves the saw was sitting on. After several small kicks, the saw finally fell, clattering as it hit the floor. Jack's gaze shot to the door. Were there guards just outside? Had they heard?

He held his breath, lying frozen for several seconds, waiting for the sound of a key turning in the lock. He released his breath in a gush then wriggled around until his hands wrapped around the saw's handle. His fingertips probed for the switch.

Jack jumped when the saw came to life, buzzing like a cloud of mad hornets. Rivulets of sweat flowed into his eyes, clouding his vision as he twisted his head to-and-fro, trying desperately to get some view of the saw he held. No luck. He'd have to do this by feel. He fumbled to press the tape binding his hands behind the chair against the small blade of the saw. He muffled a groan as the blade bit into the flesh of his arm. Despite the pain, Jack held his arms in position until he felt the bond suddenly give way. His hands now free, Jack twisted, snatching up the saw and cutting through the rest of the straps holding him to the chair.

"Finally!" he mumbled.

Jack turned off the saw then wiggled his fingers to help the flow of blood return to his hands. He lay motionless for a few seconds, listening, then hurriedly peeled away the last tags of tape holding him to the chair. He rose, swaying a few seconds before steadying himself. What should he do next? His gaze shot to the contents lining the shelves. *Yes! I can use a few of these things.* He looked for a few very specific items he thought would be helpful—a long-handled scalpel, syringes, and anesthetic drugs. He gathered his booty, setting it on a stainless-steel surgical tray. He stuffed the scalpel in a shirt pocket. He filled two large syringes with a mixture of drugs that would knock out and paralyze anyone in a matter of seconds...if injected in the proper place.

At the rear of the storage locker, he used the scalpel to cut a small slit in the tent fabric then placed an eye to the opening, surveying the outside as best he could. *Good. No one in sight.* He enlarged the hole enough to squeeze through it then crawled across the rear of the OR tent, the sand warm against his hands and knees. Jack froze when he heard voices from just inside the tent. *Shit!* Were those his captors? He craned his neck, listening. *Wait! That sounds like one of the nurses!* He gingerly pressed an ear against the heavy fabric. *It is!* He scratched a fingernail on the tent fabric.

"Hey. It's Jack Bass—but stay quiet!" he whispered.

There was a flurry of movement on the other side of the fabric.

He cringed and shot a quick glance around. "Keep it down!"

He sliced an opening in the material just large enough for him to squeeze his head through. He cast his gaze about the staff huddled around him.

"What the *hell?*" George, a medic, moved closer. "Dr. Bass! How did you—?"

"Quiet, George! I'll tell you later. Any guards close?"

"None inside the OR tent as far as we can tell. Don't know about outside."

"How's everybody doing?"

“Scared as hell.” He waved an arm around at his colleagues. “The medical staff that were in the OR tent are all okay.” He shrugged. “Not sure about the rest of the camp.”

“Okay.” Jack pulled his head back out then enlarged the incision before squirming through it. “We gotta get out of here now, or we’ll die.” He sighed. “We have no weapons that I know of, no food or water, and no radio available to us.” He shrugged. “Anybody got any ideas how to escape?”

“Well...actually, Walt and I been talking,” George stated, shooting a quick glance at Walt then looking back to Jack. “We’ve got an ambulance sitting in the camp. If it hasn’t been destroyed, we could load everybody in it and make a run for it.”

“Whaddaya think, Doc?” Walt asked anxiously from behind George’s shoulder.

“Works for me.” Jack rubbed his chin. “I guess we should start off by going to check that out as a first step.”

“What’re we gonna do if there are guards, Doc?” George asked.

“I have something that may help with that,” Jack muttered, patting the syringes in his pocket. He wished he felt as confident as he was trying to sound. “It’ll be dicey, but I can’t think of any other options off the top of my head.”

Walt gazed at the syringes, raising an eyebrow. “Uh...whatever you say, Doc. Wish we had something more...definitive.”

“Me, too, Walt.” Jack turned to the rest of the group. “Give us thirty minutes. If we’re not back by then or if you hear shooting, get the hell outta here ASAP. Get away as best you can—head southwest, and you should find some friendlies.” He cast his gaze around the OR. “Find some bottles of water—even if it’s lavage rinse—you’ll need them.” Jack looked at the somber faces staring back at him in the dim light. “Questions?”

Heads around the room slowly shook.

“George, Walt, let’s hit it.”

The three men slipped out then low-crawled until they spotted the ambulance. Walt peered over a small dune to scan the area where it sat.

“I can’t see any obvious damage,” he whispered over his shoulder then slid back down the mound.

“Any guards?” Jack asked.

“One at the rear—another by some sandbags a few yards away. Looks like they’re both asleep.”

“All right, here’s how we’re gonna do this.” Jack pulled a syringe from his pocket. “First, I’ll inject the guy sleeping on the sandbags then try to do the same to the other guard. If you see me wave from the ambulance, get over there quick.” He looked each in the eye. “If I get caught or shot, get back to the OR tent pronto, grab the rest of the group, and *get the hell outta here!*” he whispered.

“But, Doc—”

“No buts—that’s an order! Anything else?”

Walt and George exchanged a quick glance then shook their heads.

“Okay. See you in a few,” Jack said.

Jack crawled into the dark toward the guard sprawled near the pile of sandbags. *You must be nuts, Bass!* Sweat soon soaked his clothing. He inched his way to the pile of sandbags opposite where the guard was sleeping. He stopped and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. He didn’t really have a plan other than trying to inject his disabling concoction into a good spot on the man’s body. He wasn’t sure how to keep the guard quiet for the few seconds it would take for the drugs to take effect. He slithered to the top of the pile and lifted just high enough to see the top of the guard’s head.

*Here goes!* He wrapped his fingers tightly around the barrel of the syringe, his thumb poised on the plunger, then sprang. Jack clamped a hand over the guard's mouth, swinging the syringe around with his other hand. The guard's eyes burst open, the man flailing wildly as Jack fought to restrain him. Jack rammed the large needle into the man's neck where the carotid artery was located, the main route for blood flow to the brain. He mashed down on the syringe plunger. After a few seconds, the guard's eyelids fluttered then closed, his body sagging limply to the ground.

Jack panted for a few seconds, wiping sweat from his eyes. This may not have been the best idea...but he was committed now. *Just don't get yourself killed, Bass! You've got people's lives at stake.* He slinked across the few yards of sand to the side of the ambulance, halting just around the corner from the second guard. Jack pulled the second syringe from his pocket.

*How can I hit a target I can't even see?* He slid his eye to the edge of the machine, stealing a quick glance. The position of the guard would make it impossible for Jack to cover the man's mouth before injecting him. *This is not gonna be easy!*

He decided to aim for the heart instead of the neck since it presented a larger target. It would delay the drug's delivery to the man's brain by several precious seconds. *A lot can happen in a couple of seconds...especially when the other guy has the gun!* Jack inched to the corner of the big machine then took a deep breath. He leaped toward the guard, swinging the syringe toward the man's chest.

The needle jammed into a rib and became stuck. *Sonofabitch!* The guard's eyes shot open, and he jumped to his feet. Jack wrapped his free arm around the man's neck and wrapped his legs around the man's waist, pinning his arms to his sides. The guard yelled, and Jack clamped his arm around the man's neck until his shouts turned into squeaks. Jack fought to maintain his grip on the syringe as the soldier spun wildly, reminding Jack of his days spent breaking his grandfather's wild horses.

Jack wrestled with the syringe, working it in circles to dislodge the needle from the bone. *Better quit screwing around and get this done!* He yanked hard, pulling the needle free, then quickly redirected it. He shoved it into the soft tissue between the man's ribs, immediately jamming down the plunger.

The soldier bucked wildly, flinging Jack to the ground. Jack landed hard on his side, quickly twisting onto his back. The guard twirled, pointing the barrel of his AK-47 at Jack's chest. Jack threw himself to the side and winced. He could almost feel the bullets ripping his flesh apart. After a couple of seconds, he rolled slowly to his back. The guard's arms had dropped to his sides. Jack jumped back just as the man dropped to his knees on the sand at Jack's feet. The guard's eyelids quivered, then he plopped forward, his face slamming against Jack's chest. Jack gulped in a few gasps of air then threw the man off him.

"Godammit! I'm too old for this sorta shit!" Jack hissed.

George and Walt ran to his side.

"Jesus Christ, Doc, you okay?" Walt asked.

Jack nodded then pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Get this thing ready to go"

"I'm on it, Doc," Walt responded.

Jack stood to a crouch. "George, you go back to the OR tent and get the rest of the staff. I'm going to nose around—see if I can find any more of our wounded."

"Be careful, Doc."

"If I'm not back in ten minutes...or you hear shooting, fire this bitch up and hightail it—just get away from here as fast as possible!"

Jack headed off into the murk. It was time for a little payback! Visions of Lori being killed and defiled flashed repeatedly through his mind, stoking a burning desire for revenge. Rage smoldered in Jack's mind, soon consuming his thoughts. He knew he would probably not survive the night, surprised at how little that thought bothered him.

Jack crept from shadow to shadow, finally able to make out Lori's tent in the faint twilight. Hers was the only barracks tent that still stood in the camp, the sides fluttering slightly in a gentle desert breeze. Jack yearned to find the Iraqi major there. He slithered to the doorway, pulling the door flap back a couple of centimeters, peering inside. He could barely make out a shadowy form lying face down on Lori's bed. Jack pulled the scalpel from his pocket, removed its sheath, and snuck through the doorway on hands and knees. Was the person on the bed the prey he sought?

Jack crept to the bedside. The insignia on the uniform signified the rank of major. *Bingo!* He gazed around, spotting a pistol on the nightstand. He snatched it up then clambered to his feet.





Like the waves of sand blown by the hot desert winds that he'd come to despise, swells of hatred swirled in Jack's mind as he glared down at the man on the bed. His thirst for revenge was unwavering. Unstoppable. He bent to put his lips near the major's ear, pressing the tip of the pistol barrel against the back of the man's head.

"Hello, Major Ahmed." He mashed the barrel of the pistol hard against Ahmed's scalp. "You make so much as a peep and I'll show you as much mercy as you showed my people yesterday."

The major turned his head slightly, an eye shooting open, bulging out and staring at Jack. He slowly twisted his head farther, his mouth hanging open.

"That's right, you bastard! It's me, and I'm *pissed!* Now let me tell *you* what you're going to do for *me*," Jack growled.

Jack snatched up a dirty sock from the floor next to the bed. "First, you're going to stuff this in your mouth." Jack handed it to him. "Then you're going to hold your hands out like a nice boy so I can tie them. And if you get any ideas, let me tell you I won't hesitate one second to kill you—even if that means I die, too."

Jack's shoulders sagged as his gaze fell to the floor.

"You murdered Major Darden yesterday—one of the finest people I've ever known. An angel," he muttered. "The only woman I ever loved as an adult." He shook the pistol in Ahmed's face. "And it's taking every fiber of my self-control not to blow your damn brains out right now!"

The major nodded slowly, grimacing as he slipped the sock partially into his mouth.

"All the way!" Jack growled, jamming the sock in farther with the barrel tip of the pistol until the major gagged. Jack slid open a drawer in Lori's bedside stand, rummaging through the contents until he located a roll of heavy bandage tape. Jack hastily ran tape around Ahmed's head to secure the sock in his mouth then bound his wrists together, keeping the gun jammed against his ribs. Jack trussed the major's wrists to the metal bar of the headboard, using the rest of the roll to bind the man's feet to the metal bar of the foot rail.

"Now you're going to tell me where Major Darden's body is."

Jack rammed the tip of the Beretta's barrel under the major's chin and ripped the tape off the man's mouth. He yanked out the sock and leaned in, putting his ear near the major's mouth. "Tell me."

The major spit into Jack's ear. "Screw yourself, *infidel!*"

Jack bolted upright, glaring at the Iraqi as he wiped the spit from his ear.

"Wrong response."

Jack shoved the sock back into Ahmed's mouth and taped it again. Mulling over his next steps, suddenly, Jack recalled something he'd seen in Lori's drawer when he'd been rifling through it a few minutes ago. He wrenched open the drawer, quickly finding a bottle of succinylcholine and a syringe. He stuck the needle into the bottle and gazed impassively at the major.

"This is succinylcholine. It's a paralyzing agent. Starts working in a matter of seconds." He partially filled the syringe then pulled the needle from the bottle, holding it where the Iraqi could see it. "Usually only lasts a couple of minutes—but for those couple of minutes, you can't breathe—can't even move. You're still wide-awake...you just. Can't. Breathe. Kinda like drowning...a horrible sensation from what I understand."

Ahmed flailed wildly against his restraints.

"Oh—seems you've heard that, too, eh, Major? You'll have to tell me if it's true..."

Jack deftly inserted the needle into a large vein on the major's arm.

"I'm just going to give you a little at first—just enough to give you a taste of suffocation—then I'll ask you again where Major Darden's body is." He pushed the plunger and leaned in close. "You may want to take a deep breath while you still can," Jack whispered.

Jack stood, watching as the major's flailing quickly waned into complete stillness. Even in the dim light, Jack could see Ahmed's lips turn darker. Jack could easily imagine the fear that must be stirring in the man's mind. After about forty-five seconds, the Major's abdomen started to twitch, followed by erratic breaths a few seconds later. Eventually, the man's breathing became deep and rapid. The color of his lips returned to a normal hue.

"Feels pretty terrible, eh, Major? Now—will you tell me what I want to know?"

"Piss off!" the muffled response came through the sock. The major jutted his chin and glared at Jack.

"Damn, you're stubborn!" Jack replied. "Oh, by the way, if you get enough, this stuff *can* cause severe brain damage—turn you into a permanent vegetable. Even kill you," Jack said matter-of-factly. He filled the syringe and flicked it with a finger a couple of times. "Of course, that would mean you wouldn't be around to kill any more innocent women and patients...so, not a bad thing."

He grabbed the major's arm, a flash of guilt twisting somewhere deep in his conscience—but it was quickly stifled as he recalled the vision of this man shooting Lori in the head then letting his men gang-rape her lifeless body. Jack slowly slid the needle into a vein, struggling to keep it in place as the major thrashed. Jack poised his thumb over the plunger of the syringe.

"Last chance, Major—you want to talk, or do you want to go for a personal breath-holding record?"

"Okay, okay!"

Jack could just make out the muffled screams as the man nodded vigorously.

Jack pulled out the needle and ripped the tape from the major's mouth again. This time, he put his face inches from the major's and stared into the man's eyes. "You've already caused me to hate another human more than I thought possible. If you spit in my ear again, I'll make sure you die a miserable death," he snarled.

Jack jerked the sock from the major's mouth then jammed the pistol barrel under his chin.

"Her body is still back in the tent where I killed her!"

Jack gawked silently at him a few seconds. This man spoke as if he was proud of what he'd done to Lori. That was just unacceptable. Jack silently re-secured the strip of tape over Ahmed's mouth, set the gun aside, and picked up the syringe. The Iraqi's gaze darted nervously between Jack's face and the syringe.

"Over all the years I've spent in this army, I thought I'd seen all the horrible things humans could do to each other." Jack held the syringe in front of his face, turning it in different directions. "You and your men showed me yesterday that I had not," he mumbled. There was nothing left where his emotions used to reside. A void. Darkness. A chill ran through his body, and he shivered. *This must be what death feels like.*

"I hate you not only because you callously killed helpless patients...and a wonderful woman I loved dearly"—Jack poked him in the chest—"but also because of what you have made me feel...and *do* as a result of your actions. I now have experienced hatred more profound than I would have ever imagined—and I've taken lives because of that hatred." He sighed, his shoulders drooping. "And now, I'm about to take another..."

Ahmed shook his head vigorously, his neck veins bulging as he yelled into the gag.

“I will likely regret this in years to come, but right now, I just don’t care—I only know this will prevent you from ever repeating the heinous acts of yesterday.”

Jack slid the needle into the man’s vein and emptied the syringe. “*Enjoy, asshole! May you rot in hell!*” Jack whispered. He jumped up from the bed and bolted out of the tent, scanning the ruins of his camp. “And may I not be there to greet you...”

Jack’s head snapped around at the sound of the ambulance’s engine firing up. He made no attempt to run after it. The headlights flickered as it zipped out of the camp.

“Safe travels, my friends,” he muttered. *At least we fought back and saved ourselves, rather than just rolling over and giving up.* He shrugged and snorted. *Hawkeye Pearce, I’m not, I guess.* His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden din of men yelling and gunshots being fired. He smiled as the ambulance disappeared over a large dune, then he ran into the darkness of the desert. *I’ll be there soon, Lori.*

• • • •

JACK ROLLED OFF JANICE’S guest bed, landing on the floor with a thump. He awoke tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, his gaze darting about the room as he panted. *Where am I?* He twisted his head to-and-fro, gasping for air. He gazed out the window at the lake. *Oh...yeah.* His heart slowed from its frenetic pace. He stood then plopped down on the edge of the bed, resting his elbows on his knees and holding his head in his hands. The sweat from his hair trickled down his fingers onto his forearms. *Damn, Bass! You are one heck of a mess.*



(0700, Monday)

Mark Quinn was enjoying his rotation through the anesthesia service at Southern Medical Center Hospital, though he was nervous about being so close to Dr. Bass every day. Mark tried to avoid the man as much as possible, still struggling with what he should do about what he'd witnessed the night of the lab murders. The stories about Dr. Bass having recently gone crazy when some gangbangers came into the OR and killed a patient didn't exactly lessen Mark's apprehension level.

Mark stood at the front desk, reviewing the case assignment sheet for the day.

"Forget what that assignment sheet says. I've got something else in mind for you."

At the sound of Dr. Bass's voice, Mark spun, sweat springing to his brow as his gaze met that of the taller, broad-shouldered man standing in front of him. Bass regarded Mark intensely, one eyebrow arched.

"U-uh, okay, Dr. Bass."

Jack flashed a broad smile. Mark couldn't recall having seen him smile before. What was he up to?

"There's an add-on case I thought might be really interesting for you. You heard of a patent ductus arteriosus, or PDA?"

"Yeah, I remember reading about them in pathology. Why?"

"Got a six-day old preemie with a PDA coming to the OR soon. Ed, our chief resident, is going to do the case. I asked him if he'd mind if you came in to watch. He said it was fine with him as long as you stayed out of the way—there's not a lot of room around a body that small. Interested?"

"Hell, yes! Sorry—yes, sir." Dr. Bass was turning out to be great about assigning Mark to interesting teaching cases.

"All right. Go into OR 3 and help Ed get the room set up, and if there's time before the case starts, I'll review the pathophysiology of a PDA with you—explain all of the special considerations we have to make for this surgery." Jack turned and rushed off.

"Thanks, Dr. Bass! I'll come find you when I'm done helping Ed." Dr. Bass seemed to have taken a special interest in Mark, though Mark was uncertain why that might be. Mark was still very uncomfortable around the man...there was just some sort of tension around the guy. Mark couldn't put his finger on why but it was almost palpable every time he was in Bass' presence. *He is a damn good teacher, though.* Mark went to the supply room, bumping into Misty Carrel, a surgery intern.

"Hey, Misty. How's it going this morning?"

"Good." She smiled at him. "How about you?"

"Good, also. Hey, I wanted to thank you again for dinner last weekend. That was a cool little place you took me to—I really enjoyed it." He shrugged quickly. "Of course, I enjoyed the company, too." He paused, looking down and rubbing his toe on the floor, glancing sideways at her. "We still on for doing something next weekend?"

"I enjoyed it, too. I worry, though, what my colleagues would think of me going on a second date with a lowly medical student."

Mark snapped his head around toward her, his mouth dropping open. He relaxed and smiled when he saw her smirk. "They'd think you have good taste."

"More likely, they'd think I was taking pity on you." She playfully punched his shoulder.

“That’s a low blow.”

She laughed, patting his shoulder as she walked by him on her way out of the room. “Yes, let’s do something this coming weekend,” she called over her shoulder.





(0740, Monday)

“Hey, nurse, you seen Dr. Bass this morning?”

Janice groaned. Frigman... Why couldn't the man leave them alone? She looked up from her paperwork at him, rolling her eyes as she followed his gaze. She pulled the neck of her surgical gown closer about her.

“Well, Chief, I know for sure he's not down my shirt,” she replied.

Frigman's face turned red, and he cleared his throat. “In your dreams, honey.”

“Maybe in my nightmares,” she mumbled.

“What'd you say?”

“Nothing, Chief. What do you need?”

“I need you to answer my question. You seen Bass?”

“Not lately. I'm sure he's very busy getting the schedule started.” Janice returned to her paperwork. “Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy.”

Frigman stood staring silently at her for a few seconds. “Thanks for nothing...*nurse*. I'll just find him myself.”

“Janice Dwyer—my name is *Janice Dwyer*, Chief *Wiggam*.”

Frigman growled, his face turning a deep shade of red. He jabbed a finger at her. “I hate that nickname!”

Janice shrugged. “Oops...so sorry.” She sneered at him. “It just slipped out.”

He spun and stormed away from the desk. A small smile crept across Janice's lips as he waddled down the hall. He paused briefly to look about the immediate area then headed toward the OR anesthesia office.

“Hey, Chief, that's a sterile area!” Janice yelled after him. “You can't just go wandering around in your street clothes. You need to change into scrubs—”

“I can go anywhere I want!” he called over his shoulder as he ambled toward the anesthesia office. “And I don't need your permission, bitch!”

Janice snatched up her phone and called the anesthesia office. *I hope you're there, Jack.*

“Jack Bass.”

“Jack! Heads up—Frigman's on his way back there right now. I tried to head him off but couldn't...behave yourself with him!”

“Thanks, Janice. I appreciate the warning, and of course, I'll be gracious,” he quipped. “I suppose I owe you another dinner now?”

“You're silly. You don't owe me anything. I'm just concerned about you and Frigman both surviving being in the same room.” She huffed. “Don't let him get under your skin—we've got a busy day today.” She paused briefly. “I will take you up on that dinner, though,” she said. “Bye.”

She hung up the phone then stood and leaned over the counter above her desk, looking down the hallway just in time to see Frigman turn into the anesthesia office.

“Damn! I hope this doesn't turn into a battle royale,” she muttered.

• • • •

JACK SET THE PHONE back in the cradle and quickly steeled himself for Frigman's arrival. An instant later, he sensed Frigman's large mass inside his office, but he didn't bother looking up.

Frigman cleared his throat loudly. "Morning, Dr. Bass. I need a little of your time."

Jack acted surprised by Frigman's arrival, scowling as he gazed up at the man. Jack turned toward his colleague, Dr. Tortuga, who had been discussing a case with Jack.

"Could you excuse us for a minute, please, Dr. Tortuga?" He glanced at Frigman then back at Tortuga. "This won't take long," Jack said flatly.

Dr. Tortuga looked suspiciously at Frigman then back at Jack, raising an eyebrow inquisitively. "Sure, Jack—glad to."

"Thanks."

After Dr. Tortuga left the office, Jack turned again to Frigman.

"And what would this be concerning, Gary? I've got a really busy morning."

Frigman snorted. "Don't be coy, Dr. Bass—you know I want to talk about the lab murders...and it may take more than a minute."

Jack blew out a long breath and rubbed his forehead. "I thought you might say something like that." He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'll need to refer you to my counsel, Ken Conlin. I can give you his number if you want. I've been advised by Mr. Conlin not to speak to you without him being present." Jack shrugged and locked eyes with Frigman. "So...I have nothing to say."

Frigman remained silent, his jaw working as if he was gnawing on a tough piece of meat. He raised an index finger at Jack.

"Would you like me to call Mr. Conlin?" Jack asked, reaching for the phone on his desk.

"I'm here to talk to *you*, Bass, not some damn lawyer!"

Jack stood, leaning his hands on the desk as he glared at Frigman. "You may be a cop, but you'll obey the law just like everyone else! You don't, I'll have lawyers and the FBI breathing all over your fat ass so fast it'll make your head spin!" he snarled through gritted teeth, his chest heaving. *Calm down, Bass.* He took a deep breath. "What'll it be, Chief?"

Frigman hiked up his gun belt, which immediately slipped back down under his sagging belly. "You think you're so damn smart, Bass!" He paused a few seconds. "*No*—I don't want you to call your stupid lawyer." He jabbed a finger at Jack. "Don't think that I'm done with you, though!" He spun on his heel and stormed from the office.

Jack plopped onto his chair, holding his head in his hands. *Man, I'm getting tired of this crap.*

Mark had been listening at Jack's office door. He spun when he heard the office door knob rattle, ready to bolt from the anteroom.

Frigman stopped in the doorway, his gaze shooting up and down Mark. "Christ! I mighta known! You and Bass gonna figure out who to kill next, Quinn?"

Mark tried to feign surprise. "Oh...h-hey, Chief Frigman," he muttered. *Just what I needed—bumping into this prick.*

Frigman's jowls flopped as he shook his head then elbowed Mark aside. Janice appeared in the anteroom doorway, her glance shooting between Frigman and Mark, her mouth falling open. Frigman narrowed his eyes as he looked at Janice. "You part of this group of wackos too, honey?" he asked then shoved her aside like a fullback bulling his way through a crowd of would-be tacklers.

Mark stepped into the hall and watched the ruddy-faced cop waddle away. *So much for being out of the woods with him!*



(1930, Sunday, one week later)

The hostess showed Janice to the table where Jack sat nursing a frozen margarita. He was embroiled in thoughts and didn't even notice their presence. Janice cleared her throat, and Jack's gaze darted toward her. His face flushed warm, and he hopped up, pulling out a chair for her.

"Sorry, Janice, I didn't notice you arrive."

She turned to the hostess. "I'll have one of what he's drinking, please." She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "You look a little troubled—like your mind was a million miles away. Nervous about meeting Sheila Wallace...or is there something else bothering you?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd be able to arrange this meeting so quickly—I'm not feeling very well prepared for this discussion."

"Relax—just see what she has to say."

"I'm also having second thoughts about how smart this is on my part." His gaze moved from his margarita to her eyes. "Am I just going to stir things up again? Will more people get hurt—or worse—because I've started asking questions?" He shrugged. "Maybe I should just leave a sleeping dog lie."

"Look, Jack, Sheila *wanted* to talk with you—it'll be fine. She's good people, and she wouldn't have agreed to talk if she hadn't wanted to."

"Where should I start? I don't want her to think I'm nuts—"

"Too late, I already told her you are," Janice said.

"*What?*"

Jack stared at her a few seconds. Was she joking? He was getting to know her better but sometimes wasn't sure when she was just jerking his chain. Janice broke out in a laugh.

"Not funny," he stated.

She pushed affectionately on his shoulder. "I know Sheila—she won't bite and won't think you're nuts, so chill out."

The waiter brought Janice's margarita to the table.

"Cheers," she said, touching her glass to Jack's.

He smiled feebly at her and hoisted his glass.

"Yeah. Cheers." He set his glass down and looked at her for a few seconds. He was really starting to like Janice. She was fun...and funny. Like Lori. His heart twisted a little. "Thanks for helping with this, Janice. You really are a good friend." He leaned over and gave her a short but passionate kiss on her lips.

"Do you kiss all of your *friends* like that?" she asked.

"No...only the one's I think are hot."

Janice sat quietly with her mouth slightly agape, looking at Jack.

Suddenly, he burst out laughing. "Gotcha back!"

She slapped his shoulder jokingly and smiled. "Bite me."

Jack stared silently at her. Lori used to say that to him. *You're doing it again, Bass. You need to stop.* His smile drained away, and he scooted back on his chair.

Janice pointed at a woman who had just entered the restaurant. "Oh, good, there's Sheila now."

Sheila waved at Janice, and the other woman smiled wanly and headed toward their table. When she reached them, she removed her sunglasses. She wore no makeup. Dark raccoon circles under her eyes made her look old. *I know that look*, Jack thought. It was the look he'd seen in the mirror every morning since Lori had been killed.

Janice stood and hugged Sheila then turned to Jack. "Sheila, this is Dr. Jack Bass."

"Nice to meet you, Sheila." He rose to shake her hand then shifted from foot to foot, averting his eyes. "My, uh, condolences on the loss of your husband."

"Thanks—I miss him a lot," Sheila mumbled.

She continued to hold his hand, gazing intently at his face as if she was searching for something very specific there.

Jack slowly drew his hand from her grip then pulled out a chair for her. "Please have a seat. Thanks for coming to chat with me, Sheila." He pointed at his and Janice's drinks. "Care to join us in a margarita?"

"No...thanks. I don't drink much these days." She shrugged. "Just don't feel in the mood..."

"I understand entirely, Sheila—I had a significant loss myself not that long ago," he replied.

Janice gawked at Jack, her eyebrows shooting upward, but he ignored her and went on.

"I don't mean to dredge up bad memories, but some strange stuff has been happening at the hospital recently. I was hoping you might be able to help shed some light on a few things...maybe help me understand...at least from a historical perspective."

Sheila nodded slowly. "I'll help where I can."

"I guess I should start off by mentioning what led me to you." He took a large gulp of his drink then wiped his mouth. "Someone started anonymously sending me information shortly after I started at Southern Medical Center. Frankly, I don't know what to make of the stuff. It appears to be related to research grants for the anesthesia department. The last package I got had copies of more financial documents *and* your husband's and Bev Costas's obituaries—all with the dates highlighted. I don't understand the relationship between the documents and the dates at this point—might just be a coincidence. I'm suspicious, though, that there's more to the deaths than people have been led to believe." He shrugged. "I think someone may be trying to tell me that, anyway."

Sheila stared into Jack eyes. "I already know about those documents, Jack."

"Oh, did Janice mention them?" Jack glanced at Janice.

She returned his stare and shook her head. Jack paused, scratching his head as he looked back and forth between the two women. He cocked his head to the side.

"But...I haven't told anyone else but my buddy at the FBI..." His mouth suddenly fell open.

"That's right, Jack—I brought those envelopes to your office," Sheila said. "Mary made sure you got them but promised she'd keep the source a secret."

Jack closed his mouth, pressing his lips tightly together for several seconds as he stared at Sheila. When he looked at Janice, she put her hands up and shrugged.

"Uh...can you fill me in on the reason for giving me that information?"

Tears welled up in Sheila's eyes, running down her cheeks and spilling onto the table. "I'm sorry—it's all just so weird—I still can't believe Dale is dead." She sniffled. "Worse yet, that he may have been *murdered* because he was rocking the boat at work."

"*What?*" Janice and Jack both chimed.

Jack leaned in close to Sheila, his gaze flitting nervously around the nearby patrons. "Sheila, that's pretty serious—what's got you thinking that?" he whispered.

Sheila sobbed softly for several seconds. "I'm sorry." She dabbed at her tears. "As you might imagine, it's difficult for me to talk about this." She took a deep breath. "Dale told me before he died that if anything happened to him, he wanted me to make sure that information got into the hands of someone I could trust." She looked at Janice. "Janice, that's why I asked you what you thought about Jack. I'd hoped he might be the one who could help me."

"Well, I don't know that I'm the best one to do anything with the information you sent, Sheila. I'm no cop," Jack stated.

She abruptly stopped dabbing at her eyes then met Jack's stare. "But, Dr. Bass, if you don't help, I don't know who else to go to."

She put a hand on his forearm. Jack tensed but didn't move away.

"I know you haven't been here long, but...Janice and everybody else I've talked to in the OR thinks you're a great guy. They believe you're honest and try to do what's right." She frowned and looked down. "Like Dale did...even if it's not the easiest thing to do." She turned her gaze back to Jack's face. "That's why I decided to send you the documents. I'd hoped you'd at least *try* to do something." She stared at him, a pleading expression on her face.

"Sheila, I—"

"*Please* help me, Jack! I-I promised Dale I would try to do something if anything happened to him. Please don't let the people who killed him get away with it!" She gritted her teeth. "Help me nail the bastards!"

Jack didn't quite know how to respond, so he sat silently, gaping at her. He could sense her frustration and sorrow. He truly wanted to help but...how? *I'm a doctor, not a criminal investigator.*

"Can I ask why you haven't gone to the cops?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I did. When I went to the city cops, they told me it was Frigman's jurisdiction. Said they couldn't intervene without his permission and he'd told them he didn't want their help." She balled her fists. "And I don't trust that fat fuck and his cronies one bit!"

"Okay. Tell me more...but no promises." He took another large gulp of his drink then waved his hand for her to continue. This might be related to what was happening with him at work...or might not. He wasn't sure. "What was happening with Dale at work before he died?"

"Dale had received some research grants, but when Dr. Waymon gave my husband the budget for his research, Dale noticed a big discrepancy between the amounts of the grants and the budget amounts that were approved," Sheila muttered between snuffles. "When he approached Waymon with what he thought was an error, Dr. Waymon said that it was *not* an error. Told Dale it was departmental policy to take a percentage of every grant. Said it went toward departmental administrative expenses. Dale told Waymon he thought that was reasonable but thought fifty percent was exorbitant."

Jack arched an eyebrow. "I agree with Dale on that!"

"When Dale asked Waymon if he could see something to justify taking that much money, Waymon started yelling and cussing at him—even threatened to fire him."

Sheila paused to take a drink of water, her hands shaking badly as she brought the glass to her lips.

"Dale didn't want to get fired—he liked his job, was excited about his research...and I was pregnant." She shrugged. "So, he just backed off. Waymon even apologized for his outburst soon after that." She stifled a sob. "I wish Dale would have just left it that way—but it really bothered him. He kept nosing around, asking questions of other faculty who'd received research grants. Several of them were very nervous talking about it...or just flat-out refused to. He learned there was a departmental

fee deducted from all of their research budgets, including Bev's." She paused, turning her eyes to the tabletop, shaking her head slowly.

Jack rested a hand on her shoulder. "Go ahead whenever you're ready."

"Dale then approached Mary and asked if she knew anything about the research budgets. She said she didn't. Then he started anonymously getting the documents I've now forwarded to you. He reviewed them and estimated there must have been *millions* of dollars of so-called administrative fees skimmed from the research grant monies over the past five years or so. The dollar amounts closely matched deposits made to offshore bank accounts. Unfortunately, the account holder's name was redacted from the deposit information Dale got...but he felt strongly it was somebody in the anesthesia department."

She looked directly into Jack's eyes. "Why would the university use offshore accounts like that?"

"Good question," Jack replied softly, rubbing his chin. "That's very odd."

"There's more. Dale confronted Waymon with all the information, and Waymon told Dale he'd stuck his nose where it didn't belong...despite being warned. He fired Dale on the spot." She sobbed and sniffled.

"Then what happened?" Jack asked.

"He went in late one night to clear out his locker and office. Before he left home that night, he gave me all the stuff I sent to you. Told me to make sure I gave it to someone I trusted if anything happened to him. I n-never saw him alive again!"

She started to sob uncontrollably. Jack and Janice scooted their chairs closer to her, each putting an arm around her shoulders. People sitting at the surrounding tables were stealing quick looks at the trio.

Janice shot a glance at Jack then helped Sheila stand.

"We'll be back in a few minutes. I'm taking Sheila to the lady's room."

Jack sipped at his drink, lost in thought, as he awaited their return. *All that Sheila just told me is probably related to what's happening with me now—but how..and why?* What the hell had he stepped into the middle of?

After a short time, Janice returned to the table. "Sorry, but Sheila's a mess—I'm going to drive her home and stay with her awhile. Do you mind?"

"Not at all—good idea. I'll call you later." He kissed her quickly on the lips. "Be careful...and don't tell anybody about any of this."

"Sure, Jack. We'll talk later. Bye."





(1800, Friday)

Jack created a plan of action after meeting with Sheila Wallace. First, he'd gather as much information as he could from Frigman about the recent lab murders. Jack needed to figure out if there was a connection to the deaths of Bev and Dale. As he drove to the university police station, Jack contemplated how best to strike up such a conversation. He pulled his truck into a parking space and took a deep breath, fretting about how Frigman might respond. He hoped the crazy cop wouldn't try to lock Jack up. He strolled into the lobby. The officer at the reception desk eyed Jack, looking him up and down.

"Hi, Officer. I'm Dr. Jack Bass. I have an appointment with Chief Frigman—is he here?"

The officer waved in the general direction of some nearby chairs. "Yeah—have a seat." The cop picked up the desk phone and jabbed at a button. "Hey, boss. The asshole's here."

*Well, that sets an interesting tone for the meeting,* Jack mused. Apparently, Frigman had already told his staff something about Jack. Obviously, nothing good. A large shadow showed on the shades of Frigman's glass-walled office. The squeak of his chair could be heard clearly in the lobby as the figure rose from the desk seat. Frigman opened the door a crack and motioned Jack into his office with a nod of his head.

"In here, Bass."

Jack stepped in, his eyes widening as he cast a gaze around the office. It was a pig sty—files lying about in disorganized piles, several empty food wrappers laying on the floor and desk. A half-empty bag of Cheetos sitting on the desk explained the orange crumbs sprinkled on Frigman's shirt and loosened tie. Frigman waddled behind his desk and plopped down into his chair, breathing heavily. He waved a hand at a chair in front of his desk but said nothing as he scrutinized Jack.

Frigman brushed some food crumbs from the top of his desk onto the floor. "What do you want, Bass?"

"Good to see you, *too*, Chief," Jack replied. *No! Don't start off that way, Jack.* "I'm sorry. Let me start over. Chief, we've obviously gotten off to a bad start in our relationship. That's not what I would've preferred. I wanted to come here today and see if we couldn't start over...on better terms."

"Uh huh. I see. Pardon my French, Doc, but my bullshit meter is reading in the red. What do you *really* want?"

Jack never thought this was going to be easy. *Stay calm. Don't let this clown get under your skin.* "I get it—we'll never become fishing buddies." He shrugged. "But I hoped we could at least open some lines of communication." Jack scooted his chair nearer the desk. "I've learned about some recent history of the anesthesia department that I wanted to ask you about."

Frigman's eyebrows shot up, and a few beads of sweat rolled down his creased forehead.

*So...that got your attention, eh?* Jack thought.

"What're you talking about, Bass?" Frigman casually threw a handful of Cheetos in his mouth, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. He stared at Jack and chewed with his mouth open.

"The faculty deaths that occurred in the department—I understand they were considered a little suspicious?"

"Those cases are closed—"

“Could you share any information about that with me, anyway?” Jack interjected. “Maybe if I knew more about those deaths, I might be able to help determine if they’re related to the recent murders in the lab.”

Frigman leaned forward, resting a chubby forearm on his desk. He glared at Jack. His face reddened as he worked his jaw for several seconds. “Like I was *trying* to say—those cases are closed!” He jabbed a finger at Jack. “And it’s none of your goddam business, anyway.” Frigman leaned back in his chair, brows deeply furrowed as he continued to glare at Jack. “I don’t know what you’re up to, Bass, but I’m not falling for your line of bullshit.” He waved a hand dismissively. “You’re entitled to read the public police reports about those deaths.” He shook his head, his jowls jiggling. “But there’s no way they are related to these recent murders.”

“I’m not so sure I agree...”

“Screw you, Bass!” Frigman slid forward on his chair and it screeched. “I don’t give a damn what you think!” He jabbed a thumb at his chest. “You know what I think? I think you’re here trying to put up a smokescreen around yourself. That’s something guilty people do.” He slapped a palm on his desk. “Well, it’s not going to work!” He narrowed his eyes. “And it’s only a matter of time till I nail you!”

Jack held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “Chief, what will it take for me to convince you of my innocence?”

Frigman hesitated for a few seconds. “Well...you *may* have some information you can help me with.”

“Name it, Chief. I’ll tell you whatever I know.”

“When I was in your office the other day, I bumped into that Quinn kid outside your office.” He squinted. “What do you know about him?”

“Mark Quinn?” Where the hell was he going with this? “He’s a good kid—smart, hard worker... I like him. Why?”

“Doesn’t surprise me to hear you like him—you two seem like birds of a feather.” Frigman picked up a pen from his desk and twirled it in his fingers. “Not that it’s any of your business, but Quinn is also a person of interest for those lab murders. If you want to convince me of *your* innocence, you keep an eye on that kid for me—tell me if you see him doing or saying anything suspicious.”

Jack felt like he’d just had a bucket of cold water thrown in his face. *This makes no sense!* “I-I can’t believe Mark would have anything to do with something like that—there’s just no way!”

“You *should* believe it, Bass.” He smirked and dug out some more Cheetos, throwing the empty bag on the floor near the trash can. “Otherwise, you are the prime suspect.” He gave Jack a quick sideways glance. “We’ve already gotten some solid evidence...just need a little more to arrest the kid.”

Jack stared at him and ran his fingers through his hair. Was he making this up? *Why have you been hassling me so much if you think Mark Quinn killed those ladies?*

“So, I need you to keep an eye on that kid.” Frigman paused briefly. “But don’t think this gets *you* off the hook—if that kid confesses that you were involved, I’ll be coming to haul you in, too.”

Jack arched an eyebrow and stared blankly at Frigman. *Why is he so insistent that I’m involved with the lab murders? Is he just grasping at straws and hoping to get lucky?* Jack huffed and rolled his head around. “Yeah, sure, Chief...whatever.” Jack clambered to his feet, rubbing his chin as he played this conversation over in his head. “Thanks for your time and the information, Chief. I’ll let you know if I see Quinn doing anything suspicious.”

Frigman remained seated, a baffled look on his face. Jack turned toward the door.

“Remember—I’m still watching you, too!” Frigman called after Jack as he walked out of the office.

• • • •

JACK SAT FOR A FEW moments in his truck, pondering what he’d just learned. *What the hell is going on here...and what’s Frigman’s play in all this?* He needed to speak with Mark Quinn as soon as he could. Needed to hear his side of this story. He slapped the steering wheel.

“Why didn’t I just stay in the Army? At least then I knew who the enemy was.”



(1100, Saturday)

Mark Quinn sat alone on the couch in his spartan apartment. He had a difficult decision to make. He'd stopped deluding himself that this whole murder thing would just go away, and Chief Frigman would forget about him. It was painfully obvious that wasn't going to happen. He had information and evidence he felt could prove his innocence...or be used against him. He had to be careful. He needed to confide in someone, but who could he trust? Talk about a huge dilemma!

"I hate that asshole, Frigman, but...maybe if I share my evidence with him, I could show him I'm innocent." He took a sip of coffee. "That would be bad news for Dr. Bass, though."

He walked into his kitchen and set his empty cup in the sink then leaned against the counter.

*I wonder what Misty would think? She might have some good suggestions...* He rubbed the back of his neck then shook his head.

"No! I can't put her at risk by telling her about this." If that dipshit Frigman got any inkling she might know something, he'd probably harass the hell out of her. Mark blew out a long sigh. There was probably only one course of action for him to take—it wasn't exactly desirable but was probably the safest bet. He dialed the number on the business card he'd picked up from the countertop.

The phone rang twice. "Chief Frigman, University Police."

Mark poised a finger over the "end call" button, fighting the urge to hang up.

"Hello? Who the hell is this?" Frigman demanded.

"Ch-chief Frigman?"

"Yes."

"Th-this is Mark Quinn. I have something I need to talk to you about." *Damn! Relax! Don't let him hear you sounding so nervous.* He hated how easily Frigman seemed to intimidate him.

"Quinn? What...are going to finally confess, boy?"

"No! I told you—I didn't do it, but...I was there during those murders. I saw the person who did it." Mark took a deep breath. Telling Frigman had a cathartic effect on Mark's mind.

"Go on. You have my attention."

"I freaked out! I couldn't believe what I was seeing! I-I didn't know what to do...so I just ran." He groaned. "I couldn't afford to get sucked into something like this—I-I thought it would put my enrollment in med school at risk..."

"I knew it!" Frigman yelled. "I'm not going to listen to this over the phone, though. You get your ass down here to the station. Pronto! Then I can record your confess—I mean, statement."

"Okay," Mark mumbled. Had he just made a mistake? "I'll be there in about twenty minutes. Good-bye" Mark hung up the phone, a chill crawling up his spine like some cold, wet amphibian was on his back.

• • • •

FRIGMAN MET MARK AT the front door of the police station and escorted him directly into an interrogation room. Mark squirmed as he sat on the hard, straight-back chair.

"I'm all ears, Quinn. Start talking."

Mark looked around for a recorder, but the table in front of him was empty. "I thought you said I needed to come here so you could record this?"

"I'll decide that after I hear what you have to say—get on with it, kid. What do you have?"

“I’m here because I’ve told some others what I saw.” He looked down at his hands, wringing them on his lap. “They suggested I talk with you.”

Frigman growled. “You shouldn’t have told anyone!” He jabbed a finger at Mark. “You’ll need to give me their names.”

Mark nodded. Why would that matter? “Uh...sure.” He looked up at Frigman. “I was in the lab the night of those murders. I’d fallen asleep when I was looking at a slide in the microscopy room.” He shrugged quickly. “Something—a noise, I guess—woke me.” He shuddered. “The noise from that man killing those two ladies. I-I saw him do it.”

Frigman waved a hand rapidly in circles. “Well, go on, boy. Who was it?”

“I think it was a medical center faculty doctor.”

“I knew it! You mean, Bass, don’t you—was it Dr. Bass? C’mon, boy, spit it out!”

“I can’t really say I know who it was—just that he was wearing a faculty lab coat.”

Frigman stood in front of Quinn, his hands on his hips, his face turning a deep red. “Look, boy, I don’t like playing games. I have a pretty good idea who did it, and unless you give me some good evidence to make me think otherwise, your name is still on the top of the list!” He shook a finger in Mark’s face. “Now, who the hell was it?”

“I-I have some evidence I found at the murder scene.” He shot a quick glance up at Frigman. “You can see it for yourself. I think when you see it and I explain what I saw, you’ll change your mind about me.”

“What?” Frigman poked a finger in Mark’s chest. “You *do* know tampering with evidence at a crime scene is against the law, don’t you?” Frigman pointed at the door. “Go get it.”

“It’ll take me till tomorrow.”

“You don’t show up with it tomorrow, you’ll be sorry, boy. Now, get outta my sight!”



(0900, Monday)

Frigman reviewed the results of the DNA test then set it on his desk. *Holy crap, what a stroke of luck!* Bill Turrel had noticed a blood stain on the floor mat of Quinn's car. Turrel had gotten into the car and had gathered a sample. That blood was a match for one of the murder victims.

"We're bringing you in, you little bastard!" Frigman muttered, pumping his fist in the air. He rose from his desk and toddled out of his office, stopping by Bill Turrel's desk.

"Let's go, Bill. We got a DNA match for one of the murdered lab techs on that blood from Quinn's car. We're hauling in that little twit."

Turrel smiled broadly and thrust out his chest. "Glad I mentioned it to you when I spotted it, boss."

"Yeah, yeah, Bill." Frigman rolled his eyes. "That's real good police work on your part. Now, shut up and let's go."

• • • •

(Forty minutes later)

MARK WAS IN A DAZE as Frigman and Turrel dragged him into the police station and threw him down in a chair in the interrogation room. He'd been unimaginably embarrassed when the police came onto the hospital ward to arrest him, taking him away in handcuffs. They'd ignored his repeated reassurances that he would not try to flee if they allowed him to walk out without being shackled. Of course, Mark's senior resident, Dan, cackled and taunted him as the cops dragged Mark away.

Mark surveyed the small room. *I hate this place!* He was tired of talking to the police. Tired of this whole situation. *What the hell did I ever do to deserve all of this? I was just minding my own business...not bothering anybody.*

Frigman threw the door open and breezed into the room, a big smile on his face.

"When do I get to make a phone call to my lawyer?" Mark asked.

"Don't try to tell me about the law, boy. I'll tell you when—if I decide to let you make one at all."

Mark's guts churned, doing somersaults in his belly. "You can't do that!"

Frigman whisked his baton from his belt and shook it at Mark. "Don't tell me what I can't do, boy!"

Frigman took a position, standing directly in front of Mark. He'd just opened his mouth to speak again when Bill Turrel stuck his head in the door.

"Hey, boss. We got a visitor—says it's something important."

"Shit!" Frigman grumbled.

"All right, all right—I'll be right there." He leaned down, his face near Mark's. "You just sit here and behave yourself, boy. I'll be right back."

Mark listened as best he could to the muffled conversation taking place in the hallway. He couldn't make out any of the words, but there seemed to be occasional heated exchanges.

Sweating profusely, Mark reached into his lab coat pocket, hoping to find a hanky to mop his brow. His fingers touched the cellphone, and he froze. His gaze darted to the door then to his pocket. In all the commotion, he'd forgotten it was there. *I can't believe they didn't frisk me and find this!* He inched the phone out of the pocket, his gaze glued to the door. He snuck a peek at the phone just long enough to scroll to Jack Bass's number then mashed on the call button.



*Please answer, please answer!* Mark's leg pumped like a fleshy jackhammer as he waited. *C'mon, c'mon!* After several rings, Mark was transferred to Jack's voicemail. He slumped in the chair. *Damn!* The voicemail beeped. Mark swallowed hard, his throat so dry he was barely able to choke out a single word.

"Dr. Bass, it's Mark Quinn. Frigman arrested me for those lab murders. He has me down at the police station," he whispered. "I-I'm scared, Dr. Bass! I think they may try to do something to me—I didn't know who else to call. Please—"

Frigman burst through the door, holding out his hand. "Give me that damn phone, boy!" he yelled. "Where the hell did you get that thing?"

Mark jumped, nearly dropping the phone. He quickly disconnected then frantically deleted the number he'd just called from the outgoing calls menu.

"It's the phone I always carry." Mark shrugged. "You didn't take it, so I thought it must be okay if I used it."

"Goddamit, Bill, you dumbass!" Frigman grumbled under his breath. He snatched the phone from Mark and shook it at him. "Why didn't you tell me you had this?"

"Uhh...you didn't ask."

"Don't be a smart-ass with me, you punk!" Frigman pocketed the phone. "I'm gonna show you how I handle smart-asses."

He lifted a thick phonebook from a nearby table then stood behind Mark, holding the book firmly against the side of Mark's head. Mark squirmed as he tried to see what Frigman was up to. Frigman grabbed a handful of Mark's hair and yanked his head back.

"Hold still, godammit!"

Mark gave up, scrunching his shoulders and sitting still. Frigman pulled his baton from his belt and slammed it against the phone book. A sudden, excruciating pain pierced Mark's eardrum. It felt like someone had stuck a knife through it. He twisted his head away. "Ouch!"

"No bruises, no broken bones...but plenty of pain." Frigman laughed as he backed away, slipping his baton back into his belt. "Now—you gonna tell me who you called, or do you want a repeat performance?"

Mark nodded slowly as he held his hand to his ringing ear.

"Good! You may not be as dumb as you look."

Frigman moved behind Mark, and Mark cringed, expecting another pummeling. Frigman leaned over, putting his mouth next to Mark's ear. "Who'd you call?" he bellowed, causing another wave of excruciating pain in Mark's ear.

"Nobody! I couldn't get through."

"Bullshit! Don't lie to me. I saw you talking. Do I need to get the phone book again?"

"No!" Mark covered both of his ears with his hands. "All right, all right! I tried to call my lawyer, but all I got was his voicemail."

"Your lawyer? I didn't tell you that you could do that!" He glared at Mark a few seconds, rubbing a fingertip across his lips, then dug the phone from his pocket. "Never mind. I'll just check myself to see who you called." Frigman jabbed at the keys with a chubby finger. After a few minutes, Frigman slammed the cellphone down on a table then bent over, bringing his reddened face so close that his hot, Frito-scented breath washed across Mark's face.

"You little prick—you think you're pretty *smart*, don't you? You deleted the number from the dialed calls menu, didn't you? Why would you do that unless you didn't want me to see the number?" He jerked on Mark's hair again. "*Who'd you call?*"

“I told you, Chief! My lawyer,” Mark labored to sound convincing. “And when I do talk to him, he’s going to hear about the phone book thing.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not going to be talking with him any time soon,” Frigman stated, a tinge of nervousness in his voice. He picked up the phone book and toddled out the door.

Mark held his head in his hands, rocking back-and-forth. *I hope Dr. Bass checks his voicemail soon.*



(1930, Tuesday)

Jack unlocked the front door of his home and shuffled in. He dropped his briefcase on the floor of the entryway and hung his keys in their usual spot on the hook of the umbrella stand. *This leaving home in the dark and returning in the dark is getting old.* He went through his usual routine of sticking his cellphone in its charger then putting his shoes at the base of the piece of antique furniture. Some of his friends kidded him about being so anal about his routine, but he hated having to search for things when he had to leave the house quickly for an emergency.

Jack entered his kitchen to grab a beer from the fridge and noticed the light blinking on the answering machine indicating he had messages waiting. He paused briefly then stepped to his refrigerator. *I need a beer before I do anything else.* After he took a long swig, he stabbed the button on the machine then leaned against the counter.

“Jack, it’s Janice. I was wondering if we were still on for dinner tonight? Call and let me know. If I don’t hear from you by about eight or so, I’ll assume you got tied up. Talk to you soon...I hope.”

Jack shot a quick glance at the clock on the kitchen wall. 7:42 p.m.

“Damn! The time totally got away from me.”

He snatched up the phone, dialing as he played over different excuses in his head. She answered on the second ring.

“Janice! Sorry I’m calling so late...I just got home and got your message.” He paused a few seconds. “Are you still interested in grabbing some dinner?”

“I thought maybe you were blowing me off,” she quipped.

“Not at all! I just got stuck at the hospital and lost track of the time.”

“Well, you’ll have to buy, then, to make up for your oversight,” she joked.

“It’s a deal. Give me a few minutes to get cleaned up, and I’ll swing by to pick you up.”

“Okay. See you in a few.”

Jack set his beer on the counter, noticing there was another message waiting. *I’ll listen to it after I get back from dinner.* He raced into his bathroom, quickly scrubbed, then threw on some fresh clothes. He stopped and briefly examined himself in the mirror, running his fingers through his damp hair. *I sure like spending time with her, but...maybe I’m doing that too much?* He rushed down the hall, slowing as he neared the kitchen.

“I could sure use another pull from that beer before I leave.”

He ducked into the kitchen and snatched the bottle from the countertop. As he put the bottle to his lips, he noticed the red message light still blinking. *Later.* He kept staring at the blinking light. *Aw, crap! It might be the hospital.* He glanced at his wristwatch then stabbed the play button, tapping his foot rapidly as he waited.

“Dr. Bass, it’s Mark Quinn.” Jack leaned closer to the machine, barely able to hear Mark’s whispered message. “Frigman arrested me for those lab murders and has me down at the police station. I-I’m scared, Dr. Bass—I think they may try to do something to me. I-I didn’t know who else to call. Please—”

“Give me that damn phone, boy!” Frigman yelled in the background.

Jack stiffened at the sound of the cop’s voice coming through the speaker.

The message ended abruptly.

“Sonofabitch!” He snatched up the phone and dialed Janice.

“Hello—”

“Janice, it’s Jack. Hey, I am so sorry, but something critical has come up. I’ve got to go take care of it right now. I’ll call you later. I’m really sorry—you don’t know how much I’d rather spend time with you tonight.”

“What is it, Jack—did something happen at the hospital? Anything I can do to help?”

“No. I don’t want to bother you with this, and I’m not sure how long it will take—I’ll call you when I’m done. Maybe we can talk about it then. Gotta go. Bye.”

Jack called Ken Conlin as he rushed out his front door.

The phone was answered on the first ring. “Conlin and Steele Law Firm, may I help you?” a woman asked, her voice pleasant.

“Yes, my name is Dr. Jack Bass. I was calling for Kenneth Conlin. Is he available? It’s urgent.”

“Let me check for you, Dr. Bass. He’s already left for the day, so I’ll need to patch you through to his cellphone—it may take a few seconds.”

“Sure. I’ll wait.” Jack ran down his sidewalk, stopping at his truck door when he heard a voice on his phone.

“Ken Conlin here, Dr. Bass.”

“Hey, Ken. I know I’ve retained you and all, but I’m sorry we haven’t had a chance to talk much yet.”

“No problem. Happens all the time. The receptionist said you told her this was urgent—how can I help you?”

“Well, uh, you know how I told you that Chief Frigman over at the medical center was harassing me about those murders?”

“Yeah. Is that asshole at it again?”

“No, not with me—a medical student I know, Mark Quinn, was just arrested. Stupid as it may sound, Frigman arrested the kid for the murders he’s accusing me of! Quinn’s a good kid, Ken. I seriously doubt he had anything to do with it, so I’m not sure what Frigman’s up to. Quinn seems genuinely afraid that Frigman is going to do something...*untoward* to him, though.”

“Hasn’t that jackass Frigman brought in outside assistance to help with that investigation?”

“I don’t have any idea. The whole thing’s pretty weird.” He paused. “You sound like you already know Frigman.”

“Oh, yeah. Unfortunately. He’s gotten confused about the law a few times in the past with some clients of mine, so I had to educate him on the proper interpretation.”

“Then you know he’s a total jerk.”

“Yep, sure do.”

“Can you help me out on this?”

“How long would it take you to get over to the police station, Jack?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

“It’ll take me about twenty if I leave right now. If you would, head straight over there, and ask Frigman to see this kid—what’s his name again?”

“Mark Quinn.”

“Okay. Get over there and insist on seeing Quinn. Don’t do anything else—just try to stall Frigman until I get there. If they won’t let you see him, tell them I’m on my way and that they are not to move him until I’ve had a chance to talk to him. I’ll be there ASAP.”

“Great, Ken. See you over there...and thanks again.”

“Glad to help, Jack. Bye.”



The tires on Jack's truck squealed loudly as he veered into the parking lot of the university police station. The truck skidded to a stop askew in a parking spot, and he threw his door open then sprinted toward the building entrance. As he reached the bottom of the flight of front steps, he froze. Above him, Mark Quinn stepped out the main doors. He had his hands cuffed behind his back, and Frigman and another officer each had a hand clamped on one of Mark's arms. Frigman's face immediately took on a burgundy color and twisted into an angry scowl when he spotted Jack. Mark Quinn's shoulder's slumped, and he sighed loudly.

"Well—perfect timing on my part," Jack stated, standing with his hands on his hips.

"Outta my way, Bass," Frigman bellowed. "This doesn't concern you." He jabbed a finger at Jack. "Move or I'll have Bill here arrest you for obstruction of justice." He smirked. "You know, you oughta be happy about this development—now that I know this slug committed those murders, you might be off the hook...unless he tells me you helped him, that is."

Frigman turned to Bill.

"Bill, why don't you escort the good Dr. Bass back to his vehicle and off the property."

"Consider it done, boss."

Turrel released Quinn's arm, stepping toward Jack, pulling his baton from his belt. Frigman shook Mark by his arm, leaning his face close to Mark's ear.

"So, you called Bass, eh, you little brat?"

"Before you start any crap with me Frigman, you should know I just spoke with Ken Conlin." Jack smirked. "A lawyer I believe you know. He'll be here any minute."

Turrel froze in his tracks, shooting glances back and forth between Jack and Frigman.

Frigman excitedly waved Turrel toward Jack. "Get your ass down there and take care of him like I said, Bill." Frigman stabbed a finger at Jack. "Last warning, Bass—get outta the way...or else."

Frigman jerked Mark's arms high behind his back, twisting his shoulder joints into an unnatural position. Mark stood on his tiptoes, squirming and groaning in pain.

"Back off, Frigman! You're not the damned Gestapo—let go of his arms!" Jack yelled.

Frigman's eyes bugged out in his reddened face. "Bill, hold this kid while I escort Dr. Bass off the property." He stepped away from Mark's side, drawing his baton as he approached Jack. He had taken only a couple of steps when a deep voice boomed from behind Jack.

"Frigman! You fat prick—just what do you think you're doing? Put that goddam baton away!"

Ken Conlin stopped next to Jack. "Sorry I didn't get here sooner. Let me handle this now," he whispered.

Jack smiled at Ken. "All yours."

Ken took a small notepad and pen from a pocket and looked at Bill. "What's your name, Officer?"

Turrel looked sheepishly at Frigman then turned to Ken. "B-Bill Turrel, sir."

"You don't need to answer this high-priced mouthpiece's questions, Bill!" Frigman bellowed. "You're an officer of the law."

Bill shot nervous glances between Conlin and Frigman.

"Got it. Bill Turrel." Conlin turned to Frigman. "I'm now counsel for Mr. Quinn. Can I see the arrest warrant, Chief?"

Frigman growled.

"Well, Chief—where is it?"



“I don’t *have* a friggin’ arrest warrant...yet! I’m on my way to get that now, so get the hell outta my way, Conlin!”

“Chief, Chief, Chief—how many times are you and I going to have to go through this sort of scenario? You *know* it doesn’t work that way,” he stated, shaking his head. “Take the cuffs off my client now, or I’ll call some of my buddies over at the FBI Civil Rights Division and the Federal Prosecutor’s office. I know they’d be happy to come chat with you...*again*.”

“Don’t tell me the law, Conlin!”

“Apparently, someone needs to, Chief.” Conlin stepped forward and stabbed a finger at Frigman. “And, it’s *Mister* Conlin to you.” He pulled his cellphone from his pocket, a finger poised over the keypad. “What’s it gonna be, Chief?”

Frigman’s jaw worked furiously as he glowered at Conlin. He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at Mark.

“Bill, take the goddam cuffs off this little prick!” he bellowed then leaned in close to Mark’s face, glaring at him. “Next time, you won’t be so lucky.”

When Turrell finished removing the cuffs, Frigman grabbed Mark by the arm, shoving him down the steps toward Conlin.

“Here’s your precious little client, Conlin.”

“Frigman, you ever heard of police brutality? Don’t ever handle a client of mine like that again!”

As Mark took a position between the lawyer and Jack, they both turned toward him.

“You okay?” they asked in unison.

Mark glared at Frigman. “Yeah, I’m fine...but I can’t wait to tell you all about what went on in there.”

Ken threw a business card at Frigman’s feet. “If you have any other questions for my client, there’s my number. See you around, Chief *Wiggam*.”

Ken put his hand on Mark’s shoulder and hurriedly ushered him over to his car, Jack following closely. When they arrived at Conlin’s car, Ken spun to Mark.

“Mark, I’m Ken Conlin. I’m a lawyer, and Dr. Bass asked me to help you. We need to find a time to talk—soon. I need to know more about why and how you’re involved in this.”

“Thanks, Mr. Conlin. I-I was really getting scared in there,” Mark said.

Ken turned to Jack. “Jack, can you get Mark home? On the drive over here, I got another urgent call I need to attend to.”

“Sure, Ken. Just send the bill to me.”

“Don’t worry about that. I think you and Wes Watley are right, though. Something smelly is going on around here—be careful and don’t hesitate to call any time.”

“Thanks, Ken.”

Conlin climbed in his car and sped off.

“C’mon, I’ll take you to my place and fix us some dinner,” Jack said, the word dinner reminding him that he hadn’t called Janice yet. *Oh crap! I hope she’s not mad.*

• • • •

NEITHER JACK NOR MARK said anything for several minutes as Jack maneuvered his truck through the traffic.

“Mark, you want to tell me what’s up? Why did Frigman arrest you for those murders—why are you even on his radar for that?”

Mark shrugged and stared out the passenger window.

“C’mon, Mark—you need to come clean with me if you want me to help you.”

Mark continued to sit silently, staring at the bustling traffic.

“Mark! You gonna talk to me? I know you didn’t kill anyone, but I need to know what’s going on.”

Mark twisted to face Jack. “You’re right—I didn’t kill anyone...but I saw the man who did—and I think Frigman suspects that,” he muttered flatly. “I think he might just be trying to scare me into telling him what I know.” He turned his gaze back out the window.

“You know who the killer was?” Jack asked excitedly.

“Yes.”

“*Who?* Tell me!”

“The nametag I found by the dead women was...” Mark turned back to Jack. “Yours.”



*(0600, Wednesday)*

Misty hit the alarm snooze button and rolled onto her back, closed her eyes again, then extended her arm to the other side of the mattress, searching for the warm body that should have been there. She was still feeling the warm afterglow of the lovemaking from the previous night and felt like snuggling. When her probing fingers didn't locate the warm flesh they were seeking, she cast a lazy gaze over at the empty spot. Mark was gone. She scanned the room, noticing light coming from under the closed bedroom door.

Still naked, she jumped from the bed and padded to the door, opening it a crack. Mark Quinn was sitting at a small dinette table. He was staring absently at the wall in front of him as he held a cup of coffee. She approached him stealthily from behind, bent over, and put her arms around his neck, nuzzling his head between her bare breasts.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked inquisitively.

Mark jumped but quickly relaxed, leaning his head into her warm, soft breasts, enjoying the feel of them against the back of his neck. He turned slightly toward her, smiling broadly.

"Just doing some thinking."

She walked around in front of him and perched on his lap, settling into a comfortable position across his thighs, then she looked into his eyes.

"About what?"

Mark started to gently caress the soft skin of her back, aroused when he noticed her nipples harden in response.

"Really?" He snorted. "About all this bullshit that's been going on with these murders at the hospital. What Frigman is up to. How Dr. Bass might be involved. That's what."

Misty put her arms around his shoulders, pulling his head to her, nestling it as she softly stroked his hair.

"I don't like Frigman—he's a perverted psychopath."

"No debate from me—he's a scumbag."

"But Dr. Bass seems like a great guy. You don't really think he's involved with the murders...do you?"

Mark shrugged. "I like him, too... I don't know what to think." He turned his face to her. "I don't even *want* to think about all this stuff. I just want to focus on school—"

They both jumped as Mark's phone bleated. Mark reached around Misty and snatched it from the tabletop.

"Mark Quinn."

"Hey, Mark. It's Jack Bass. Sorry for calling so early."

Mark bolted upright in his chair, almost knocking Misty off his lap. "Hey, Dr. Bass. What's up?"

"How's your schedule look today?"

"Well, my usual day at the hospital, I'm afraid..." Mark responded sullenly.

"Not anymore, Mark. I talked to an old friend of mine who's in the FBI—gave him the lowdown on what you told me in the truck. He wants to talk with you today then have you take that evidence you said you have to the local FBI office."

"Well, I suppose I can call in sick..."

“No, don’t do that. You don’t need to draw any attention to yourself. What time do you think you’ll be done?”

“It probably won’t be until after six tonight.”

“Okay, that should still work fine. I’ll wait for you in my admin office—not the one in the OR. Just come by when you’re done today. If I’m not there when you arrive, just tell my AA, Mary, I said to let you wait in my office.”

“O-okay.”

“You sound a little down this morning—you hanging in there?” Jack asked.

“I’m trying, Dr. Bass, but...all this bullshit *and* trying to keep up with my schedule and studying... I’m just worn out.”

“It’ll be over soon, Mark.” Jack was silent a few seconds. “Look, Wes Watley, my FBI buddy, is all over this now...and Ken Conlin is available to you, too. Just hang in there a little longer, and we’ll get all this straightened out. I promise.”

“Okay, I’ll handle it, but I’m ready for it to be over.”

“Ditto, Mark. See you this evening.”

Mark disconnected and gave Misty a hug then a little pat on her bare bottom. “Well, much as I hate to say it, it’s time to go.”

She hopped up from his lap then stood facing him. “Well...aren’t you going to share some details?”

Mark rose and looked into her eyes. “I’d rather not. I don’t want you to get sucked into this fiasco any more than you already are.” He pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her. “It’s my problem—I don’t want it to become yours, too,” he whispered into her ear.

“If it involves you, it *is* my problem. I wish you’d let me help.” She extracted herself from his embrace and started to walk back to the bedroom, looking over her shoulder with an impish smile. “I do know one way I can help.” she said in an alluring voice. “Unless you really have to leave right this minute.”

Mark looked at her taut buttocks and trim body, smiling sadly. It was obvious she’d been a college athlete. “Yeah, unfortunately, I do—but hold that thought until tonight.”



(1300, Thursday)

Jack leaned against the tiled wall in the hallway between a couple of operating rooms, holding his phone to his ear. “Hey, Nancy, it’s Jack Bass, how’re you today?”

“Hello, Dr. Bass,” Dick Olgent’s executive assistant replied.

“Is Mr. Olgent in? I need to talk to him.”

“He is. Can I tell him what you want to talk to him about?”

“I don’t mean to be cryptic, but...it’s something quite confidential—can you just tell him it’s very serious...and urgent.”

“All right, Dr. Bass, I’ll let him know. Please hold a minute.”

After a few seconds of a canned announcer’s voice extolling the wondrous virtues of the care delivered at Southern Medical Center, Dick Olgent answered.

“Hi, Jack. Nancy tells me you have something urgent you want to talk about. Do you want to come over to my office, or is this something we can resolve on the phone?” he asked in a concerned tone.

“Hey, Dick. Thanks for taking my call. Actually, I’d much prefer to talk in person—I think I may have learned something about those lab murders. I’d really appreciate being able to get a few minutes of your time...today, if possible.”

Silence filled the line for several seconds. “Well, Jack, you certainly know how to get my attention. Do you think you’re in any danger?”

“I don’t know about *me* being in any danger, but I am worried something bad might happen to somebody else.”

“Well, unless you want me to bump something off my schedule, I really don’t have an open slot until after six this evening. Is that soon enough, or shall I cancel something?”

“After six is fine, Dick.”

“Good. That way, I’ll really be able to focus on what you’re telling me. One other thing, Jack—have you talked with Chief Frigman about this? I think that’s especially important if you think someone may be in danger.”

“No...I haven’t...and I have my reasons.” Jack paused for a few seconds. “I was hoping you and I would be able to have a private discussion before involving anyone else,” Jack said in a grave tone.

“Well, Jack, as the University Police Chief, I think he should hear anything you have to say, but I guess I’ll hear you out first. See you in my office around six. Goodbye.”





(1815, Thursday)

Dick Olgent stood and circled around his desk to greet Jack. “Dr. Bass, good to see you.” He shook Jack’s hand firmly, smiling as he waved him to a chair at a large conference table in a corner of the office. “Please have a seat.”

Jack took a seat, his back to the door, then looked around the office. “Nice office—I love the hardwood paneling.”

“Thanks, Jack. I do like it... I guess rank does have its privileges, eh?” Olgent replied, taking a seat opposite Jack at the table. “You really got my attention with your call earlier today. I’ve been worried all afternoon about what it is you want to tell me. As you can imagine, those lab murders have caused me some sleepless nights.” He leaned his forearms on the table. “Where would you like to start?”

“I’m not quite sure where to start—I believe this all probably started long before I arrived here.”

“That sounds ominous, Jack...that’s been bothering me since you called earlier.” He leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and held a finger to his lips. “And you think there are more people in danger now?”

“I do. There’s a medical student named Mark Quinn that I think is at particular risk.” He blew out a long breath and ran his hand over his hair. “Not to mention...me.”

Olgent’s eyes shot wide. “Now you’re really starting to scare me.” Olgent leaned back, resting his chin on a fist, a grave look on his face. “You said you haven’t talked with Chief Frigman about this?”

Jack snorted. “He’s talked to me about it a few times...unfortunately. He’s actually accusing me of the lab murders!” Jack paused a minute. “But I don’t want to share with him what I’m about to tell you.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think Frigman may be involved somehow...”

Olgent jumped from his chair and paced back and forth on his side of the table. He stopped and turned to Jack. “That’s a pretty serious accusation. You say he’s accusing you, but now...you’re accusing him?”

Jack nodded. “I can imagine what you must be thinking. Your police chief could be a bent cop, maybe even complicit in murder. Trust me, I thought about this long and hard before I came here.”

“I’m not sure you *can* imagine what I’m thinking, Jack.” Olgent plopped back into his chair. “Of course, I’ll need to know all the details about what you know, or suspect, before I can decide how to proceed.”

“Well, I have plenty to tell you—I even know of a witness to the lab murders, and he says he has some very compelling evidence.”

Olgent’s eyebrows shot up then he held his hand up in a gesture to stop. “Have you told anyone else about this?”

Jack stared at him. How much should he share with Olgent? On the one hand, he wanted Olgent to have as complete a picture as possible, but... Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned Mark’s name, either. He shook his head slowly. “No.”

“Nobody outside the university?”

No way Jack was going to mention Wes. “No...nobody.”

Olgent’s face relaxed and his shoulders sagged just a bit. “Good. Let’s keep it that way until I decide what to do next.”

“What are you thinking?”

Olgent gazed at Jack, his brow deeply furrowed. “I don’t know yet—you’ve dropped some pretty shocking news in my lap. It’s going to take a little time to process.”

“I’m not sure we have much time. I’m worried something bad is going to happen.”

Olgent rubbed his chin and gazed up at the ceiling. “You said you have not discussed your concerns with Chief Frigman?”

“That’s right, Dick. Again, I have my reasons.”

“But you’re worried something bad is going to happen..” He turned his eyes down to Jack. “Don’t you think the police should hear about that? After all, Jack, I want to prevent any further catastrophes—want to keep this from becoming headlines.”

Jack squirmed in the chair. Great! Another politician administrator. More worried about bad press than people in danger.

The phone on the desk rang. “Excuse me while I grab that.” Olgent stepped over and answered, listening for a minute then nodding. “Yes... I think that would be best, too.” He hung up and turned to Jack, a wan smile on his face. “Sorry for the interruption. It’s hard for a medical center president to get much undisturbed time.” He motioned his arm toward the door and shuffled toward it as he looked at Jack. “Thanks for coming by and sharing your concerns.”

Jack stood and moved toward the door. *I guess the meeting is over.* Olgent opened it and held it as he smiled at Jack, offering a handshake. Jack studied Olgent’s face. *That’s it? Really? That’s all you want to hear?* What the hell was up with that?

“Can I expect some follow up on your plans?” Jack asked.

Olgent nodded and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Sure, Jack...sure.” Olgent pressed on Jack’s shoulder, prodding him out the door.

The door closed behind Jack, and he stood there a few seconds then turned back to the door and arched an eyebrow. *Well...that was probably a waste of time.* Jack ambled out of the building and walked across the dark parking lot toward his truck, his mind replaying the meeting. *Now what?* He circled around a high concrete wall at the parking garage entrance, spinning when he heard shuffling behind him.



(1930, Thursday)

Mark had been sitting in Jack's office for nearly two hours. He glanced at his watch then hopped from the chair.

"It's not like Dr. Bass to be late." Mark gazed around the office. "Especially for something this important."

He paced around, examining pictures, awards and diplomas hanging on the walls.

"How could somebody who's done so much be so...humble?"

There were several pictures of an attractive strawberry-blond woman in Army fatigues with Jack in different settings.

"I wonder who that is? I didn't think he was married."

Mark wandered more, his eyebrows shooting up when he spotted the gold-plated Ka-Bar knife on Jack's desk next to a pile of envelopes. He swallowed hard then blew out a long breath. What the hell should he do? *Maybe Janice Dwyer knows where he's at.* He called the OR front desk, but she'd left for the day. The nurse on duty gave him Janice's cellphone number. He hurriedly punched the numbers into Jack's desk phone.

"Hello, Jack," Janice answered in a sultry voice. "Late again and calling to beg for forgiveness I suppose?"

Mark was caught off guard, unsure how to respond.

"Jack...you there?"

"Um, hey, Ms. Dwyer—it's Mark Quinn. We met recently. I-I'm calling from Dr. Bass's office."

"Oh...hi, Mark." She cleared her throat. "What can I do for you?"

"I was scheduled to meet Dr. Bass a couple of hours ago—he hasn't shown up. That's not like him."

"No...it isn't."

"His AA said he hadn't called her to say he'd be late." He hesitated a few seconds. "I, uh, was hoping you might know where he is."

"No...I don't know where he is. I was wondering myself—we had dinner plans," Janice responded quickly. "You're right, though, it's not like him to be late without calling."

"What we were going to discuss is actually why I'm worried about him," Mark muttered.

"The lab murders?"

A jolt ran up Mark's spine and slammed into his brain like a punch in the face. Was there *anyone* who didn't know he was involved with the murders? "Uh...yeah."

"Mark, I don't have a good feeling about this—I'm going to call him at the hospital. Maybe he got stuck in the OR for a late case." She paused. "Why don't you look around the office building? If you find him, ask him to call me immediately. If you don't find him in the next half hour, call me back."

"Yes, ma'am." Mark disconnected, a thought suddenly striking him. "I'll call that FBI guy. Dr. Bass said to call him if anything suspicious happened." He dug out his wallet, fumbling through its contents. He found the card and jabbed the numbers into his phone. "C'mon, c'mon." Mark's heart sank when the voicemail greeting started.

"Crap!"

Mark snatched a pen off Jack's desk, jotting down the number given in the greeting. He dialed, drumming his fingers on the desktop as the phone rang several times.

"Wes Watley."

"Mr. Watley, my name's Mark Quinn. I'm sitting in Dr. Jack Bass's office. He and I were supposed to meet a couple of hours ago...but he hasn't shown up. No one seems to know where he is," Mark rattled off then took a deep breath. "He'd given me your card—told me to call you if anything weird happened."

"Slow down, Mark. I need you to answer a few questions as best you can."

"Of course. I'll tell you whatever I know."

"First, what were you two meeting about tonight?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

"Is it about the murders that happened down there in that hospital lab?"

Mark's breath caught. He didn't speak for several seconds. "Uh...yes."

"Okay. Jack's already told me about that. You the medical student who witnessed the murders?"

"Um...yeah," Mark replied, his shoulders sagging.

"Don't worry...you're not a suspect. Jack and I are old buddies, and he told me about his suspicions—how you got caught in the middle of all this. Go ahead."

Mark released the breath he'd been holding. "The University Police arrested me. Dr. Bass was worried that Frigman, the university police chief, might try to do something...*bad* to me. We were going to talk about what to do next." Mark paused. "I-I have some evidence hidden...and Frigman wants it"

"Then why would he want to do something bad to you?"

"I think he just wants to scare me—so he can get his hands on the evidence. You might say it's very incriminating for Dr. Bass...but I saw the murderer. I-I don't *think* it was Dr. Bass."

"I smell a setup."

Mark did too. He shrugged. "I don't know... Anyway, like I said, Dr. Bass is a couple of hours late for our meeting—that's not like him."

"No, it isn't." Wes hesitated a few seconds. "Okay, Mark. Here's what I want you to do. After you hang up, go straight home—no detours."

"I was going to look for him in the office building here."

"No! Just go home."

"S-sure."

"When you get home, lock the doors—don't open them for anyone. I'm going to hop the next available flight down there. I'll call you when I hit the ground." He huffed loudly. "Mark, I don't know what's going on down there, but my intuition tells me it's some nasty stuff. Let me give you the name and number of an agent at your local office. If you feel threatened by anything before I get there, call him immediately."

"S-sure."

"Ready for the number?"

"Shoot."

Wes rattled off a phone number. "I hate to run, but I've got some calls to make ASAP." The line went dead.

Mark hung up the phone and plopped into Jack's chair, resting his head on his palms and rocking it back and forth. "Damn, I'm ready for this to end!"



(0610, Friday)

A massive headache greeted Jack as his mind slowly emerged from a mental muck. He opened his eyes, only to find they were covered with a blindfold. *What the hell?* He peeked through a sliver of a gap at the bottom of the blindfold, turning his head this way and that, trying to survey his surroundings. Was he lying in the cargo area of an SUV? When he tried to sit up, he discovered he was bound and gagged.

The vehicle lurched as the driver hit the brakes, slamming Jack against the seatback. The car sped up again, and he rolled all the way back against the tailgate. This pattern repeated several times, interrupted by the car making several sharp turns before screeching to a halt. *Are we driving through a damn obstacle course?* Smashing against the sides of the vehicle did serve to wake Jack further, though. He sniffed a few times. Was that the smell of the ocean? He craned his neck. And the sound of gulls squawking?

“See anybody?” a man said from the front of the SUV.

“No. Go ahead and back up to the boat, boss. I’ll keep an eye out.”

The SUV backed a short distance and stopped, then two car doors slammed. Jack shook his head to help clear the remaining cobwebs. *What the hell is going on?*

“Let’s get with it then—I want him on board before somebody shows up!”

The rear cargo door was thrown open. Jack squinted against the blinding light of the rising sun.

“What are you doing awake, tough guy?”

Something cracked Jack sharply on the side of the head, sending him back into black nothingness.

• • • •

(Sixty minutes later)

THE DIN OF LARGE DIESEL engines and the slap of waves against the hull goaded Jack into wakefulness. His head throbbed. Each violent leap of the boat over a wave felt like someone was slapping the side of his head with a cricket bat. Judging by the time between swells, Jack assumed they were a good way from shore. He tested his bonds. *Damn!* The tightly wrapped cord would not loosen.

“Goddamit! Where am I?” he roared.

No one responded. After several seconds, Jack let his head slump to the floor.

“How the *hell* did I let myself get into this situation?”

He lay motionless. Was this it? Was this how his life ended? Had he finally used up all the nine lives his friends claimed he had? He rocked his head back and forth on the floor.

“Damn! Not at all what I had in mind when I’ve thought about how I’d leave this world,” he mumbled.

The engines throttled back, and the boat slowed. Footsteps sounded on the flying bridge above the cabin. *Who is driving this thing? And why are they slowing? We’ve got to be out in the middle of the ocean somewhere.* And more importantly, what was going to happen next? The engines idled for a couple of minutes then cut off. The footsteps up on the flying bridge moved toward the aft main deck. Someone climbed down a metal ladder from above, then the patio door from the aft deck slid open. Jack gazed at the person entering the cabin, his mouth falling open.





*(0700, Friday)*

Mark was startled by the loud knock at his door. He jumped, spilling coffee onto his lap. His gaze shot to the door.

“Huh?” Wes Watley said he’d call when he landed. Why would he just show up without calling?

A second, harsher knock rattled the doorframe.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Mark called out. He opened the door a crack and peeked through, ready to lambast the salesperson he expected to find.

“Mornin’, Quinn,” Frigman said.

Mark groaned then started to inch the door closed. “Hey, Chief Frigman...sorry, but I can’t talk right now. I was just headed out the door for the hospital—I’m running late.”

Frigman shoved his foot into the opening.

“I gotta go.” Mark looked at the Chief’s foot then at his face. “And I can’t get the door closed with your foot there.”

Frigman did not respond, making no effort to move.

“Maybe we can talk later,” Mark stated then tried to close the door again. He sighed. “I really do need to get going.”

Frigman gave Mark a big, goofy smile. “Look, Quinn, I think you and I got off on the wrong foot.”

Orange particles, which looked like the remains of Cheetos, were stuck between Frigman’s teeth. Mark swallowed hard to keep from gagging and averted his gaze. “Yeah—can we talk about it later, though?”

“I’m already here—let’s talk now.” Frigman pushed the door open and bulled past Mark, gazing quickly around the apartment before spinning toward Mark. “I wanted to let you know that I misjudged you.” Frigman paused, wincing. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you.” He swallowed, as if choking on something. “I don’t blame you if you don’t like me...I was hoping an apology might help.”

Mark’s jaw dropped. “I-I beg your pardon, Chief?”

“You heard me, boy—sorry—I mean, Mr. Quinn. I reviewed the facts again and figure I was wrong about you. I’m here to tell you that. And apologize. I’ve also gotten some new information that leads me to believe it was Dr. Bass who killed those lab techs, not you.” His smile appeared strained. “I was hoping you’d be willing to show me that evidence you said you found—I think it would help me nail him.”

Mark gazed at Frigman, his heart racing. “Mr. Conlin told me not to talk to you without him present.”

Frigman scowled. “You don’t need any damn lawyer, kid—I’m on your side. Can you show me that evidence or not?” He looked around again. “Is it here?”

“Why should I trust you now, after all you’ve done to me?”

Frigman’s face turned red, and he tugged at his collar. “Well, uh...I, uh, was only interested in you because of the evidence I had at the time.” He shrugged. “I understand now that you were just an innocent bystander.”

“Okay, Chief.” Mark smiled. “Does this mean you’ll quit harassing me about the lab murders?”

“Sure, kid, sure. Trust me, after you turn the evidence over to me, you’ll never see me again.”

“That’s good to hear. Sounds like this will all be over for me soon.”

“Yes, it will, Mr. Quinn.” Frigman smiled a crooked smile and nodded. “Very soon!”

“And all I have to do is give you the evidence I found?”

“Exactly, kid.”

Mark stroked his chin, struggling to look unworried, though his mind was churning. “Okay. I don’t have it here, though—it’s hidden over at the medical center. Shall we meet over there?”

Frigman frowned then shook his head, his jowls jiggling. “I’ve got a better idea. How about I just drive you over there? That would be better than driving separately.”

Mark shrugged. “Thanks, Chief. That’s very thoughtful of you.” He turned away. “Let me get my things.”



“Well, well, looks like Sleeping Beauty has decided to wake up,” Waymon said sarcastically. He walked over to Jack and slapped his face several times. “Hey, Jack, old buddy—c’mon, wake up.”

Waymon laughed as Jack tried to turn his head away.

Jack thrashed against his restraints. “Waymon! You crazy bastard! What the hell are you doing? Untie me *now!*” He gazed at his arm. “Why is there an IV in my arm?”

“You kill me with your tough guy act—oops, I got that backwards. I’m going to kill you!” Waymon threw his head back, letting out a loud cackle. “You’re hardly in any position to make demands, Jack. You’ll find out about the IV soon enough. Why don’t you just lie there like a nice boy and keep quiet while I finish preparing?”

“Preparing for what?” Jack yelled.

“I need to find out what you know about...recent events—and who else you told about it. Then I’ll kill you.” He smirked. “That’s what.”

“What events? What’re you talking about, you crazy sonofabitch?”

“I’m talking about our little enterprise.”

Jack cocked his head. “What enterprise?”

“The enterprise that nosy people like Bev and Dale interfered with...and now, you and that Quinn kid, too.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “*You’re* involved in the deaths of Bev, Dale, and the lab techs?”

“Involved?” Waymon chuckled. “Hell, yes, I’m involved—but none of it would have been necessary if it wasn’t for you meddlers!”

“Meddlers? How were the lab techs meddling?”

“Well...the lab techs were just an unfortunate necessity—nothing really personal against them...”

“You keep saying we all were interfering with something, somehow, but you haven’t said what!” Jack yelled. “Tell me what the hell you’re talking about!” He fought against his bonds.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. It hardly matters now, since you’ll never be talking to anyone again.”

“Let me loose!” Jack bellowed.

Waymon sat on the couch and lounged back against the cushions. “It all started several years ago when I was thinking how tired I was of busting my ass and getting paid squat compared to what I could have been making in private practice.”

“I’m not interested in listening to you whine about money—you got paid plenty!”

Waymon stared blankly at Jack. “Not really—not for the lifestyle I deserved. Anyway, one day when I was sitting at my desk reviewing grant budgets, it dawned on me—every year my department got millions of dollars in research grants. All I had to do was find a way to tap into them and set it aside for my retirement fund.”

“*Retirement fund?* What are you talking about?”

“Things were going along just fine. I was building a nice little nest egg, and nobody seemed the wiser. I got a couple of partners along the way, and, long story short, we’ve been putting away upwards of a couple million dollars a year for over five years. All tucked away safely in some offshore accounts.” He rubbed his hands together. “Just waiting for us when it’s time to retire.”

“Partners?”

Waymon rolled his eyes. “Yes...unfortunately.” He frowned. “Back to my story, though. That nosy little prick, Dale Wallace, got too curious. I tried to scare him off, but he just wouldn’t take a hint. We

decided to shut up Wallace—permanently. Anyway, when Wallace was being clubbed to death one night, he admitted he'd also told Bev Costas about his suspicions.” He shrugged. “So, one thing led to another...”

Waymon hung his head, shaking it.

“Poor Bev. I really hated to do that to her—with her having young kids and all—but, she was too much of a risk.”

“You act as if killing innocent people is like making a menu selection!”

“Well...it *is*, Jack,” Waymon stated matter-of-factly. “We had a multi-million-dollar enterprise going, and we weren't about to let any pests mess it up. We figured we only had another year or two to go, and we'd have plenty of money to enjoy the type of retirement we deserved.”

“You sick sonofabitch!”

Waymon looked poker-faced at Jack for a few seconds then held up a hand in front of his face and examined his fingernails. “That's when those assholes on the board stuck their noses in and decided I should be replaced as the Chairman of the Anesthesia Department. Can you believe that? *My* anesthesia department! Just because a couple of department staff members died!”

He snarled like a dog guarding a bone.

“They did agree to let me handle the recruiting for my replacement, though. My partners and I figured we'd just hire some bozo...somebody who wouldn't bother us. Then we'd be able to just get on with business-as-usual.”

“Bozo? Why the hell did you hire *me*, then?”

Waymon laughed. “Really, Jack? You're *exactly* the type of clown we were looking for! We figured some Army retiree probably just wanted a nice, comfortable civilian job. Then, during a background check, we discovered you had been thrown out of the Army because of your cowardice over in Iraq, *and* you had been locked up in a nut ward afterward.” He snickered. “We agreed you'd be the perfect patsy for the job.”

“I'm no patsy!”

“But...you *are*, Jack. You're nothing but a naïve boy scout.” Waymon leaned his face in close to Jack's. “But then you had to go and start snooping, too!”

Jack lunged his head toward Waymon's but the restraints kept him from reaching his target.

“I still don't understand why you would come after me now if you thought I was such a dunce.”

Waymon opened his eyes wide and leaned back. “You really are thick, aren't you? Our plan had always called for you to be nothing more than an...*interim* solution. We figured we'd let you become Chairman, then we'd make sure you failed—in some horrendous fashion.” He shrugged. “The board would be forced to recognize the error of their judgment about me and reinstate me as Anesthesia Chairman.”

“Fail? How?”

“Duh! That's where those lab techs came in. It had to be something egregious. Something the board would have to act on immediately.” He gazed blankly at Jack. “So, I killed them and left evidence incriminating you!”

“You killed two innocent women just to set me up?” Jack shook his head hard. “Jesus! I feel like I'm in a damn *Twilight Zone* episode.”

Waymon held his arms up at his sides in a gesture of innocence. “It was nothing personal against them—they were just convenient targets. Wrong place at the wrong time, as the saying goes.”

Jack wrestled against his bonds. “Waymon, you're friggin' nuts! You're talking about all of this as if it's just some fiction novel. You've killed people and destroyed lives! Stolen millions of dollars

meant for medical research. You are an absolute lowlife—right down there with pond scum. You make me want to puke!”

Waymon’s face turned red, the veins in his neck bulging. He slapped Jack hard across the face. “Shut up! How dare you talk to me that way!”

“I’m gonna do more than talk to you when I get loose.”

Waymon’s chest heaved and his eyes bugged out. “Enough of this! I don’t need to explain myself to you. It’s time to get rid of you once and for all!”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“Yes...I will.” Waymon dug in a pocket and pulled out a syringe filled with a milky-looking substance.

“What do you think of the drug, Propofol?” he asked casually.

Jack tried to scoot away from Waymon but twisted his head around to keep an eye on the crazy son-of-a-bitch. “What’re you doing?”

“I think you’ve got a big mouth, and I need to know who else you’ve talked to about this. I think Propofol is way better than pentothal for getting people to talk.” He turned back to Jack, holding the syringe up in front of his face. “I’m going to experiment on you...until you tell me everything you know.”

Jack rocked his head back and forth. “This is a waste of your time,” Jack said “I haven’t talked about this with anyone!”

Waymon threw his head back and laughed. “How valiant of you, Jack. But I already know you and Quinn are in cahoots. I need to know who else you’ve shot off your big mouth to.” He uncapped the needle and jabbed it into the IV connected to Jack’s arm. “We need to clean up *all* the loose ends.”

“There’s nobody else!”

“I guess we’ll know for sure soon enough.” Waymon injected the cloudy medication, watching hungrily as it flowed into Jack’s arm.

Jack tried to yank his arms loose from the cords tightened around them. No luck. His mind soon descended into a warm fog, like sinking into murky quicksand in a Louisiana swamp.

“Waymon, you bastard, I’m telling you—no one else...knows...anything...” he said, but his voice sounded odd, as if coming from a distance.



Frigman turned the squad car into the main entrance of the medical school campus and slowed. “Where we headed, kid? Where you got this stuff hidden?”

“I’ve got it stashed in the anatomy lab—all locked up,” Mark replied.

“What floor is your lab desk on? What’s the number...and where’s the key?”

“My desk is kind of hard to find. It’ll be easier if I just show you, Chief. I’d probably just get you lost if I gave you directions.” Mark blew out a long sigh. “I’ll just be glad to be rid of the stuff.”

He glanced at Frigman. The big man was looking out his side window. Mark hurriedly wiped the heavy sweat from his forehead.

“Yeah, sure, kid,” Frigman replied distractedly. “Which building?”

Mark pointed. “There. Basic Sciences Building.”

Frigman swerved the squad car, tires screeching as it hopped the curb and skidded to a stop halfway on the sidewalk.

Mark looked over at the cop with a deadpan expression, pointing a finger across the street. “Chief, there’s a parking spot right over there.”

“Don’t sweat it, kid,” he replied, “we’re fine right here. Let’s get going.”

They climbed out of the car and walked to the steps of the building Mark had pointed out. They ascended to the entrance doors, Frigman breathing heavily and resting his hands on his knees as they stopped at the doorway.

“Where’s...the ele...vator?” Frigman spat out between gasps.

“Not sure, Chief, I always take the steps.” He held the door open, waving Frigman through. “After you.”

Frigman gave Mark a nasty look, grumbling something unintelligible under his breath as he shuffled into the lobby. “I’m not taking any damn steps!”

“My lab is on the third floor—I’ll take the steps and meet you there.”

Frigman grabbed Mark’s upper arm and jerked him closer. “No! You’ll ride up in the elevator with me.”

Frigman dragged Mark over to the elevators and jabbed the button then glared at Mark. Mark stared into Frigman’s eyes then looked down at Frigman’s hand that was squeezing his arm.

“Okay...but you don’t need to break my arm.”

Frigman looked at his hand. He smiled awkwardly then released Mark’s arm. “Sorry, kid. Guess I got caught up in the excitement.”

Mark gawked at him. “Uh huh.”

The elevator doors clanked open, and Frigman waved Mark forward. “After you, kid.”

They stood in silence as the elevator whined its way up the shaft. The chief’s shirt was sweat soaked, and Mark wrinkled his nose at the stink inundating the interior of the elevator. He hopped out as soon as the doors opened. Their footsteps echoed in the vacant, cold halls as Mark led Frigman down them, finally halting in front of a set of double doors.

“Here we are.” Mark pushed a door open, releasing a gush of chilled air carrying a sickening scent of formaldehyde.

“Ahh. That’s more like it,” Frigman said, raising his arms out to his sides and smiling. “Why do they keep this place so cold, kid?”

“It’s the anatomy lab. The low temperature helps preserve the bodies.”



“Man, I wish I’d known about this place before. I’m going to make this my satellite office when it’s hot outside.” Frigman wrinkled his nose. “What’s that smell, though?”

“It’s the formaldehyde that the cadavers are stored in.”

“This where you got the stuff hidden?”

“Yeah—my desk is right over there.”

As they walked, Frigman’s gaze darted repeatedly to the rows of stainless-steel coffins that contained cadavers, and he pinched his nostrils.

“I never did tell you what I found...or where I found it,” Mark said.

“I don’t really care.”

Mark shrugged quickly. “Anyway, I found a few things both inside and just outside of the lab.”

“Good! That’s probably just what I’m looking for.” He rested a hand on the butt of his baton.

“I found Dr. Bass’s hospital ID badge near the bodies in the lab. His lab coat was in the alley behind the lab.” Mark stopped, turning to face Frigman when they arrived at Mark’s desk. “Don’t you think that’s weird—that he’d be so sloppy about leaving clues pointing at him?”

“I knew that sonofabitch Bass was involved!”

“But—wait a minute, Chief—I never told you it was Dr. Bass I saw kill those women.”

Frigman hesitated briefly. “Well, uh, look, kid, I been around crime for a long time. Witnesses get excited in a situation like that...make lots of mistakes about what they remember.”

Mark scratched his head. “I’m not really sure he was the killer, though.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re wrong about that! If you’ve got Bass’s lab coat and ID badge from the crime scene, that’ll be enough evidence for me to prove he was the killer.”

“I suppose so...” Mark tossed a quick shrug. “Let me get this stuff out of my desk.”

Mark reached under the ledge on the metal cabinets above his desk, fumbling a few seconds then extracting a key. He bent, sliding the key into the lock of a cabinet beneath his desktop.

Frigman quietly slid his baton from his belt and raised it over his head with both hands.



Jack started to awaken as he felt hands grabbing his ankles and wrists, swinging him through the air.

“Good-bye, Jack.” Waymon laughed uproariously. “Have a nice swim.”

Jack tumbled as he sank into the murk, soon becoming disoriented, unsure of the direction of the surface. The few seconds in the water seemed like minutes, his lungs already aching. The saltwater and after-effects of the drug blurred his vision, but he could still see several large fish circling him. The size of them and the shape of their dorsal fin were the unmistakable silhouettes of sharks.

He recalled his SCUBA training and forced back the panic, replacing it with a sense of calm. The words of his instructor echoed in his head. “If you get disoriented about which way is up, just let out a little air and follow the bubbles.” Jack reluctantly let a few bubbles dribble from his lips then watched them crawl up his chest and belly. He immediately righted himself, aiming toward the dim light of the surface. He tried a dolphin kick with his legs. It worked but steering was a struggle.

He chased his bubbles upward and neared the surface, the shadow of the boat bobbing on the waves above him. He turned toward it. As he closed in on the boat, the propeller blades came into sight. *Yes! Those might just work.* Jack did a couple of big thrusts to close the distance between himself and the propellers, his head smacking against a propeller shaft.

His leg muscles were on fire! His lungs felt as if they held burning embers. It was taking unimaginable willpower to not open his mouth and take in a deep breath. He twisted, turning his back to the propeller blades, fighting to maintain a position where he could hold his bound hands against the sharp edge. He sawed feverishly, a deepening grayness creeping into his vision as his brain began closing down from lack of oxygen. Jack kicked at the water to push harder against the sharp metal, shooting quick peeks over his shoulder.

The starter motors for the boat’s diesel engines began to grind. He shook his head hard. *No!* Once the motors fired up, it would likely be mere seconds before the propellers were engaged. They would tear him apart. He sawed even more furiously at his bonds, his vision now little more than a fuzzy, dark tunnel. Despite his limited vision, he still sensed large shadows circling closer in the water. Something cold and scratchy brushed against him, and a large fin slapped against his head.



Mark watched Frigman's reflection in the glass of a picture sitting on his desk. Mark's gaze darted between the picture and the drawer he was rummaging in for a blood-spattered lab coat. He pulled on the jacket, but it snagged on a screw, and he became distracted with untangling it. There was a rustling of clothing and leather behind him. His gaze shot back to the picture frame. His eyes shot wide when he saw Frigman with his baton raised above his head. Mark sprang aside as Frigman's baton smashed into the desktop with a loud crack right where Mark's head had been.

"Goddamit!" Frigman yelled loudly, raising his baton above his head again. "Hold still, you little shit!"

Mark leaped from his squatting position onto the top of the nearby lab table that separated his desk from the next row of desks, rolling rapidly across. He stood on the far side of the wide lab table, glaring at Frigman.

"I figured as much!"

Frigman stood red-faced and panting, wagging his baton at Mark. "You're only delaying the inevitable. Just stand still and take it like a man."

"Screw off, you fat ass! I grew up being bullied by jackasses like you!" He jabbed a finger at Frigman. "And I'm sick of it! Sick of listening to your stupid bullshit!"

"*Fat ass?*" Frigman shrieked in a voice that sounded like air squeaking from a balloon. "How dare you call me that!" He pointed the baton at Mark. "That just cost you, boy. I was going to kill you quick, but now I'm going to hurt you real bad before I let you die. Let you die a slow, painful death." He jabbed a finger at the lab coat hanging out of the drawer. "I've got the evidence I was looking for, so I don't need you anymore."

"You don't have any evidence—that's *my* lab coat!" Mark yelled back. "Dumbass! You really think I would trust you—that I'm that stupid and gullible?" Mark pointed at the coat. "Go ahead. Pick it up...look at the name on it!"

Frigman shot Mark a hateful look, quickly glanced at the lab coat then back at Mark. "If you try anything while I check it, I'll beat you silly."

"Yeah, whatever..."

Frigman grunted as he bent, yanking the lab coat from the cabinet then holding it up and turning it around. He stared at Mark's ID badge that was clipped to the lapel then growled. "But...it's covered in blood..." he muttered uncertainly.

"It's my dog-lab coat. Of course, it's covered in blood—dog blood!"

Frigman hurled the lab coat to the floor. "You think you're so damned smart, you little twit—well, it doesn't matter. I don't really need that crap anyway because if you're dead, you can't tell anybody about what you saw." He stepped toward Mark. "So, I'm going to kill you!"

"Gotta catch me first...Chief *Wiggam!*"

Frigman shrieked like a banshee then lunged across the lab table, swinging his baton wildly. Mark easily jumped out of reach, the baton cracking loudly as it hit the cold, hard marble tabletop.

"Dammit, boy, hold still! I'm not playing games with you!" Frigman waddled around the end of the lab table, like a duck rushing across a busy street.

As Frigman came around the end, Mark rolled across the table to the opposite side. He stood opposite Frigman, sneering at the red-faced cop.

Mark waved Frigman forward. "C'mon—come and get me. Teach me that lesson!"

“Why, you little...!” Frigman reversed direction, trundling back around the table again.

Again, Mark rolled across the tabletop, laughing as he faced Frigman. The cop stood, leaning on the table, gasping. Mark leaped out into the center aisle that ran the length of the room.

“C’mon, Chief, I’ll move out here and make it easier for you.” He waved an arm at Frigman then pointed at the floor in front of himself. “See—nothing between us.”

Frigman leaned on the corner of the lab table, breathing heavily as he scowled at Mark. “I don’t really need to beat you to death.” He reached for his pistol.



Mark dove at Frigman, using a move he'd learned in Krav Maga, smashing a fist against Frigman's forearm and sending the pistol flying. Mark landed on the floor, rolled, then stood and turned to face Frigman.

"Now what you gonna do, lard-ass?"

Frigman rubbed his forearm, yelled, and charged Mark like a linebacker, his head down, arms spread wide. Mark hopped aside. Frigman snarled and spun, immediately stampeding toward him again. As Frigman neared him, Mark deftly stepped to the side, grabbed Frigman's wrist, and reached with his other hand to push on the back of Frigman's shoulder. The movement sent Frigman flying forward, spinning wildly. He lost his balance and smashed into a set of cabinets then slumped to the floor. He gulped in air, his face crimson, his neck veins bulging.

"You think this kung-fu shit is going to save your ass, boy?"

"Yes, Chief. I do."

Frigman groped at the cabinet, struggling to pull himself to his feet. He stepped toward Mark, tiredly swinging a fist at Mark's head. Mark ducked under the blow, spun, and swept his leg across the back of Frigman's knees. The big man crumpled, collapsing to the floor with a thunderous crash that rattled the nearby cabinets. Frigman didn't try to rise, his chest heaving as he guzzled breaths of air, his eyes bulging as he glared at Mark.

"Not so tough when you're not beating up on some defenseless woman or man, eh, Chief? Have you had enough...or do you still want to show me how tough you are?"

Frigman lay on the floor then nodded. "You're right—I'm beaten."

Mark stepped closer and stabbed a finger at Frigman. "Damn straight, you are!"

Frigman waved Mark closer. "At least help me up."

Mark hesitated then slowly stepped forward and held out a hand. Suddenly, Frigman lunged, wrapping his forearms around Mark's calves.

"We'll see who has the last laugh, boy!" Frigman threw a shoulder against Mark's knees.

Mark tipped like a tree being felled. Frigman cackled like an old witch as he scrambled up over Mark.

Misty Carrel dove from the shadows of nearby cabinets, swinging an aluminum baseball bat. The bat pinged as it connected with Frigman's head. The big man slumped onto Mark, and Mark quickly shoved him off. The cop lay on the floor, motionless. Mark stared at the bat in Misty's hands then looked into her eyes.

Misty shrugged. "When you called me just before you came over here, I thought you might need a backup plan."

Mark nodded at the bat. "And that was it?"

"I was on the softball team back in college—had a pretty good swing back in the day. I thought it would come in handy if you needed help."

Mark shook his head. "I asked you to *get* some help, not come yourself."

"I didn't know who I could get on such short notice. I wasn't going to risk letting you get hurt or killed, so...I just came myself. You were doing pretty well with those karate moves." She shook her head and snorted. "I can't believe you fell for that old trick of him asking you to help him up."

Mark shrugged. "I guess my brain just doesn't work in those devious ways."



Misty smiled. "I guess that's a good trait for a doctor." She threw the bat aside and jumped at him, throwing her arms around him and burying her face in his chest. "Mark, I was so scared when you called—I couldn't bear the thought of losing the man I've fallen in love with."

Mark gawked at Misty, his mouth falling open. "What did you say?"

Misty looked up at him, smiling broadly. "I said I love you." She snickered. "But don't tell anyone I'm in love with a lowly medical student—it could ruin my reputation."

Mark laughed and pulled her tightly against him. "I've loved you for some time, Misty. I was afraid to tell you, though. I-I thought you'd never fall for a guy like me—you know, not a nickel to my name."

"Quit it! Don't give me that 'guy like me' crap."

Mark shook his head hard and pushed back from Misty. "Damn, I wish I coulda recorded what just happened," he muttered.

Misty stepped back and smiled, holding up her phone. "I'm a step ahead of you."

Mark chuckled. "As usual."

"But I don't know how good it is—I couldn't get very close to you two. Let's take a listen."

Frigman began moaning. Misty and Mark spun toward him.

"First, we need to find something to tie him up," Mark said.

Mark strode over to where Frigman's gun lay on the floor, picked it up, and put it in his pocket. He and Misty then searched for something to secure Frigman.

"Bingo!" Misty yelled, pulling an electrical cord from a cabinet.

She and Mark rushed to wrap the cord around Frigman's ankles then struggled to roll him onto his stomach so they could tie his wrists together behind his back. Frigman started to groan more loudly, squirming as Misty and Mark rushed to secure him. After they had trussed him, Mark pulled out a hanky and used it as a gag over Frigman's mouth.

"Okay, Misty. Let's listen to that recording and see what we've got."

"Keep your fingers crossed," Misty said tentatively then pressed the play button.

The voices were somewhat garbled amongst all the background noise, but Mark could just make out the words.

*"Goddamit, kid, hold still! You're only delaying the inevitable, so just stand and take it like a man."*

He stopped the recording and smiled at Misty. "That's great! Let's see what else we've got."

*"Look, you little shit, you think you're so damned smart—well, it doesn't matter. I don't really need that crap anyway because if you're dead, you can't tell anybody about it. Either way, I'm going to kill you!"*

"Yes!" Mark shouted, pumping a fist in the air. "You got everything I was hoping for. It may not be the best quality in the world, but I'm sure Wes Watley can have somebody at the FBI clean it up."

They exchanged a high five.

"Speaking of Wes, we should probably give him a call and let him know what's happened." Mark quickly punched in Wes's number.

"Special Agent Watley."

"Hi, Agent Watley...it's Mark Quinn."

"Where the hell are you, Mark? I've called you several times since I arrived. I'm at your apartment...and you're not. I instructed you to stay here! What's up?"

"Uh...sorry about that—I kinda screwed up. Chief Frigman came to my apartment. He brought me down here to the school to get the evidence I had hidden—"

“*What?*” Wes quickly interjected. “Where are you now? Is Frigman still with you? Tell me what’s going on, Mark!”

“Frigman surprised me at my apartment—made me come with him down to the medical school.” He sighed. “I’d told him I had the evidence hidden here.”

“Not too smart!”

“Yeah...I suppose not...” Mark mumbled. “Let me fill you in.”

Mark relayed the events that had taken place, finishing with the part about the recording he and Misty had just listened to.

“Mark, you’re damned lucky! No wonder you and Jack get along—you two are birds of a feather. From now on, though, do exactly as I tell you.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. Trust me, I wasn’t trying to be a hero.”

“What’s important is you’re not hurt. You sure you’ve got Frigman secured well enough?”

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere,” Mark replied, quickly glancing at Frigman.

The big man was wriggling on the floor like a beached whale.

“All right, Mark. This is what I want you to do...”

After a couple of minutes, Mark disconnected. “He wants us to lock up this lab until he gets here, but he’s not sure how long it will take him. He’s got a bigger problem.” Mark blew out a long breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “Nobody seems to know where Dr. Bass is.”



Misty and Mark locked the dead bolts on the lab doors then stood staring at Frigman. Mark squatted down in front of him.

“Chief, the FBI is on their way here, so you may as well cooperate.”

Frigman’s eyebrows shot up then he nodded.

Mark ripped the gag from Frigman’s mouth. “Where’s Dr. Bass?”

“Look, kid, you’re in big trouble for doing this to a police officer! When I get loose, I’m going to hurt you so bad before I kill you.” He nodded toward Misty. “And the little bitch, too!”

Mark rolled his eyes and looked up at Misty. “Misty, why don’t you play back that audio?”

Frigman’s gaze darted to Misty.

“Gladly.” She smiled and pulled out her phone.

*“You little shit, you think you’re so damned smart—well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t really need that crap anyway because if you’re dead you can’t tell anybody about it. Either way, I’m going to kill you!”*

Frigman hesitated. “Big deal. I-I don’t care about that crap. I’ll just get rid of the phone, too.” He gawked at Misty and winked. “After I have a little fun with her.”

Misty threw the phone at Frigman, bouncing it off his head.

“You just don’t *get* it, do you? You ignorant, disgusting swine—you’re caught! You’re going down! We know you’ve killed people, and we have a recording of you threatening to kill Mark. What kind of fantasy-land do you live in?” She shook her head, smacking a palm against her forehead. “You’re *not* going to get loose, you’re *not* going to hurt us, and you sure as *hell* won’t ever lay a hand on me, you...you...disgusting slob!” She spun away, shaking her clenched fists in the air as she growled.

Mark looked at Misty then back at Frigman. “I’d say Dr. Carrel has pretty much laid out the current reality for you. An FBI agent will be here any minute, and we’re going to give him the recording and the other evidence we have. You’re going to jail—probably death row. I hear cons really hate ex-cops in jail, so I doubt you’ll even live long enough to get executed.”

Frigman’s lips trembled then he jutted his chins. “Piss off!”

“Why don’t you just tell us if you know where Dr. Bass is? If you don’t, I might just let Dr. Carrel borrow my dog-lab scalpel and let her practice her surgical technique for castration.”

Misty quickly spun around, a big smile on her face. “Oh, yeah! I like that idea, Mark!” She held out her hands and wiggled her fingers. “Where’s your scalpel? Give it to me.”

Frigman pressed his thighs together, sweating and blinking rapidly as he shot glances between Mark and Misty. His lower lip trembled again.

“Keep her away from me!” he blurted. “I’ll tell you, but...I-I want to cut a deal!”

Mark threw his head back and burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s sweet.” Mark shook his head. “This isn’t some goddam TV show, you moron. And I’m not a DA or a cop. The only deal I might be able to offer is to convince Dr. Carrel not to show you her skills with a scalpel.”

Frigman glanced at them again then set his jaw.

“Go to hell—both of you! I’m not telling you a damn thing. I’ll just wait to see if anyone from the FBI actually shows up. If they do, I’ll make my deal with them.”

“I thought you might feel that way,” Mark replied flatly. He walked over and leaned close to Misty and pointed at a body hoist in the corner of the lab. The hoist had a large sling attached that was

used to transfer cadavers in and out of the stainless-steel coffins. "I think if we lifted him on a transfer hoist and positioned him over an open coffin, he might be more cooperative," he whispered in her ear. "Maybe threaten to drop him into one."

She shrugged and nodded. "It's worth a try, I guess."

"We need to secure you better." Mark pointed at a stainless-steel coffin. "We're going to put you in one of the cadaver tanks. Unfortunately, they are all filled with that nasty-smelling formaldehyde you asked about earlier." Mark smirked at Frigman. "I hope the smell won't bother you too much. Don't worry, though, it will wash off after a few months."

"What the hell are you talking about, boy? You're not sticking me anywhere!" Frigman's gaze darted to the rows of stainless-steel coffins. "Besides, there's no way you and the little bitch can lift a stout man like me up into one of those things!"

"Oh, but we can, Chief." Mark turned to Misty. "Dr. Carrel, would you do the honors, please?"

"Gladly," she replied, a big smile on her face.

Misty pushed the hoist near Frigman, then she and Mark unhooked the large canvas body hammock, spreading it on the floor next to Frigman.

"Get that thing away from me, you two crazy bastards! You can't do this to me! I-I'm the chief of police, for chrissake!" He squirmed wildly. After a few minutes, Frigman lay still, his chest heaving. "You...can't...do...this to me..." he gasped feebly.

"Chief, we're going to roll you onto this lift hammock. Once we start lifting you up, you might not want to thrash around like that. I don't know what the weight limit is on this thing—I'd hate to see it break while you're in the air. If that happened, you might have a nasty drop to the ground. Probably break some bones," Mark said.

Misty and Mark rolled him onto the hammock, struggling to position him so they could hook the hammock back onto the hoist. Mark pressed down on the hydraulic piston lever to lift the hammock, standing on his tiptoes in order to apply all his body weight. It hissed and squealed loudly but barely moved. Misty stepped up and added her weight to the effort, and the entire apparatus creaked as the hammock inched off the ground. They eventually lifted Frigman high enough to clear the side of a cadaver tank, resting as they watched Frigman swaying in the hammock, the hoist creaking like an old oak tree in a windstorm.

"I'm sure you can hear this thing squeaking, Chief. Just remember, if you move around too much, you'll probably break it...and drop like a sack of rocks."

Frigman eyes bugged out as he stared at Mark. "You can't do this to me. Put me down!" he snarled.

"Will you tell us where Dr. Bass is?"

Frigman shook his head gently. "Go to hell, punk! Put me down first."

"Have it your way, Chief."

They rolled the hoist near an empty cadaver coffin. Mark opened the hinged cover, letting it fall against the side of the tank with a loud bang. A sudden gush of the nauseating smell of formaldehyde oozed from the container.

"Whew!" Mark backed away, fanning the air in front of his face. "I don't miss that smell."

Misty and Mark positioned Frigman over the open container then backed a few feet away.

"Last chance, Chief, or...in you go," Mark stated flatly.

Frigman wrinkled his nose. "Go to hell, boy. Y-you don't have the balls."

Before Mark could respond, Misty jumped forward and slapped the release lever. "I do!"

The hydraulic piston screeched as it released. Frigman crashed and bounced against the sides of the tank as he dropped, his body wedging into the cold, smelly confines.

“You little bitch!” Frigman screamed as he slowly sank farther into the coffin. “Get me the hell outta this thing—*now!*” Frigman squirmed, each wiggle lodging him farther down in the steel coffin, the smelly chemical creeping higher onto his plump jowls. He rocked his head violently from side to side, causing the fluid to splash onto his face. “Okay! Okay! I’ll talk. Just get me out of here!”

Mark glanced at Misty. She made no movement toward the hoist lever. Mark stepped over and closed the release valve on the hydraulic piston.

The formaldehyde lapped gently at the corners of Frigman’s mouth as he labored to lift his head above the fluid. “Get me out of here!” he screamed between coughs and gags.

“Are you going to tell us where Dr. Bass is?” Misty asked, scowling.

Frigman glared at them, his face contorted with a mixed expression of hatred and fear.

“Yeah, fine!” Frigman snickered. “Not that it matters—it’s already too late for him. He’s fish bait by now.”

Misty and Mark exchanged a quick glance.

“*What?*” they chimed in unison.

“Yeah, that’s right, you two idiots. Your big hero is already dead! He got taken for a little boat ride earlier this morning. I’m sure Bass is giving some shark indigestion as we speak.” Frigman’s fiendish laugh echoed eerily out of the casket.

Misty’s and Mark’s mouths hung open as they looked at each other.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mark asked.

“That’s all I’m telling you,” Frigman responded with a tone of determined toughness. “I ain’t talking to anybody until I get a lawyer...and they’re going to hear about how you’ve treated an officer of the law!”

“All right, Chief. A deal’s a deal,” Mark replied. He knew better than to trust this guy but...he had to give this a try.

Mark leaned his weight on the lever of the hydraulic piston but was unable to budge it. He looked at Misty, but she just stood there glaring at Frigman.

“Um, Misty, I could use some help.”

She looked blankly at Mark for a few seconds then moved next to him. “I was just debating whether we should just close the lid and leave.”

Frigman shot a concerned, pleading look at Mark.

“He called me a bitch, implied he wanted to rape me, tried to kill you...and told us he helped kill Dr. Bass. Why not just leave him?”

Mark stared at her. Was she serious? He leaned close to her. “Misty, I don’t know if you’re kidding or not, but...we can’t do that. It would make us like him, and I don’t want to become that kind of person,” he whispered.

She shrugged then stepped forward, putting her hands on the lift lever then turning to Mark. “Ready?”

They put their full weight on the handle but were barely able to push it. Frigman was wedged so tightly in the steel coffin, they couldn’t break him loose. By the time they abandoned the effort, they’d only been able to raise him enough that the formaldehyde no longer lapped onto his lips.

Mark peered over the metal edge of the box, gazing down at Frigman. “I guess that’s the best we can do for now,” Mark said. “I just hope this lift doesn’t break and drop you farther down in there.”

There'd be nothing we could do to lift you back out if that happened." Mark held his hands up at his sides. "I wouldn't move around much if I was you."

"FBI! This is Agent Watley! Mark, open the door."

Misty and Mark startled. Frigman closed his eyes, groaning.

Mark smiled, heaving a loud sigh as he moved toward the door. "Be right there, Agent Watley."

Mark rushed to unlock the door. Wes Watley was standing just to the side, his gun held at the ready, and another agent was stationed at the other side of the doorway, gun drawn.

"You okay, Mark?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, sir. C'mon in."

Wes stepped in, holding his pistol out in front of him, then turned to Mark. "Where's Frigman?"

"Right over here." Mark pointed at where Misty stood next to the cadaver tank.

Watley's eyes opened wide as he neared the storage tank and saw Frigman wedged down inside it. He arched an eyebrow as he looked at Misty then Mark.

"Long story, sir," Mark replied sheepishly then turned to Misty. "Let me introduce you to Dr. Misty Carrel, a surgery intern here at the medical center."

Wes shook Misty's hand. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Carrel."

"Chief Frigman just told us that Dr. Bass is probably already dead. Said his body was dumped out at sea," Misty rattled off.

Wes stepped up to the tank. "For your sake, Frigman, you better be wrong about Jack Bass. I'll be your worst nightmare if Jack is dead," he growled.

"Just get me out of this thing!" Frigman whined, turning his face away from Wes.

Wes leaned down close to Frigman. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me specifically where Jack Bass is—and you'd better be fast about it!"

Frigman's lower lip began trembling. "I want a deal," he mumbled feebly.

"The only deal I'll make is that I won't kill you right here and now...*if* you tell me where Jack is."





The cords binding Jack's wrists gave way with a snap.  
*Finally!*

Jack pushed off from the propeller shaft toward the stern of the boat. A sudden gush of water flowed past him as the propellers engaged. He clawed along the bottom of the boat, battling a darkening mental haze. He twisted his head wildly, fighting with all his strength not to suck in a mouthful of water. God, how his lungs burned! His fingers touched the cold metal of the ladder at the rear of the boat. Air blasted from his mouth. Jack used his last ounces of strength to pull himself toward the surface. His face broke free of the surface, and he sucked in a huge breath. Saltwater mixed with the air and sent him into a coughing fit. He coughed so hard he nearly lost his grip on the ladder but held on, his arms shaking.

The boat picked up speed, the foamy torrent ripping at him. His fingers slipped on the wet rung, and he was drug down a step farther into the sea. He crooked an elbow around the ladder, his hands too weak to maintain a grip. *Do or die time, Bass!* He forced himself to put a hand on the next higher rung, the effort exhausting him. *One more!* He pulled himself up, one slippery rung at a time, finally freeing himself from the water's deadly grasp. He clung to the ladder, his entire body shaking from both exhaustion and the cold breeze streaming over him. He gulped in deep breaths, trying to recover some strength and gather his thoughts.

He didn't have the stamina to continue hanging from the ladder on which he was precariously perched. Already, his legs had begun to cramp from the awkward position. He needed to get into the boat, though he knew that meant he'd likely bump into Waymon. *I hope he's not armed with anything more than that stupid syringe!* Jack had to be smart, using the only advantage he had—surprise.

He edged his eyes above the rim of the gunwale, quickly surveying the aft deck. He didn't see anyone. *That fishing "fighter's chair" near the rear of the deck could give me some cover.* Jack clambered up the ladder and flopped over the gunwale, landing on the deck with a wet smack. His arms shook wildly, barely able to support him as he crawled to a spot behind the fishing chair.

Jack sat there for several minutes, rubbing the cramps out of his legs, energy slowly returning to his body. His face flushed hot and his pulse began to pound in his temples.

"Lousy son-of-a-bitch!" he whispered. "Time for a little payback."

He clambered to his knees, stealing a quick glance around the cushion of the chair. He still couldn't see Waymon, but music and horrendous singing came from up on the flying bridge. Jack spotted a gaffing hook stowed in its rack on the side gunwale. He shrugged. *What the hell? It's better than nothing.* He grunted. *Although they say never bring a gaffing hook to a gun party.*

Jack snatched the metal pole and crept up the ladder like a cat stalking prey, pausing with his head just below the edge of the upper deck. *I hope he's preoccupied with piloting the boat.* His heart sledgehammered against his ribs. He took a deep breath then inched his eyes just above the edge of the deck. Waymon was at the helm, his hands on the wheel, singing loudly along with the blaring radio. Jack let out a quiet sigh.

He climbed onto the flying bridge deck on his hands and knees then slowly stood, tightening his grasp on the metal pole. The boat hit a large swell, and Jack lost his balance, the gaffing hook clanging against a metal railing as he fought to regain his footing. Waymon spun, his eyes shooting wide as he spotted Jack.

“You just won’t stop making a nuisance of yourself, will you, Bass?” he yelled over the noise of the wind and boat. “I should’ve just overdosed you *then* thrown you over the side.”

Waymon whirled toward the control console, reaching for the gun that sat atop it. Jack had seen the gun and anticipated the move. He charged forward, swinging the long gaffing hook. Waymon grabbed the pistol and swung it in Jack’s direction, but the gaffing hook smashed against the pistol and sent it flying. The gun skittered across the deck until it smacked against the bottom of a railing. Waymon’s mouth hung open, and his gaze darted between Jack and the pistol.

“Yeah, Lamar, I guess you *should* have,” Jack growled.

Waymon jumped forward, grabbing the end of the gaffing hook, yanking it from Jack’s hands. The long metal pole banged to the deck between them, and Waymon dove for it. Jack sprang forward, putting both of his feet firmly atop the pole, pinning it to the deck. Waymon tugged at it a few times then gave up and stood, backing slowly away from Jack.

“Well, I guess it’s a stalemate—now what?”

“Stalemate, my ass!” Jack motioned to an empty corner of the deck area. “Move over there and kneel on the floor with your back to me.” Jack snatched up the shaft.

“No!”

“Then I’ll just have to kick the ever-loving crap out of you where you are!”

Waymon held his hands up in front of himself, palms out. “All right, Jack—no need to go postal on me!”

Once again, a large swell rolled under the boat, forcing Jack to throw a hand on the railing to steady himself. Waymon launched himself at Jack, but Jack slapped him away with the gaffing hook.

“Too many years of sitting on your ass at a desk, Lamar.”

Waymon sprang once more at Jack, but he sidestepped and twirled to deliver a crushing blow with his elbow to Waymon’s flank, driving him to his hands and knees.

“I, on the other hand, have had years of self-defense training in the Army and have stayed in shape.” Jack waved him forward with both hands. “C’mon—jump at me again. I can keep this up all day. Your kidneys are going to get really sore, though.”

Waymon crouched, backing against the pilot’s control panel, his lips trembling. “Why are you doing all this, Jack?” he yelled. “Are you trying to make up for being such a coward over in Iraq?” He stabbed a finger at Jack. “Why couldn’t you just hide in a closet here like you did over there?” He squinted at Jack and smirked. “It’s that dumb bitch nurse you got killed, isn’t it? Doing all this isn’t going to bring her back from the dead, you know!”

Jack saw red, a hot flush running over his whole body. He leaped toward Waymon, cupping a hand and smashing it against one of Waymon’s ears. Waymon screamed, throwing both hands over the ear.

“Her name was Major Lori Darden!” Jack yelled, his eyes bulging, spittle flying from his lips. “And if you bad-mouth her again, I’ll throw your ass over the side of this boat with an anchor around your neck!” Jack shoved Waymon down, pinning him to the deck with a knee, then leaned down, putting his face close to Waymon’s. “I’m also fed up with your references about me being a coward in Iraq.” He jammed a finger against Waymon’s nose, mashing it flat. “From what I’ve seen of all the bullshit you’ve been putting into research grant requests, you ought to understand that you can’t always believe everything you read.”

Jack glared at him, panting, then lifted his knee from Waymon and reached to retrieve the gaffing hook. Waymon drove both legs into Jack’s stomach then rolled and dove for the gun. Waymon scrabbled to the pistol, snatching it up and standing as he twisted toward Jack. Jack gripped the

gaffing hook like a baseball bat and swung it with all his strength. The metal pole connected with the side of Waymon's head with a rack. Waymon flew over the rear railing, landing on the deck below with a loud thud. Jack peeked over the edge of the railing. Waymon lay sprawled on the lower deck, unmoving. A crimson pool of blood was spreading on the deck beneath the large gash on the side of his head.

Jack took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I warned you, Lamar." He picked up the pistol, safed it, and tucked it in the waistband at the small of his back. He slumped to the deck, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a shirtsleeve, breathing heavily. After a couple of minutes, he crawled to his feet.

"No time to relax, Bass," he muttered. He had to get Waymon secured then warn Mark and Janice. Then somehow, he had to get the boat to shore. He stood on shaky legs, moving unsteadily toward the ladder, smiling when he saw a coil of mooring rope hanging on a hook next to it.

"Excellent! Just what I needed."



Jack finished wrapping the last few loops of rope around Waymon's chest, cinching them so tightly that Waymon grunted. Jack didn't know what he'd told Waymon when Waymon had drugged him. He needed to call Janice and warn her that Frigman might be after her. Jack just hoped he wasn't too late. Jack's gaze shot to the cockpit helm station. *Can I get a call patched through on the ship-to-shore radio?* He'd need to rouse Waymon...get his assistance. Jack looked around the cabin, quickly spotting a refrigerator. He stepped to it and yanked it open, smiling when he saw a bottle of water. He snatched it up, unscrewed the lid, and splashed water onto Waymon's face.

"Time to wake up, Lamar."

Waymon's eyelids fluttered. Jack slapped his face again. After a few seconds, Waymon's eyes crept open. Immediately, he began struggling against the ropes.

"Untie me, Bass!"

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, *sure*—just like you did for me when the shoe was on the other foot." Jack pointed at the radio. "I need you to tell me how to work the ship-to-shore radio. I want to patch through for a phone call."

Waymon remained silent for a few seconds, his gaze searching Jack's face. "What makes you think I'll cooperate?"

Jack reached behind his back and pulled the gun from his waistband.

"I don't have time to play games...and even less interest in doing so." Jack looked Waymon squarely in the eye. "You need to understand something. If you don't cooperate, I'll start using this thing on you...the first couple of rounds will be into your kneecaps. Then I work my way up." He drew the slide back and let it slam closed. "Don't cooperate and you'll be singing soprano by the time I'm done."

Waymon crossed his legs. "Bullshit! You don't have the *balls*—so save the tough-guy act!"

Jack pointed the gun at Waymon's head and fired. The bullet nicked Waymon's ear then burrowed into the deck, spraying splinters of fiberglass against the side of his head. Waymon's eyes shot wide, and he screamed. Jack dropped to his knees, straddling Waymon, then leaned down, nose pressed against Waymon's.

"You don't know shit about me!" Jack pulled his face back. "As much as I hate to say it, I've seen and done things I'd rather not have to remember." He again leaned his face closer to Waymon's. "What you need to know—right now—*this moment*, is that I'll do anything to protect the people I care about. Anything! Just like I did in Iraq."

Waymon rubbed his bleeding ear against his shoulder. "You're crazy!"

"So I've been told," Jack replied flatly. He twisted and mashed the barrel tip against Waymon's knee. "I need you to tell me how to do ship-to-shore communication. Now!"

Waymon's face blanched white, and his lips trembled, his gaze glued on Jack's face. He nodded.

"What's the matter, Lamar? Don't like being in fear for your life?" Jack turned back, waving the gun in Waymon's face. "Just imagine how poor Bev Costas felt when you and Frigman held her down and gave her a lethal narcotics overdose. Do you think she was scared...concerned about her young kids? And Dale Wallace when Frigman clubbed him to death—do you think his last thoughts about why his trying to do the right thing was going to cost his children their father?"

"D-don't do anything r-rash, Bass."

Jack laughed. "With the mood I'm in that may be difficult."

Waymon's eyebrows shot up. His lips twisted, but no words came out.

Jack drew the hammer back on the pistol then turned, again pressing it against Waymon's kneecap. "Last chance."

"Okay! I'll tell you!" In a quivering voice, he explained how to get patched through to a regular landline phone.

Jack scurried up to the flying bridge and snatched the radio handset from its hook. God, he hoped Janice was okay! Jack thumped his foot on the deck as he waited several minutes for the call to process. A phone rang, and he tightened his grip on the handset.

"Hello."

He jumped into the air and pumped his fist. "Janice! Thank God!"

"Jack! Where are you? We've been looking everywhere." She took a deep breath. "Are *you* okay?"

Jack sighed and nodded. "I'm fine...now that I know you're okay. Look, I don't have a lot of time to talk—I just needed to make sure you weren't hurt...and warn you about Frigman. I think he's on his way to your place. Don't let him near you—he's up to no good!"

"Jack, wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean as soon as you hang up, lock all your doors and close your shades. Turn off all your interior lights. Call 9-1-1. Don't open the door for anyone until the city police arrive." He paused a few seconds. "Do you have a gun?"

"Yes, my husband had one."

"Know how to use it?"

"Y-yes. He taught me."

"You got bullets for it?"

"I think so..."

"Good—get it, load it, and keep it with you at all times. If Frigman gets in your house somehow, shoot first and ask questions later. Give him any benefit of the doubt and you'll be dead!" He sighed. "If that happened...I-I could never forgive myself."

"I'll take care of myself," she said firmly. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me. Talk to you later."

"Jack—"

He disconnected then hurriedly called Mark Quinn. Jack paced the deck as he waited for the call to go through. "C'mon, *c'mon!*"

A phone started to ring.

"H-hello?" Mark answered.

"Mark! Are you okay? Where are you?"

"Dr. Bass?"

"Yeah. *Are you okay?*"

"Yeah—I'm fine. We've been scared to death about you, though! Chief *Wiggam* told us you were dead. Where the heck are you?"

"Let me talk to him," a man in the background said. There was rustling on the line. "Jack, it's Wes. You all right?"

"Yeah, I am now—rotten bastards damn near killed me, though!" He paused a few seconds. "Glad you're in town."

"Just got in. After Mr. Quinn called me yesterday about you disappearing, I figured it was time to get down here. I'm in a car now with him and Dr. Carrel."

“Great! I’m out on the ocean somewhere—not a clue where. Lamar Waymon is on board with me.”

“Is he...subdued?”

“Yes. He’s trussed up like a rodeo steer.”

“Good man, Jack! Frigman just told us about their plans for you on that boat ride. Are you safe now?”

Jack snorted. “Safe? I don’t know about that...but I’m still alive.”

“I swear, Jack, the spots you get into...and *out* of!”

“You and Mark both said Frigman told you stuff. Where is the fat bastard?”

Wes laughed. “He’d tried to trick Mark into giving him the evidence Mark found the night of the lab murders—then tried to kill Mark. Mr. Quinn and Dr. Carrel kicked his ass. I’ll give you the details later.”

“Mark and Misty are okay?”

“Yep, and Frigman spilled his guts—I know all about what he’s been up to. Right now, he’s headed to a jail cell.” Wes snorted. “Dumbass thinks he’s going to get a plea deal because he’s a cop.”

“I need you to check on somebody right away. Her name is Janice Dwyer.”

“Tell me about her. Who is she? How’s she involved?”

“She’s a nurse who works in the OR with me. I-I’ve been seeing her some after work.”

“Good, Jack! I’m glad to hear you’re getting back out there...after Lori, I mean.”

“Yeah...we can talk about that later, too. Anyway, she helped me figure this mess out and knows most of the details—even some from before I started working at the medical center. I think Frigman was planning on killing her. I just talked to her, and she’s okay, but she could still be at risk. I’m worried there may be conspirators we don’t know about who are involved in this ploy.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know—not even sure there is anyone else. I’m just worried about her. I told her to call 9-1-1, but if I give you her number, would you give her a call—reassure her?”

“Sure, Jack, will do. Right now, we’re on our way down to some marina that Frigman told us about. Gulf Coastal Marina is the name of it. It’s apparently where that boat you’re on has a berth. Think you can get the boat back there?”

“Not on my own, and I may have a hard time convincing Waymon to help me. It could be a while before I get there.”

“All right. Want us to bring Janice down with us?”

“Hell, yes! That’d be great. I’d feel a hell of a lot better if I knew she was with you. I gotta go. Bye.” Jack hung the radio set in its bracket and stood. *I’ve got things to take care of.*





Jack moved down to the main cabin where he'd left Waymon, taken aback when he slid open the door. Waymon had managed to wriggle his way over to just inside the sliding glass door Jack was entering. He lay on his back on the floor, his arms behind him, glaring up at Jack.

"Untie me, Bass!" He pushed himself up the rear bulkhead, leaning against it.

Jack stepped over Waymon and then turned. Hands on his hips, Jack stared down at Waymon.

"Your little gig is up, Lamar. I just talked to folks on shore—they have Frigman in custody." He leaned down. "You need to help me get this boat back to shore so you can join him in jail."

"He won't be able to help you with that, Jack," a man's voice came from behind Jack.

He jumped and spun, his gaze shooting wide.

Dick Olgent crouched at the bottom of steps leading down to a lower front berth, pointing a pistol at Jack's head.

"I'm the only one here who knows how to navigate." He waved his pistol at Jack. "I saw that pistol tucked in your waistband. You need to take it out—slowly—and drop it."

Waymon jumped to his feet behind Jack, snatching the pistol from where Jack had it tucked. "I got it, Dick!" He peered around Jack at Olgent. "Can I shoot him now?"

Olgent laughed. "You'll get your chance, Lamar." He stepped up into the cabin and wagged the gun at Jack. "Get your hands up, Jack."

Jack slowly raised his hands. "H-how?"

Olgent snorted, shaking his head. "I go down to take a little nap while Lamar takes the boat out, and he lets things go to hell." He looked around Jack at Waymon. "Can't say I'm surprised. When I woke up and came up here and found him tied up, you can imagine my surprise. Of course, I had to cut my partner loose."

Jack's mouth fell open. "Y-you're in on this?"

Olgent laughed. "Of course, I am!" He stuck his chin in the air. "I'm the one who actually got it organized into something profitable." He wagged a hand casually at Waymon. "Lamar had a basic idea, but he was terrible at implementing it."

"Screw you, Dick!" Waymon called back.

Olgent rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah...whatever." He pointed a finger at the ceiling. "Why don't you go up and get the boat turned around while I get Jack...situated."

Waymon grumbled under his breath and left the cabin. His footfalls soon sounded from above.

"Now what?" Jack asked.

Olgent gave Jack a deadpan look. "Why, we take you back out and finish the job Lamar screwed up. What else did you think would happen, Jack?"

Jack took a step toward Olgent. "You clowns are not going to get away with this!"

"Ah, Jack, Jack, Jack—the big Army colonel still trying to be in command up to the very end, eh?" Olgent stated, taking a step back. "I really am sorry it's come to this. You couldn't just let a sleeping dog lie, could you? No, you had to keep digging...stirring things up until you gave us no choice."

Jack stepped forward again, and Olgent cocked the gun.

"One more step and I shoot you...and I'd really rather not. I detest violence."

"Not enough to save Bev Costas and Dale Wallace, though," Jack snarled.

“Unfortunate but...” Olgent shrugged. “Just collateral damage.” He pointed the gun at the couch. “Now, get over there and sit down...and shut up.”

Olgent sat in the helm seat and twisted it to face Jack. Olgent remained silent for a few seconds, his elbows resting on his knees.

“You know, Jack, I actually like you.” He grunted. “I even think you’re much better at running your department than Waymon ever was. The people in your department, as well as those in the OR, really seemed to like and respect you. Hell, even the surgeons liked you!” He blew out a long breath. “Unfortunately, that’s not why we hired you.”

Jack glared at Olgent, arching an eyebrow and cocking his head. “What the hell are you talking about, Dick? Waymon said something like that, too. Why *did* you hire me if it wasn’t to run a department well?”

“I don’t know what that psycho told you, but when the board forced me to replace Lamar, he and I felt we needed somebody who would just follow directions—without asking questions.” He snickered. “Kinda like in the Army, Jack.” Olgent nodded toward Jack. “We thought you were that person. We thought with your disreputable Army record in Iraq that you’d be that nice little patsy we were looking for.” He leaned back on the couch and shrugged. “Needless to say, all your interfering has shown us we were wrong.”

“What the—my Army record from Iraq? What did you hear—and from who?”

“Frigman may be a jackass, but he does have a few useful talents—you know—background checks, security concerns, and all that stuff. He got access to your Army records and found some *very* interesting tidbits regarding your history when you were over in Iraq.” Olgent hung his arms up on the back of the chair, lounging against the cushion. “Frankly, as I’ve gotten to know you, I’m surprised you were so cowardly over there.”

“*What?* What are you talking about?” Jack growled, warmth flushing up his neck onto his face.

“I’m talking about how the Army said you acted under dire circumstances. I mean, *really*, Jack—hiding in a closet while your staff were killed all around you. What kind of leadership is that?” He snorted. “Then the rescue squad finds you crying like a baby, holding some nurse you got killed.”

Olgent’s casual reference to Lori as “some nurse” made Jack’s blood boil. Images of her brains trickling down his arm when she was shot flashed through his mind. “You don’t know *squat* about what really happened over there!” he shouted.

Olgent jabbed a finger at Jack. “And as if that wasn’t enough, they had to commit you to an insane asylum when you got back to the States. C’mon, Jack...how could we *not* think you’d be a perfect lackey?” He chortled.

Jack’s thoughts flashed back to Iraq. Back to the intense hatred that had swelled within him when Lori was killed and her corpse abused. Back to the immense emptiness in his soul that had followed. He fought to suppress the painful memories, not wanting to reopen the ragged wound her death had torn in his psyche.

“What do you mean, ‘lackey’? Lackey for what?”

A particularly large swell slapped the boat broadside, pitching the deck violently, throwing Olgent from the tall chair he was perched on. Olgent wind-milled his arms wildly as he fought to regain his balance. Jack burst from the couch, vaulting toward Olgent. He grabbed the back of Olgent’s shirt, spinning him and throwing him to the floor. The gun flew from Olgent’s hand and slid across the deck. Another swell smashed against the hull, and Jack stumbled. Olgent raised his legs and rammed a powerful kick to Jack’s knees. Jack felt like a human pinball as the buffeting waves and kicks tossed him about.

His gaze shot around the cabin in a frantic search for the gun. His back turned to Olgent, Jack was staggered by the blow Olgent delivered to the back of one of Jack's knees. Jack fell forward, his head banging against a cabinet before he ended up sprawled on the deck. The tossing of the deck worsened the spinning sensation in his head as he lay face down on the floor, stunned, struggling to regain his bearings. Olgent climbed to his feet, holding onto the helm chair.

Waymon appeared at the rear door, throwing it open. "What the hell is going on?"



“Get the gun, Lamar!” Olgent yelled.

“Where is it?”

“Somewhere over there in the corner—hurry up, dammit!”

“Screw the gun! I’ve got something else just as good.”

Jack rolled onto his back to see Waymon slinking toward him, a large syringe in his hand.

“I’ve got a little *argument settler* that will work just fine.”

Waymon snatched the cap off the needle, raised the syringe above his head, and lunged at Jack. Jack rolled to the side and scabbled to his feet. He grabbed Waymon’s coat and threw him across the cabin. Waymon’s head smashed into a wall, and he slumped to the floor. Olgent drove a shoulder into Jack’s flank, knocking him to the floor then jumping on top of him. Olgent sat on Jack’s chest, scrambling to reach something on the floor above Jack’s head. Jack twisted his neck just enough to see the gun inches from Olgent’s fingertips. Jack slithered up a few inches on the floor, reaching for the butt of the pistol. Olgent snapped it up from just beyond Jack’s fingertips.

Olgent swung the gun toward Jack’s head. Jack raised an arm, using an elbow to block Olgent’s hand that held the gun. *Damn!* He suddenly recalled something an old Army sergeant told him. Jack wrapped his raised hand around the back of Olgent’s neck. He grasped a handful of hair to hold Olgent’s head firmly then plunged the thumb of his other hand deeply into Olgent’s eye socket. When Jack felt his thumb reach a point behind the fleshy eyeball, he hooked his thumb and yanked it outward. Olgent screeched and jumped off Jack, dropping the gun as both his hands flew up to cover his eyeball dangling from its socket on a bloody strand. Jack rolled onto his side, grabbed the pistol, then jumped to his feet and spun.

Both Olgent and Waymon were lying on the floor. Waymon was still, Olgent was coiled up in a fetal position, whimpering softly, his hands cupped over his injured eye. Blood trickled between his fingers. Jack crossed the cabin and stood over Olgent.

“Dick, I’m sorry I had to do that...but you left me no choice. Why don’t you let me take a look at that eye?”

Olgent drew back from Jack and balled his body up tighter.

“Let me at least bandage it. Do you have a first-aid kit somewhere?”

Olgent moaned then held out a shaky finger, pointing at a blue first-aid box hanging on the opposite cabin wall.

After a few minutes, Jack finished securing a bandage over the bloody eye socket from which Olgent’s eyeball hung by a few threads of pinkish tissue. Jack didn’t want to listen to Olgent’s continued sobbing, so he threw a coil of rope around Waymon’s wrists then made his way up to the flying bridge. He walked to the helm, twisted the keys to cut off the engines, then flopped onto a bench. He took a deep breath and soon fell into a slumber.



Jack awoke with a start and bolted upright, his gaze shooting to his watch. *Damn! How did I let myself do that!* He scrambled down the ladder to the main cabin. Olgent was still whimpering on the floor, and Waymon was still out cold. He collected the syringe that Waymon had held, found the cap, and put it on the needle. He shoved it in a pocket then found a pen and a small notepad in the helm glove box. He then stood over Waymon, using a foot to roll him onto his back before kneeling next to him and patting his face.

“Wake up, Lamar.”

Waymon’s eyes fluttered open, and he scowled at Jack.

“Lamar, it’s time for you to fess up to everything. I can’t remember all the details because I was drugged when you were bragging to me before.” Jack nudged him. “Here’s your big chance to regale me again with your schmuckery...and don’t forget the part about you murdering those lab techs. Then trying to frame me for it—then trying to kill *me!*” Jack stood and poked a finger down at Waymon. “You’re going to talk—I’m going to write it down. Then you’re going to sign your confession.”

Waymon snorted and rolled his eyes. “Just what is it you really want, Bass? You want in on our action?”

Jack snorted. “I want to make sure you pay for all the suffering you’ve caused—the deaths of innocent people, the destroyed lives of others, patients who still suffer because you stole the research money that might have helped them... Shall I go on?”

“Screw off, Bass!” Waymon waved an arm at Jack, as if shooing away a fly. “I was just making sure I got what I was owed.”

Jack smiled devilishly. “Oh, you’re going to get what you deserve, all right—”

“Lamar, he’s not screwing around!” Olgent muttered, pointing at the bandage on his eye and the wound on his ear. He hung his head. “It’s over.” He raised his head and glared at Waymon. “And you’re not going to blow any chance I have for a plea deal because you can’t control your temper...or your mouth. You’ve always had a problem with shooting off your mouth, you know.”

“You can screw off, too, Dick! You goddam turncoat!”

Olgent shrugged as he looked at Jack. “I tried, Jack. Just remember that.”

Jack waved the gun in Olgent’s direction. “Get over there by your buddy, Waymon.”

“Make me!” Waymon replied defiantly.

“Oh, crap!” Olgent said as he hunched his head.

Jack fired a round. It ripped into the floor near Waymon’s feet, and he off the ground. His gaze snapped from the jagged bullet hole in the floor to Jack.

“Bass, you crazy bastard! You’ll sink the fucking boat!”

“I don’t care, Lamar—as long as you go down with it.”

“You’d better do what he says, Lamar,” Olgent piped up, pointing again to his injured ear.

Waymon looked like a nervous chicken, his head snapping back-and-forth between Olgent and Jack.

“Next one’s in you, Lamar,” Jack stated. Jack was fed up of all of the games. His patience was gone.

“All right, all right!” He moved slowly toward Olgent, crossing his skinny arms across his chest when he reached Olgent’s side. “You’re going to pay to fix that hole.”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “You truly are a whack-job, Lamar.”

Jack moved cautiously to the medicine cabinet to retrieve the roll of bandage tape he'd used earlier. He grabbed it and turned to Waymon.

“Okay, Lamar, turn around slowly.”

Waymon turned, a grimace distorting his face.

“I'm going to roll this tape on the floor to you—pick it up and give it to Dick. Dick, when he hands it to you, I want you to wrap it tightly around his wrists then his ankles. Tightly!”

Jack sent the tape rolling toward Waymon's feet. Waymon gave Jack a dirty look then bent to retrieve it. He flipped it to Olgent, who fumbled to catch it.

“Here, take it...traitor.”

Waymon glared at Jack as Olgent secured his wrists.

“Nice and snug, Dick,” Jack said.

Olgent halted, briefly glancing at Jack then pulling the tape tighter. Olgent finished then looked expectantly at Jack.

“Your turn, Dick. Turn your back toward me.”

Jack waited for Olgent to turn away then vaulted across the cabin. He snatched the tape from Olgent and fastened his hands behind his back. Jack grabbed Waymon's shoulder and shoved him to the ground. He wrapped the remainder of the tape tightly around Waymon's legs then fastened the last piece over his mouth. Jack took a deep breath before tucking the gun into his waistband. He stood over Waymon.

“Lamar, we can do this the easy way...or something not so easy—I don't care either way.” Jack leaned down and ripped the tape from Waymon's mouth.





“Ouch! You prick—that hurt,” Lamar blurted. “I wish we’d never hired you, Jack—you’ve messed up everything! We had a perfect plan and it was going just fine...until you came along.”

“I didn’t ask to get dragged into your screwed-up little scheme...and I’ll bet the people you killed would say the same thing. Now, talk! Start at the beginning and don’t leave out any details.” He pulled out the pen and pad.

Waymon laughed. “You just don’t get it, Jack—it’s too late! By now, Frigman has taken care of your little bitch nurse friend and that medical student...and has confiscated whatever evidence that little brat found.” He cackled. “By the way, I know what he found, Jack—and it’s got your name all over it. Very incriminating,” he said then paused, struggling to a sitting position on the floor. “I think it’s *you* who needs to cooperate with Dick and I.”

Jack stared blankly at him, his mouth agape. “Lamar—”

“Bass, either cooperate, or Frigman will see to it that you never even survive until any trial!” Waymon screeched.

“I’ve got some news for you about him. I just got off the phone with my FBI friend. Frigman’s in custody—he’s not going to come and save you two clowns. He’s probably turning on you as we speak in order to save his own ass.”

“Bullshit! You’re lying!”

“Sheesh! You really are a nutjob, Lamar,” Jack said then stood. “Well, I gave you a chance to do this the easy way. Now you’re going to have the same experience Dick and you gave me earlier today. You’re going to swim with the fish—just like I did.”

Jack jerked Waymon to his feet and pushed him through the cabin door onto the aft deck. He dragged him to the fighting chair, flinging him into the seat and fastening the lap belt around him. Jack went back into the cabin and opened the bait well then smiled. There were a couple more bags of the bloody fish parts still in the well. Jack shot a quick glance at Olgent, who was keenly watching Jack’s every move. He had an opportunistic guise on his face, like a boxer waiting for his opponent to drop their hands. Jack stopped rummaging and gave Olgent a stony stare.

“Dick, I don’t have any more tape to secure you better, but I expect you’ll behave yourself. You will—right?” Jack asked, patting the pistol in his waistband and tapping an ear.

Olgent went pale, gave just a hint of a nod, and turned away. Jack returned to the rear deck, stood at the railing in front of Waymon, then dumped the contents of the chum bag into the water. He peered down into the clear gulf waters for a few minutes, grinning at the sight of several dark shadows emerging from the depths. He turned to face Waymon and leaned back against the railing.

He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Looks like our dinner guests are starting to arrive. I think it’s about time for you to share the experience I had earlier today.” He jabbed a finger at Waymon. “Unless you start talking.”

“Suck an egg, Bass. You don’t have the balls.”

Jack stepped to Waymon and yanked him from the chair, bending him over the railing so Waymon could view the growing number of swimming predators gathering near the boat. The water roiled as various types and sizes of fish fought over the morsels, all quickly parting when a large shark made its way through the center of the group.

“Wow, Lamar, look at the size of that one!”

Waymon made no sound, but his eyes grew wide.

“Man! What a horrible way to go—ripped apart, bit by bit, by a bunch of damn fish.” Jack shook his head then twisted Lamar back toward him, their faces inches apart. Jack stared directly into Waymon’s eyes.

“Ready to confess, Lamar, or would you rather go for a swim with them?” Jack asked, his hands on his hips as he gave Waymon a deadpan gaze.

Waymon shook his head violently.

Jack sighed. “Have it your way then.”

He threw Waymon back into the deck chair and secured him with the lap belt. Jack walked over to a hoist for large game fish that was located at a rear corner of the deck. He unlatched the winch and unreeled a length of steel cable. He kneeled and threaded it through the tape wrapped around Waymon’s ankles, and the bound man flailed wildly.

“You’re only delaying the inevitable, Lamar...unless you decide to cooperate.”

“Screw you!”

Jack shrugged then secured the cable hook and walked over to the winch control handset. He pressed the button to raise it, holding it long enough for Waymon’s ankles to be lifted a few inches off the deck.

“Change your mind yet?”

“Like I said, you don’t have the balls, Bass!” Waymon replied. “I heard all about what a coward you were in Iraq.” Waymon threw his head back and chortled. “Sheesh! What a chickenshit!” Waymon then spat a large glob of mucus on Jack.

Jack had dealt with enough belligerent drunks in emergency rooms to have been spat on before. Since being bound and spat upon while being forced to watch what had been done to Lori’s corpse in Iraq, though, he’d developed an extreme aversion to it. His guts twisted, and his pulse pounded in his head. He balled his fists so tight they hurt. His mind was descending into the dark mental crevasse of a bad PTSD episode, abruptly morphing into an emotionless robot.

Waymon stopped laughing and stared, alarm growing on his face as he watched Jack Jack hit the button on the winch again then turned to watch as Waymon was lifted several feet in the air. He flopped around on the end of the cable like a large fish.

“What the hell are you doing, you crazy bastard? Put me down!” Waymon ranted.

Jack said nothing. He swung the boom over the side of the boat, leaving Waymon hanging above the water. Several large shadows were circling beneath him as Waymon gawked down at them, spinning slowly on the cable like a big crystal ball on a dancefloor ceiling. The dorsal fins of large sharks occasionally pierced the water’s surface just under Waymon.

“You shouldn’t have spat on me, Lamar. I have no tolerance left for your antics,” J, hearing the words as if they were uttered by someone else...someone who didn’t care...someone who’d thrown in the towel on life.

“Bass, quit screwing around and put me back on the boat. Then we can talk. You can tell me what you really want. Money? The department chair? No problem—just get me down!”

Jack remained silent, staring blankly into space for several minutes before speaking in a flat, somber tone.

“You know, Lamar, I saw—and did—some terrible things over in Iraq that no person, certainly no doctor, would ever expect to be faced with.” He averted his gaze to the deck, shaking his head. “I lost my soul from that experience.”

He turned his gaze to Lamar.

“And you know what—when I’m faced with a similar situation now, much as I hate to say it, I feel almost...*compelled* to take action just like I did in Iraq. It’s like I can’t quite control myself...”

“Blah, blah, blah—you really are nuts, Bass!”

“Maybe. It’s scary, even to me, to know I can get like this. I don’t like realizing what I’ve done sometimes after I snap out of it.”

Jack pressed the winch button to lower Waymon, letting it jerk to a stop every few inches. When Waymon was a couple feet above the surface, Jack threw more chum into the water. The water soon churned like a boiling cauldron, hungry predators fighting over the scraps. A shark broke the surface, its large, tooth-filled mouth opened wide as it lunged up at Waymon. He bent up at the waist, fighting to stay out of reach of the gaping maw.

“Y-you can’t get away with this, Bass! If you drop me in the water...it’s...it’s murder!”

“I guess you would know all about murder, wouldn’t you?” Jack held up the winch control box. “Talk or I dunk you!”

“Piss off, Bass! Get me down!”

“I’ll let you down, all right.”

Jack lowered Waymon in short, jerky increments. Waymon bobbed and bounced on the line like some crazy marionette. Suddenly, a large shark leaped from the water. Waymon barely dodged the snap of razor-edged teeth. The shark brushed Waymon’s shoulder as it fell back into the water, sending him into an even wilder spin on the end of the cable.

“Okay! You win—I’ll tell you whatever you want to hear—just get me out of here!” Waymon struggled, frantically attempting to keep himself in a position where he could watch the predators and stay out of their reach.

“Just to be clear,” Jack stated, “if you try anything, and I mean *anything*, you’ll be right back where you are now—and next time, you *will* go into the water.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. C’mon, hurry up! I can see a big one coming back!”

Jack waited several seconds. He doubted he could trust Waymon but... Jack raised him and swung him back onto the boat. After lowering Waymon to the deck, Jack stood astride Waymon, looking down at him, still doubting the man was going to cooperate.

“All right, Lamar, let me get a pad and pen.” Jack *had* to hear this. Had to know first-hand that someone else had murdered the lab techs. Self-doubt had encroached on his mind about this ever since Mark had told Jack that he’d found Jack’s name tag at the murder scene. He needed to have proof that he wasn’t insane, wasn’t a murderer...just suffered from severe PTSD.



Waymon flopped onto his back and glared up at Jack. “I’m not going to tell you anything until you untie me!”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Lamar, you know I can’t do that. I just can’t trust you—”

“Then I’m not going to tell you anything!” Waymon blurted, jutting his jaw.

Jack hesitated for a few seconds then reached behind his back and pulled the gun out of his waistband, showing it to Lamar.

“Just keep something in mind. Whether I feed you to the fish dead or alive is irrelevant to me.”

“Yeah, I get it. Now get this fucking tape off me!”

Jack held the gun on Waymon and started stripping the tape from his body. Jack paused before removing the final few strips of tape that secured Waymon’s arms. Jack pointed the gun at Waymon’s face.

“Roll over onto your stomach.” Jack ripped off the last few pieces of tape then hopped up and backed several feet away. “Okay...get up—slowly. Then we’ll go into the cabin so I can write down everything.”

Waymon stood, turning to face Jack, staring at the gun pointed at Waymon’s chest. Jack motioned with the gun at the cabin door.

“Let’s go.”

As they entered the boat cabin, Olgent spun on the helm chair to face them, an inquisitive look on his face. Jack looked in his direction.

“Just turn back around, Dick. There’s nothing for you to see,” Jack muttered.

Olgent exchanged a quick glance with Waymon then slowly turned his seat to face away from the other men. Jack pointed the gun at the couch against the cabin wall.

“You sit over there, Lamar. I’m going to sit at the dining table.”

Waymon shuffled to the far side of the cabin, spinning and plopping melodramatically onto the couch. Jack took a seat at the dining table, carefully setting the gun on the tabletop. He arranged the pad in front of himself then waved his hand at Waymon.

“Go. Tell me everything you told me earlier—before you drugged me.”

Olgent intermittently stole quick glances over his shoulder as Waymon talked, wincing several times at some of the gruesome details.

“Lamar, you talk about multiple murders and embezzlement as if you’re describing a medical experiment...you do realize what you’re confessing to, don’t you?” Olgent asked with incredulity.

Jack spun to glare at Olgent. “What’s the matter, Dick—don’t like hearing the details of your little enterprise? No doubt, you preferred to just stay insulated from the truth while you sat in your ivory tower and let your goons do your dirty work.”

Olgent turned his gaze to the ground and rotated away without responding.

“Are you going to listen to me or not, Bass? Waymon asked. I don’t like being interrupted.” He gave Olgent a dirty look. “You, too, Dick—don’t interrupt me.”

Jack let his mouth hang open as he stared at Waymon. Could this guy really be this vain...this arrogant? This heartless? “You really are a pill, Lamar! Can’t wait to get on with bragging about your deeds, eh? Please—continue.”

When Waymon got to the part of his story about the night he hacked the two lab techs to pieces, Olgent again cringed, eventually covering his ears with his hands.

“Then, after we killed you and Quinn, we’d be back to business as usual,” Waymon finished then scowled at Jack. “There—is that what you wanted to hear, Bass? You know, it doesn’t matter what I tell you—you’re not going to survive, anyway.”

Jack finished writing, set the pen down on the pad, and gazed at Waymon for a couple of minutes. Lamar was truly insane. Driven to horrible deeds by his greed. Jack just couldn’t wrap his head around that mindset. “I am amazed at your ability to deny reality, Lamar. You should be a White House press secretary.”

Waymon snorted. “Whatever! Anything else?”

“No—I think that ought to just about do it.” Jack picked up the gun and stood. “Now it’s time for you to sign this before I secure you again. Just stay where you are—I’m going to come over there and put some of that tape back around your legs before I give you the pen.”

Waymon jutted his chin defiantly, scowling at Jack.

“For all the good it will do you...”

Jack picked up a couple of smaller pieces of tape from the floor near Waymon. They were tangled, but he thought they’d hold until he was able to retrieve more from the aft deck.

“Hold your ankles out, Lamar.”

Jack wrapped a couple of strands around Waymon’s feet. *Hmm...not too good. It will have to do, though.* Jack stood and put the gun in Waymon’s face. “Just sit here like a good little boy while I go get more tape.”

Waymon sneered at him. Jack went out and gathered several more pieces of tape from the deck then re-entered the cabin. The sea had gotten rougher while they had been drifting, large swells tossing the boat back and forth. The unpredictable bucking of the ship caused Jack to stagger like a drunk, shuffling unsteadily across the cabin toward Waymon. Olgent merely looked on aloofly as he watched Jack struggling to maintain his balance. Waymon looked like a vulture sitting on a branch, waiting for roadkill to take its last breath.





Jack lost his balance as a big wave smashed against the side of the boat. His arms flailed, and his hand smacked against the doorframe, knocking the gun from his grasp. Waymon vaulted from the couch and drove his shoulder into Jack's stomach, knocking him back out the door. Jack sprawled on the deck, watching Waymon. He stood in the open door, tearing the strands of tape from his ankles. Jack rolled and scrambled to his knees. Waymon kicked him in the ass, sending Jack sliding across the wet deck. His head smacked up against the gunwale. He rolled over, pushing himself up against the wall.

Waymon dug in a pocket and pulled out a large syringe, quickly uncapping the needle. "Always carry a spare." He stepped toward Jack, a maniacal grin on his face. "I told you that you'd never survive!"

Waymon stepped closer, raising the syringe above his head like a dagger, ready to plunge it into Jack. When Waymon drew his arm back, Jack shot out a foot, kicking Waymon in the knee. He screamed and dropped the syringe, grasping his knee with both hands. Jack dove across the deck and snatched up the syringe. His gaze flashed between it and Waymon.

"What kind of crazy concoction is this, Lamar?" Jack rose and stepped menacingly toward him. "Let's find out what it does to *you*."

Waymon flailed his arms at Jack, trying to ward him off. Jack shot out a hand and slapped Waymon across the face. He stumbled backward, scrambling around the deck to get away from Jack's onslaught.

"I'll bet you're a little surprised right about now, aren't you, Lamar? You probably actually believed everything you heard about my Army experience."

"Because it's true!"

Jack mimicked a gameshow buzzer. "Ehh. Wrong answer, Lamar! Want to see what's behind door number two? Like so many assholes, you like to call others what *you* really are—a sniveling little coward."

"You're nuts, Bass!"

"Only when some schmuck makes me that way, Lamar. And I'll bet you think you should be above being treated you like this, don't you?" Jack jumped forward and slapped him across the face again.

Waymon whimpered and turned away.

"I know how you're feeling—the loathing you feel when someone is bullying and torturing you...the sense of helplessness. Not fun, is it? I know that feeling—and I *hate* it! And you've made me feel that way in spades on this boat." He grabbed Waymon and threw him to the floor then pinned him there with a knee on his chest. "My whole life I've been made to feel that way by one bully or another, including my own father." He poked his finger in Waymon's chest. "No more!" Jack roared. "I've had it with all of you bullies!"

"Get off me, Bass!"

Jack grabbed Waymon's arm and jumped up, yanking him back to his feet. Waymon's face was red, tears welling in his eyes.

"What are you going to do?" he asked in a demanding but jittery voice.

Jack did not respond. He dragged Waymon to the fishing chair and tossed him into it. Jack bent, putting his face close to Waymon's.

“You had that thug Frigman do your dirty work...unless it was something *pitiful* like attacking innocent, defenseless women, eh, Lamar? But when you can’t give somebody a sucker punch or stick some goddam syringe into them from behind, you’re not so brave, are you?”

Jack locked gazes with Waymon for several seconds then stood, looking at the syringe he held.

“You seem to enjoy sticking this thing in people—let’s see how you like it.”

Jack pinned him to the seat with a forearm across his chest then slid the needle into Waymon’s neck. Waymon thrashed and wailed as Jack probed Waymon’s neck with the needle, finally locating the jugular vein.

“Ah—bullseye,” he said as a flash of blood appeared in the hub of the syringe. “On with the test!” Jack injected the contents of the syringe slowly.

“Screw you! I’ll never let you do anything to me, you assshhooollle,” Waymon screamed.

He kned Jack in the stomach, and Jack lost his footing on the wet deck, stumbling backward against the railing.

Waymon bolted from the chair, his legs already wobbly from the drug. His eyelids were fluttering. He staggered toward Jack, flailing his arms before him, punching out at Jack. Waymon dove at Jack, but he hopped aside, and Waymon fell onto the railing, grappling clumsily at it as he teetered. Jack spun back toward him just as Waymon toppled in slow motion over the banister. Waymon hit the water before Jack could even react. He rushed to the railing.

“Stop splashing around, Lamar—you’re going to attract a shark!”

Waymon slapped at the surface of the water as he struggled to stay above the surface. “Sshhcrew offff, Basshhh.”

“Stop flapping like that, dammit! Just hold on a second, and I’ll toss you a life ring.”

Jack grabbed a nearby life ring from its rack and vaulted back to the rail. He tossed it onto the water near Waymon.

“Grab that and I’ll pull you in!”

Waymon responded by holding up his middle finger at Jack. A large shark broke the surface, grabbing Waymon’s upraised arm in its large mouth rimmed with dagger-like teeth. Waymon shrieked as the shark jerked its head back and forth until it tore his arm from his body then disappeared beneath the surface of the crimson-stained water.

A couple more sharks joined in, each ripping pieces of flesh from their prey. Jack spun from the railing, cringing. The shrieking continued for only a few more seconds. Jack gazed at the syringe still in his hand then threw it over his shoulder into the water.

“Here ya go, Lamar. Maybe your little ‘argument settler’ will help you out.”



Jack shuffled toward the cabin. *What a waste! Lamar died unnecessarily because of his greed...I just don't get it.* Jack shook his head. He tugged open the cabin door, stopping in the doorway. Olgent was bending over the pistol on the floor, reaching down for it.

Jack gave a little laugh. "Well, well, well, Dick. You just never give up, do you?"

Olgent paused, still bent over. He turned his face to Jack then back to the gun.

"And, no, you won't be able to grab it, point it, and shoot me before I get to you."

Olgent's gaze darted back-and-forth between Jack and the gun.

"You've only got one eye left, Dick—you want to risk losing that one, too?" Jack growled tiredly.

"So, cut the crap—you're getting on my last nerve!"

Olgent's shoulders slumped, and he hung his head, resting his chin on his chest.

"Get back on your perch," Jack said.

Olgent shuffled to the chair and slid onto it. Jack retrieved the gun and put it in his waistband then sat on the couch, staring silently at Olgent for several seconds.

"I need your help with something. You help me and maybe I can put in a good word for you."

Olgent's head snapped up, his eyebrows arching. He regarded Jack a few seconds then nodded.

"That's good, Dick."

Jack pulled the gun from his waistband and set it on his lap with a somewhat exaggerated motion, smiling when Olgent's gaze locked onto the weapon. "I hope I don't have to use this, but if you don't cooperate...well." Jack leaned forward and glared at Olgent. "Do you *believe* I'll use it, Dick?" he snarled.

Beads of perspiration covered Olgent's forehead, the color draining from his face. He nodded.

"Good. I need you to help me get this boat back to that marina."

Olgent scowled and he shook his head hard. "You told Waymon you talked to your friends—my guess is that they're waiting with the cops at the marina." He jutted his chin and glared at Jack. "No deal. You said you'd let me go."

"I never said I'd let you go! I said I'd put in a good word...if you help me."

"Nope. I'll help you get the boat to shore...somewhere else."

"That's an unfortunate choice, Dick." Jack drew the pistol, pulling the slide back slightly then letting it slam closed with a metallic clank. He slowly raised the gun and sighted down the barrel at Olgent's head. "Good-bye...and good riddance."

"Wait a minute, Jack!" Olgent held out his hands and twisted his head away. "Don't do anything rash!" He slowly turned his face back toward Jack, peeking sideways out of his remaining eye. "All right...I'll help get the boat back to the marina!"

"Good. No more games, eh? I really don't like being forced into actions like this—like you said about yourself, I find violence very distasteful." He lowered the gun.

Jack stared at him a few seconds. "And while we're on the subject of me doing something I find distasteful, let me set the record straight for you about my time in Iraq. In order to save the lives of my staff, I was forced to kill several enemy troops—hand-to-hand, face-to-face combat. The only reason you saw what you did in my Army personnel record is because some Army PR desk jockey in Washington decided they didn't want to risk bad press about an Army doctor killing people." He shook his head. "Even if they were enemy combatants and had killed some of my staff. So, *please* spare me any more bullshit about me being a coward."

Olgent stared blankly at Jack then shrugged. “Whatever...I really don’t care at this point.”

Jack vaulted from the couch toward Olgent. “Well, *I* care!” he yelled. “So, don’t ever let me hear you say another word about me being a coward!” Jack glared at Olgent, his chest heaving. He blew out a long breath and shook his whole body. He needed to calm down and get ashore. He just wanted to make certain Janice was safe. Wanted to hold her in his arms. He spun the helm seat so Olgent was facing the bow then backed slowly toward some bench seats, raising a couple of them and peering into the underlying storage spaces as he kept the gun trained on Olgent. In the third stow space he found what he was looking for. He extracted a coil of mooring rope.

He pulled it out and walked over to Olgent, handing him one end of the line. “Hold this.”

Olgent arched an eyebrow as his gaze shot from the rope to Jack, then he shrugged and held the end. Jack spun the chair around several times, wrapping the cord around Olgent and the seat backrest. He snatched the end Olgent had been holding and tied it snugly.

“Not that I don’t trust you, Dick.” He smirked. “But I don’t trust you.”

Jack stepped to the helm control panel, looking over all the gauges and levers.

“What do I do first?”

Olgent sighed. He didn’t respond for several seconds. Finally, he shrugged. “First, turn on the blowers in the engine compartment,” he said in a pouty tone, nodding at the helm dash. “It’s that red switch on the right labeled *blowers*.”

Jack went through the startup routine as Olgent instructed and soon had the boat crawling slowly over the long, sloping swells.

“How do I steer this barge back to the marina?”

“You don’t need to—I have the coordinates programmed into the autopilot,” Olgent replied. “If you scroll through the destination choices on the screen of the autopilot there”—he nodded at a digital display on the dash—“you’ll see *berth* as one of the choices. Just scroll to it and press the select button.”

Jack engaged the autopilot, and the large boat soon picked up speed, cutting through the water. Comfortable that all was working as it should be, Jack leaned an elbow on the dash and gazed at Olgent.

“Amazing what you can buy with all the research money you’ve stolen. I guess you put it to better use than those silly researchers who might have saved some lives, eh?” Jack stated. “But as long as you’ve got your cool little toys, that’s all that matters, right?”



After resting briefly, Jack climbed up to the flying bridge and got on the radio to call Wes. “Special Agent Watley,” Wes answered on the first ring.

“Hey, Wes—”

“Jack! Where the *hell* are you? We’ve been waiting at the marina. What’s happening? Why have you been out of touch so long?”

“Whoa, slow down, buddy—you know I can’t think that fast. I’m fine, just fine. I’m heading back to the marina now, but I have no idea where the hell I am or how long it will take to get there.” He paused. “And by the way, I guess you ought to have an ambulance there, too.”

“What? I thought you said you were okay.”

“I am, but Dick Olgent isn’t in very good shape. I’ll give you the whole lowdown when I get there. See you in a bit.”

“Who the hell is Dick Olgent?”

The president of Southern Medical Center—turns out he was the ringleader...”

“Sheesh, Jack! Your commanding officer tries to kill you back when you were in Germany, now a university president tries to kill you—I think you have a problem with authority figures,” Wes joked.

Jack laughed. “Or they’ve got a problem with me.” Fleeting memories of the many beatings he’d received at the hands of his father when Jack was a child ran through his head. As always when this occurred, his heart twisted, and the confusion he’d known as a boy recurred.

“Hey, I’ve got Janice here with me,” Wes replied. “Want to say hello?”

Jack shook the morbid thoughts away and bolted upright in the captain’s chair.

“Hell, yes!”

“Hi, Jack. Please tell me you’re okay!”

“I’m fine.” He huffed. “Why won’t anyone believe me? I’ll be better, though, when I get to wrap my arms around you. How’re you doing? That low-life Frigman didn’t try anything with you, did he?”

“No. Mr. Quinn and Dr. Carrel took care of him before he could try anything.”

“Janice...I’m so sorry for having gotten you involved in this mess. If you had been hurt, I would have never forgiven myself. I’ve already been the cause of another wonderful woman’s death and—”

“Jack—stop it already! You didn’t get me involved in anything. I did. Don’t beat yourself up so much,” she said in a consoling tone. “Hey, I gotta go. Wes is motioning that he needs the phone back. I’ll see you soon...and I’ll give you that big hug. Bye.”

Wes came back on the line. “Gotta call some other folks. See you soon. Be careful.”

Jack hung the radio handset back in its holder then leaned back in the chair, a broad smile on his face as he sprawled on a bench seat along one side of the flying bridge.

It was good to be alive. The bright sun shined down on Jack, warming not only his body but his very soul. The moist, briny breeze blowing through his hair felt especially refreshing—the sounds of the sea, the gentle swaying of the boat—as if Mother Nature was creating a symphony of pleasure for him. The soft rocking of the boat and the caressing softness of the couch on which he lay took Jack back to a fond but distant memory of being held in his mother’s arms, gently embraced against her warm bosom as she rocked him to sleep. The wonderful, relaxing memory combined with Jack’s fatigue sent him into a slumber.

THE LOUD BLAST OF AN air horn brought Jack awake . He rocketed upright on the couch. Still in a daze, he quickly scanned his surroundings, trying to regain his bearings. The Bertram was inside the breakwater of the marina and was still barreling along at speed. A second loud horn blasted from another large boat heading in the opposite direction, the pilot of the other boat shaking a fist at Jack.

“Slow down, you idiot!”

Jack waved back apologetically as he scrambled to the control console. He yanked the throttle levers to idle and disengaged the autopilot. He shot a nervous glance toward the rapidly approaching docks.

“C’mon, slow down, dammit!”

Jack’s eyes darted to the rapidly nearing wharf. *Dammit! How do I slow this pig down?* His gaze flew across the control panel as his breathing became more rapid and sweat dripped from his brow. He finally just cut the engines, his shoulders drooping as the boat began to rapidly lose momentum.

“Not very smooth, Bass,” he chided himself, quickly scanning for the correct berth among the maze of moorings jutting into the waters of the harbor.

“Screw it!” he said after fruitless searching. “I’ll just tie up at the main wharf where the fuel pumps are—I want to get off of this damn thing.”

Jack tried to steer the big cruiser in the direction of the main pier, but the boat responded sluggishly, and he soon realized he would have to restart the engines in order to steer. As he re-engaged the props, he noticed more and more people on the fueling dock start to turn toward him, watching keenly as the Bertram continued to loom closer to them. Several had concerned looks on their faces and started to back away, and others rushed off the dock, looking nervously over their shoulders as they scampered away.

Jack’s heart pounded as he fumbled clumsily with the throttles and steering, the boat jerking and lurching in response. He cringed as the big boat finally hit hard against the bumpers along the side of the dock then scraped noisily against them for several feet before bashing against the stern of another boat. Those who had been on the dock and had already made a mad scramble for safety now stood a few yards from the dock, staring wide-eyed at Jack. A man burst out of the marina building, running toward Jack as he yelled angrily and shook his fists in the air.

“I think I found the owner of the boat I just smashed into.” He cringed. “Sorry, buddy,” Jack mumbled. He cut the engines, trying to feign calm as he walked to the ladder, but his legs were still shaky.

“What the hell kind of fool trick was that, you idiot?” a man standing in the open door of the fuel hut called out. “You drunk or something?” He scurried toward the boat.

Jack waved at him. “Sorry! I’ve got an emergency on board. The real captain is injured, so I had to bring the boat in,” he called out. *Man, will I be glad to get off this thing!*

“Well, you should have called so we could have gotten you help before you got here!”

“If I knew how to do that, don’t you think I would have?” Jack roared, not interested in yet another conflict. “Now, how about you stop yelling at me and help me tie this boat off?”

“All right, but then we’re going to talk about all this damage you caused,” the marina manager replied.

“Yeah—got it. My bad,” Jack called back.

“FBI!” Wes shouted.

Jack looked around. Wes was jogging toward the boat, holding his FBI ID out in front of him, his other hand holding his handgun at his side.



Wes skidded to a stop next to the marina worker. The man gazed at Jack then his eyes shot back to Wes.

“FBI? What the hell’s going on? Do you know that moron on the boat?” The man pointed up at Jack.

“Back off!” Wes shouted. “There’s an ambulance up in front of your office building—why don’t you just go help them get the stretcher down here?”

The man remained motionless, his mouth hanging open as he turned back to Jack. He rotated and walked toward his office, grumbling and shooting occasional glances over his shoulder at Jack then shaking his head.

Wes stood on the wharf just below where Jack was looking down from the flying bridge.

“Everything under control, Jack?” he called out in a concerned voice.

Jack laughed. “Have you forgotten who you’re talking to, Wes?”

Wes snickered. “Good point. Let me rephrase. Any imminent danger?”

Jack shook his head. “Nah! It’s all good but man, am I glad to see you!” Jack replied, peering down over the edge of the bridge.

Wes holstered his weapon and moved toward a mooring line that lay nearby on the dock. “Likewise, buddy, likewise. You gave us all a hell of a scare,” he called over his shoulder.

Wes quickly threw a mooring line around a cleat on the bow, repeated the action at the aft of the boat, then hopped onto the deck. As he crossed the deck, he gawked wide-eyed at all of the blood smeared around the floor then hurried toward the ladder to the flying bridge.

“Jack, looks like a damned battlefield down here,” Wes said, arching an eyebrow as he gazed at his friend “You want to fill me in on a few things?”

Jack poked his head over the edge of the upper deck above the ladder. “Yeah, I suppose I do...but it’s a long story, and I want to get the hell off this thing first.”

Wes looked up, smiled, and shook his head. “I wouldn’t expect anything but ‘a long story’ from Jack Bass.” Wes quipped.

“I’m just happy I’m still alive to talk about it.”

Jack quickly clambered down the ladder then turned to face Wes. He stood silently for a couple of seconds, smiling broadly, then threw his arms around Wes and gave him a bear hug. “Really good to see you, buddy,” he said then released Wes and stepped back.

Wes pointed at the crimson blotches covering much of the deck. “So...what’s all this?”

Jack looked at the smeared stains on the deck. “That is a mess—not to worry, though, most of it is just fish blood, not human.”

“That’s something of a relief, but you said ‘most of it’ isn’t human blood?”

“Yeah...not exactly the circumstances I had in mind for the next time I went to sea on a fishing boat,” Jack mumbled.

“I bet not.”

Jack watched the marina worker leading two EMTs rolling a stretcher toward the boat. His eyes widened. Janice walked just behind them. Wes followed Jack’s gaze then smiled.

“Why don’t you go say hello while I get things in order here?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Jack jumped from the boat onto the wet dock, stumbling and nearly falling. Janice’s laugh reached his ears as he struggled to regain his balance. They rushed to each other, falling to the ground with their arms wrapped tightly around each other, laughing together. They came to a rest with Janice lying

on top of Jack. She sat up, straddling him, looking into his eyes. She gazed at the blood on his clothing and the bruises and small cuts on his face and arms, her eyebrows knitting.

“You *sure* you’re not hurt?”

“I wouldn’t quite say ‘not hurt’, but I’m fine—nothing but a few scrapes and bruises. It looks worse than it is.”

He reached up, placing a hand behind her neck, gently pulling her face to his, their lips meeting in a warm, wet, prolonged kiss that had more emotion behind it than any other kiss they had ever shared. When their lips parted, Janice pulled away slightly, tears streaming down her cheeks. She swiped them away with her hand.

“Jack Bass, is it *always* this crazy with you?”

He laughed as he reached up, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“Let’s *hope* not!” he said, even as flashes of Germany and Iraq flitted through the fringes of his mind. He shook them away and sat up, hugging her tightly. “We’ll have plenty of time to find out, though.”

Janice’s eyes shot wide, and a smile crept onto her face. “I was hoping you’d say something like that.”

Jack smiled and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “I should get back down to Wes now,” he whispered into her ear.

“Okay, but I’m going to keep a much closer watch on you from now on,” she joked.

“Likewise,” he replied.

They untangled themselves and stood, looking silently into each other’s eyes for several seconds. Jack slowly turned away, still holding her hand. When he finally released her, their fingertips brushing lightly, and a shiver ran up Jack’s arm.

“Don’t go anywhere—I’ll be right back,” he said over his shoulder.

“Trust me, I’m not going anywhere, big boy.”

Jack smiled as he trotted back toward the boat. Life was good again. As he neared the ship, he could see the EMTs now had Dick Olgent strapped to a stretcher, a bloody bandage covering his eye. Wes stopped them on the rear deck, placing handcuffs on Olgent’s wrists as he read him the Miranda statement. When Wes finished, he nodded at the EMTs, and they started their struggle of moving the stretcher from the boat to the dock. Jack clambered onto the boat.

“Time to tell me just what the hell went on out there, Jack. The cabin looks just as bad as this back deck.” He looked at Jack and raised his eyebrows. “Worse, if I consider the bullet holes in there.”

Jack smiled and put his arm around Wes’s shoulder, leading him into the cabin. “Come on, I’ll tell you all about it.”

Jack led Wes to the table where he’d left the notepad on which he’d earlier recorded Waymon’s confession.

Jack picked up the pad and handed it to Wes. “Waymon’s confession about the scheme he, Frigman, and Olgent had going.” Jack pointed to the bottom of the page. “Waymon even signed it.”

Wes glanced at the notepad. “But...where’s Waymon now?”

Jack described the events of the last couple of days and what happened on the boat.

“So, Waymon slipped and *fell* over the side?” Wes asked, a tinge of skepticism in his voice.

Jack looked into Wes’s eyes. “What’s that look? He *did* fall! I tried to save him, but he refused my help. Then...well, you know the old saying, ‘what goes around, comes around’.”

“Explain.”

“Waymon met the fate he and his cronies had planned for me.”

“Which was?”

“He was torn apart by sharks.”

Wes finished jotting his notes then put his notepad in a pocket. “Is that all of it, Jack? You’re telling me that’s *exactly* how it went down?”

Jack was a little surprised at the question. “Hell, yes, Wes—exactly! I can’t believe you’d even ask me that!”

Wes held up a hand. “Relax. I believe you—I just had to ask...officially.” He shrugged. “Personally, I never had any doubts. Besides, that Quinn kid told me about what he’d seen and the evidence he has hidden. He and Dr. Carrel also, how shall I say—*convinced* Frigman to confess.” He chuckled and shook his head then told Jack about how Frigman had gotten wedged into a cadaver coffin. “We have plenty of corroborating evidence and testimony.”

Wes led Jack out of the cabin. “C’mon, let’s get the hell outta here. I’ve got a crime scene to secure, and you’ve got someone to go celebrate with.”

“Right.” Jack clapped Wes on the shoulder and smiled as he gazed toward Janice.



(Two weeks later)

Jack squirmed in his chair, listening to Dwayne Meeley, the lead counsel of the medical center, as he droned on about the “situation” Jack had created. A thin smile creased Jack’s lips as he mused about the ironic sense of déjà vu between this situation and those that had happened in the aftermath of Iraq. Once again, he found himself in the crosshairs, but this time, he’d taken steps to protect himself, having learned from his experience.

Jack had given all the documents he’d received from Sheila to the FBI. They felt the papers clearly showed Waymon, Olgent, and Frigman’s grant money embezzlement activities. They also had plenty of evidence to link the three to the related murders. Frigman and Olgent were also singing like canaries, turning on each other in an attempt to get a plea deal.

The Medical Center Board was, however, unhappy that Jack had not consulted them before turning over the documents to the FBI. They told Jack they’d have preferred to have had an opportunity to generate a damage control strategy for the potential public affairs fiasco. *True to the form of many such governing bodies*, Jack thought. *They’re more interested in covering their own asses than doing the right thing.*

“Look, Dwayne, can we just cut to the chase?” Jack asked. “What do you want from me, and what are you offering in return?” Jack cocked his head to one side and stared quietly at Meeley.

Meeley cleared his throat, delaying several seconds before replying.

“Well, Dr. Bass, the board has decided they don’t want the risk of negative media exposure.” Meeley glanced over the top of his glasses at Jack then quickly away.

Jack sat silently for several seconds, poker-faced as he stared at Meeley. “Go on.”

Meeley opened his briefcase, rummaging through it.

“The board is prepared to make you a very generous severance offer in return for certain guarantees from you.” He pulled out a paper and held it up, gazing at it. “We all feel it would be in the best interest of the medical center if you were no longer on staff—”

Jack scooted forward in his chair, brusquely interrupting. “And why, *exactly*, would that be, Dwayne? What, *exactly*, are the reasons for dismissal?”

“Well, Dr. Bass, we prefer not to think in terms of dismissal. Rather, you’d be leaving for health reasons.”

“Then *exactly* what would those ‘health reasons’ be, counselor?”

“We had mental health and stress in mind...” Meeley replied somewhat sheepishly.

Jack exploded out of his chair and stood glaring down at Meeley.

“No way! You assholes are not going to railroad me into admitting this all happened because I have some mental health issue! Just. Ain’t. Gonna. Happen.” Jack jabbed a finger at him. “So, you better come up with a better scenario, or I head to the press with a full disclosure. Then all of you can sweat out how you’re going to explain it all to the reporters that’ll come here from everywhere—the murders, the embezzlement, the involvement of your goddam police chief and medical center president!” Jack slowly settled back into his seat. “Now, *that* would be some negative media exposure!”

Meeley gazed at the floor and nodded.

“Let’s try this again,” Jack said more calmly. “Tell me what you’re really willing to offer, and I’ll tell you what I’m willing to accept. If that won’t work for you, this meeting is over.”

Meeley again cleared his throat, wriggling in his chair as he held a document out for Jack.

“We’re offering three months’ salary and a favorable public statement regarding your tenure—”

“Not even close to good enough!”

Meeley cringed.

“Let me tell you my offer, Dwayne. And listen good because it’s non-negotiable, and I’ll need an answer...now! Or there will be no deal.”

“Go ahead...but there’s no need to yell at me. I’m just the messenger...”

“Sorry, Dwayne. Sometimes, I yell at people who are being total jackasses to me. And *messenger* or not, you were part of this decision.”

Meeley nodded, not making eye contact.

“You clowns want me gone—fine! Consider me gone, but here’s what it’s going to take. You’ll give me two year’s salary as severance, and you’ll release the statement that *I’ve* drafted.” Jack took a deep breath and calmed himself. “You people brought me here, put me at mortal risk, and now that I’ve fixed your screwed-up situation, you want me to conveniently disappear. Okay—it is what it is. But it’s going to cost you—just like you all nearly cost me my life!”

Jack reached into his briefcase and pulled out a document and handed it to Meeley. Meeley raised his eyebrows, looking at the paper Jack held out.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the press release I just mentioned—it explains that I’ll be leaving to provide healthcare in underserved, third-world countries, and that Southern Medical Center is appreciative of all of the excellent services I’ve provided in my short tenure here. That’s it—no changes, no edits. In return, I will offer to cooperate fully with any ongoing FBI or local law enforcement investigation. I will not discuss the details with any press but, instead, will refer them back to you.” Jack reached out and flicked the paper Meeley held. “And, Dwayne, I *will* be monitoring any responses given to those I refer to you. If the responses in any way incriminate or criticize me, I go public—with all the gory details.”

Jack leaned back in his chair, waiting for Meeley to finish reading the press release then again reached into his briefcase. Jack pulled out another document that he held out to Meeley.

“More, Jack?”

“Oh, yeah. This is a copy of a severance agreement I had my lawyer draft—this and the press release have already been reviewed and approved by the FBI legal folks, too.”

Meeley’s shoulders slumped, and he groaned.

“We can sign all this now and be on our merry ways, or you guys can try to play games with me, and this will likely get very ugly.”

Meeley took a couple of minutes to finish reading then cleared his throat again. “You say *none* of this is negotiable?”

“Correct.”

“I don’t think we can—”

“Then give me the documents back, and I’ll be on my way...but you should probably watch the evening news.”

A sheen of sweat formed on Meeley’s bald head.

“Dwayne, should I remind you again of a few key points...”

Meeley looked up at Jack, a somber expression on his face. He shook his head. “No. That won’t be necessary. I’ve got it. Off the record, I don’t blame you for feeling this way.” He was silent for several seconds. “I’ll need to make a copy of these.”

“I have two copies with me—we can sign both and be done.”

“Okay...” Meeley pulled a pen from a pocket.

Each of them placed a copy of the signed documents in their respective briefcase. Meeley reached out to shake Jack’s hand.

“I hope you understand, Jack, it’s nothing personal.”

Jack looked at Meeley’s hand and then into his eyes. “Yeah, I’ve heard that a lot since I’ve been here, Dwayne. It feels very personal to *me*, though. Good-bye.”

Jack stood and spun, leaving Meeley’s office without shaking hands.

Jack went home. He needed a drink and a chance to relax. It ended up taking two drinks before his ire began to drain away. He set the empty Cosmopolitan glass on his kitchen table and slumped in his chair, his eyes glossing over as he dozed off and began dreaming.

• • • •

*(Fifteen months ago)*

JACK SAT IN THE ROCKING chair, wearing a bored expression as he listened to the JAG captain proceed with his explanation of the Army’s position on Jack’s future. He had hoped to hear about an early release from a mandated month in the psychiatric ward of Walter Reed Hospital. Though Jack had assured his caregivers he felt fine and was ready to resume active duty, there was a continued insistence that he stay there, isolated on the locked hospital ward. The excuse repeatedly given was that his psychiatric caregivers felt he was still suffering from protracted and severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Jack had to admit he was likely afflicted with PTSD but also felt that the counseling he’d received would be more than sufficient for him to self-manage the problem.

“You see, Colonel Bass, the Army’s position is that it would be bad press if the American public were to hear about an Army doctor killing enemy combatants—and, especially, that he used medical supplies to do it.”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, because war never results in enemy combatants being killed, eh?”

The captain looked nervously over his wire-rim glasses at Jack then continued. “Some might even construe the deaths as...murder.”

“*What?*”

“We’ve interviewed all the surviving witnesses of your unit, Colonel.”

Jack stopped rocking and leaned forward, staring intently at the JAG officer, then he shrugged. “And?”

“Well...we have some concerns.”

“Look, I *admit* I killed enemy combatants in order to save my staff—after patients and our commanding nurse were killed mercilessly, I might add. So, I just don’t understand the issue here.”

Poker-faced, the lawyer nodded silently then continued. “Our investigation also determined that you, personally, acted decisively with great bravery and at great risk to your own well-being. Because, and only because of that fact, at this time, the Army is not pursuing any charges or conducting any further investigation into the incident.”

The captain squirmed in his chair and shot another quick glance at Jack.

“That is, if certain terms are agreed to by you.” The captain’s gaze darted back and forth from Jack to the documents he’d pulled from his briefcase.

Jack scooted to the edge of his chair. "And...those terms are?" he asked tersely.

"Quite frankly, Colonel, you present a significant quandary to the Army command staff. On the one hand, you were quite heroic, but, on the other hand, you pose a significant public relations risk for the Army. I'm afraid if General Smithson hadn't intervened on your behalf—"

Jack interrupted. "Just answer my goddam question, Captain! What are the terms?"

The captain hesitated briefly then held out the documents to Jack.

"After careful consideration, the Army is willing to make you a very generous offer to resolve this quandary."

"Quandary! I acted to save the lives of my staff and myself!" Jack slouched back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, confused and frustrated. He suddenly leaned forward and snatched the papers from the captain's hand.

The JAG man pointed at the papers Jack held. "The documents describe the terms. Let me explain them," he stated, clearing his throat and shifting uneasily again in his chair.

"Please proceed, Captain." Jack set the documents on his lap, leaned back in his chair, and frowned.

"In consideration of the injuries you incurred during those actions, you are to be awarded a Purple Heart."

Jack shrugged quickly but said nothing.

"As well, your decisive actions likely saved the lives of not only your staff but also a number of regular troops. Therefore, you are also being awarded a Silver Star."

Jack's eyes went wide. "What?" he asked, surprised. "I don't deserve that!"

The captain flipped to another page and continued hesitantly, "But because of the concern that public knowledge of some of your actions may tarnish the reputation of the Army Medical Corps, you will be offered an opportunity for an immediate honorable discharge with full retirement benefits commensurate with your rank. You will be required to sign this agreement, stating you will never speak to anyone of the events in Iraq. Furthermore, the Army has decided this will now be labeled as classified information and, therefore, will not be released for public access. If you are ever asked about said events, you will simply state that the events are classified, and you can't comment." The captain stopped and took a deep breath, looking expectantly at Jack.

"Continue." Jack made a circular motion with his hand.

"Additionally," the captain went on as he glanced over his glasses at Jack, "if you do not willingly sign this agreement or if you sign it and ever violate it, the Army is prepared to bring you up on charges of murder and start formal court martial proceedings. You will be arrested, stripped of your rank, dishonorably discharged, stripped of any retirement benefits...and possibly imprisoned." The captain's brow was covered with sweat as he sat staring blankly at Jack.

Jack sat silently for several seconds then took a tissue from the box sitting on the end table next to his chair. He gave it to the captain.

"I think you might need this."

Jack mulled the words he'd just heard as the lawyer fidgeted and repeatedly wiped his brow.

"Captain, I'm sorry you were sent over here to do this dirty little deed, so I want you to know I'm not mad at you. I am, however, mad and disappointed at this," he responded, holding up the document the captain had handed him. "Though I strongly protest this action, you can tell your superiors that I will not do so formally and will agree to the terms."

Jack sat forward, gazing intently into the captain's eyes.



“Believe me, I wish I *could* forget the whole experience, but I’m afraid I already have a ‘life sentence’ of those memories. I’ll be only too happy to never speak of it again...maybe that will help lessen the torture of this PTSD.”

The captain pushed his glasses up his nose, shifting anxiously in his chair.

“That said, I guess I don’t have much choice about signing this agreement, do I?”

The captain maintained a blank look and shrugged.

“Thank you, Colonel Jack Bass, for all of your years of devoted service...” Jack mumbled sarcastically as he imagined the text of his retirement announcement. He shook his head slowly and held out a hand.

“Got a pen? They don’t let me have sharp objects in here.”

• • • •

JACK SAT UP IN THE chair with a start as he awoke, sweat-soaked as usual after a flashback. He looked at his wristwatch.

“Shit! Two in the morning!”

He plopped back in the chair, staring at the ceiling.

“I just can’t take any more of this,” he grumbled dejectedly. “I need to end it.”



*(0630, Friday)*

Jack's secretary, Mary, looked up from her keyboard and smiled as he walked into her small anteroom.

"Hey, Dr. Bass. How'd the meeting go?"

"Fine. They agreed to my terms," Jack replied with a hint of sarcasm, winking at her as he sat on the corner of her desk. "You know, Mary, I'm really going to miss you... I've really enjoyed working with you."

"Likewise, boss."

"Would you quit calling me boss? You know I don't like that." He shook his head, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Okay...Dr. Boss." She shrugged and chuckled.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Whatever happened to just plain, old Jack?"

"Can't do it, Dr. Bass; you've earned the respect of the title. Besides, there is no 'plain old Jack' in this room, only a great boss."

"C'mere, you troublemaker," he said as he held his arms out to her. Jack leaned over and gave her a warm hug. As he straightened, he looked at Mary.

"What's the matter?"

"I just wish you'd have arrived sooner... Poor Dr. Wallace and Dr. Costas—I feel so bad for them and their families." She turned her gaze to the floor. "It sucks that they got killed for trying to do what's right."

"I know—sometimes, it feels like honesty and competency are liabilities in the workplace anymore. It does suck."

He hopped off her desk and strode into his office, quickly immersing himself in the task of packing. He was holding a picture of Lori, admiring it, when he was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door.

"Come in." He hurriedly placed the picture in a box.

Mary inched open the door and entered, wringing her hands. "Would you ever consider staying, Boss? Everybody I talk to—and me—really like you...we all think you could really help make some positive changes here."

"I wouldn't mind staying, but it's not my decision. The powers that be here at the university feel it would be better if I left," he muttered. "And all things considered...I have to agree."

Mary put her hands on her hips. "The 'powers that be' are dumbasses, then," she said, wringing her hands. "We'll sure miss you."

Tears trickled down her cheeks, and Jack walked to over to her, embracing her and patting her gently on the back. "Mary, it's not like I'm going to the moon—I'll stay in touch."

"You'd better." She pushed herself away and wiped at her tears. "Look at me—bein' all mushy and unprofessional. I need to get back to work."

Jack held her hand as he looked into her eyes. "I'll miss you, Mary. I've come to think of you more as a friend than a co-worker," he said.

"Gotta get back to work—get ready for a new boss." She spun and left, pulling the door closed behind her.

Jack stood a few seconds, looking at the door, swiping a tear from the corner of his eye. Thank God, his father wasn't there to witness Jack crying—it would have resulted in a beating, just as it always had when he was a kid.

As he continued packing, he tried not to dwell on the rumor that someone on the university board had influence in the local district attorney's office and had helped Olgent cut a deal if he testified against Frigman and Waymon. Wes Watley had been very apologetic when he'd told Jack about the possible development earlier in the morning but stated he was unlikely to be able to impact that decision. Jack finished packing, cast a quick glance about the office, and backed through the door with his box of belongings. When he turned to face Mary's desk, she wasn't there.

“Elvis has *left* the building,” he muttered sarcastically as he walked out the office door.



Jack pulled into the driveway of Janice's house and sat in his truck for a few minutes, trepidation preventing him from opening the truck door. Finally, he took a deep breath, stepped out of the truck, and approached her front door. Janice threw it open before he knocked, smiling warmly at him.

"I wondered if you were going to sit out there all day," she joked. "I was about to come out and join you."

"Oh, sorry about that. I-I was just gathering my thoughts about what I need to tell you," Jack responded clumsily, his gaze darting about.

"Uh oh. That sounds...ominous." Her smile dissolved, and a concerned look crept onto her face. "Jack, now you have me worried—is this going to be something I don't want to hear?"

He looked at the ground, rubbing the toe of his shoe inanely on the concrete. After a few seconds he looked up at her. "I *hope* it's not something you don't want to hear," he said in a tenuous voice. "It took me so long to work up the courage to come talk to you about this... It would be tough to swallow if you wouldn't let me tell you."

She pulled him through the door. "C'mon in. I've got some coffee on—we can have a cup and chat."

Janice poured them both a cup of coffee as Jack took a seat at her breakfast table. She set the coffee cups on the table then sat, looking at him, her face drawn and pale. "Jack, you know me well enough to know I don't beat around the bush. You seem like you've got something on your mind—just go ahead and tell me what it is. I'll deal with it."

Jack fiddled with the handle on his coffee mug for a few seconds and cleared his throat a few times.

"I just came from the medical center—got everything packed up from my office." He took a sip of coffee and set the cup back on the table, focusing his gaze on it. "I guess that means I'm done here. I don't quite know where that leaves me, career-wise...or personally."

Jack looked up from his coffee cup, glancing at Janice's face, immediately wishing he hadn't. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Janice...I-I'm sorry. Please don't cry." He shook his head. "Sheesh, I'm lousy at this sorta stuff—I feel like an adolescent boy." He took her hand, leaning closer to her, looking into her eyes. "I-I'd actually hoped what I'm trying to say would not be something that would make you feel bad."

She squeezed Jack's hand, her gaze anxiously searching his face.

"I'll apologize ahead of time if it doesn't sound romantic and comes out kind of awkward, but here it goes. Janice...I really like you. If you think you could ever be interested in an oaf who can't seem to stay out of trouble, I'd love to see if we could explore a...longer-term relationship. You don't have to answer me now—"

She heaved a big sigh and slapped his shoulder playfully then threw her head back and laughed.

"Of course, I'd love to continue with our relationship—I can't believe you were even concerned about that." She blew out a long breath. "Hell, I thought you were going to dump me!" She smiled broadly, got up from her chair, then sat on his lap. She put her arms tightly around him, her face brushing his as she nuzzled at his neck. "Oh, Jack, sometimes, I just don't know about you. *This* is why you were all nervous when you got here?" She chuckled again.

"Well, I, uh..."

“Jack, I know us old maids are not supposed to have a love life, but...I think I’ve been falling in love with you for some time now. You’re not an oaf, and you’re not a troublemaker—you’re a sweet man who makes me feel good.”

Jack put his arms around Janice, pulling her close in a tight hug. “I tried not to, Janice, but...I think I’ve fallen in love with you, too.”

She leaned back and stared into his eyes. “Jack Bass, you just made me a very happy old maid.”

“But there is something...”

She sat bolt upright. “What?” she asked, alarm in her voice.

“Well, I’ve got something I have to do...and it’s going to take me out of town. I don’t know how long it will take—probably no more than a few days, though. I wanted to ask you...if you’d be interested in going on a nice, long trip with me after I get back.”

“I could answer that better if I knew where we were going and for how long.”

“I want to keep the location a surprise. I haven’t worked out any details yet, but we can stay there as long as we like.”

She stared blankly at him then arched an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry—where I have in mind is very nice, very private...and has beautiful weather.” He winked at her. “And this time, I’ll bring my own swim trunks.”

“I don’t know, Jack...” she teased.

Jack’s heart suddenly raced. He pulled at his collar as he stared at her, his mouth agape.

“I’m kidding! You need to stop worrying so much. Yes, I’ll go! It sounds like fun...and I could use a little mystery in my life. When would we be leaving?”

“I was hoping we’d be able to hit the road in a week or so.”

“That’s not much warning, but what the hell, it’s about time I was a little more impulsive. It’s a deal!”

Jack put his hand gently behind her neck and pulled her lips to his for a kiss. Her tongue gently caressed his. After a few seconds, she pulled away from him and stood, still holding his hand.

“C’mon, big boy. If you’re going to be away for a few days, I need to get as much of you as I can right now.”

Jack’s heart thumped, and he smiled as she led him into her bedroom.





Jack stepped out of the cab into the chilly Washington, D.C. morning. He scanned the always-humbling scenery of Arlington National Cemetery. He put his cap on then rubbed his gloved hands together in an effort to keep the chill away. His breath created small, cottony puffs of icy crystals as he started his trudge across the frost-embossed lawn.

Jack felt a little odd, even out of place, wearing his Army dress uniform now that he was retired. But when he came to this hallowed place to visit fallen comrades, he believed he should dress in a fashion that honored those who rested here eternally. A chill ran down his spine. He was unsure if it was from the cold of the morning or the sight of row after row of perfectly arranged grave markers, each denoting the remnants of what had been a human life.

The location of the tomb marker he was visiting was as permanently emblazoned on his mind as the name that was carved into the stone of that marker. After several minutes of walking on the frost-tipped grass among the tombs, Jack finally stopped, turned to face her marker, and snapped to attention. He'd never been very good at such military etiquette but performed as sharp a salute as he could. He then kneeled on one knee, leaning forward and gently kissing the top of the gravestone. His lips lingered on the marker until the frigid marble forced him to pull away.

"Hey, Lori. How've you been?" He dug in a pocket, pulling out a small bottle of Kahlua. "I brought something for you." He smiled feebly as he gazed at the bottle. "Your favorite brand." He gently set the brown bottle on the ground next to the marker, knowing that sooner or later some wino would stagger through the cemetery and find a little treasure. Still, he repeated the gesture with every visit.

"I really miss you, girl. I-I'll never be able to forgive myself for allowing you to be killed."

Jack turned around, easing himself into a sitting position on the frigid ground in front of the grave, leaning back against the headstone then drawing up his knees and resting his arms on them.

"I sure could've used your help with this last little fiasco I got myself into—I'm sure I would have handled it much better if you'd been at my side." Jack took a deep breath then released it in a long sigh. "I really miss being able to talk to you about tough issues like that one... We always managed to work them out together, didn't we?" He smiled sadly. "What a team we made, eh?"

He leaned his back head against the stone, gazing up at the glorious blue sky.

"Lori...I really screwed up by never settling into something more permanent with you. I really *did* think that was the best thing to do with us both being in the Army and constantly assigned apart from each other." He hung his chin to his chest. "I just never thought about you being taken from me forever—I always thought there'd be time for us after we left the service. Time for marriage, a home...a family. But here I am, once again kicking myself over that decision—and knowing I'll never be able to correct it."

He patted the ground then caressed the grass gently. "I-I don't want to make that same mistake again. I've met someone I'm very attracted to...and I think we could have a nice relationship. Her name is Janice, and she's a nurse, too—I think you'd like her." He reached back to put his hand on the tombstone, stroking it as he paused a few seconds.

"I know, I know—you'd tell me I need to get on with my life and forget about you, but...I want you to know you'll always be in my heart and in my thoughts."

He stood, turning toward the grave as he dug a hand in a pocket of his overcoat.

“I probably won’t be able to visit you for a while, so I had this made—so you’ll know you’re always in my thoughts.”

He stood and draped the chain of the small, engraved plastic placard over the grave marker and moved back a few steps to look at it. He wiped a few tears from his cheek, stepped forward to straighten the placard, then moved back again and nodded. *Perfect*. The placard was a simple, black plastic marker with letters engraved in white that read, *Love you always. Jack*. He stood ramrod straight and saluted the marker again then wiped more tears from his cheeks. “I *still* love you...and always will. Good-bye, Lori.”

He did a sharp about face and rushed back toward the waiting cab. He took out a hanky to wipe his eyes and face as he approached the vehicle, not wanting the driver to see he’d been crying. The harsh training his father had repeatedly beaten into him about men not crying still influenced his behavior. He crawled into the welcome warmth of the cab.

“Dulles, please.”

As the cab drove slowly out of the cemetery, Jack looked back, placing the palm of his hand against the window.

“Good-bye,” he muttered.

The cabbie looked in his rearview mirror and gave Jack a warm smile. Jack returned it awkwardly and looked quickly out the window, tears flowing again, his father be damned.

• • • •

WHEN HE ARRIVED AT the airport, Jack hoped his eyes weren’t still puffy and red. As he walked into the terminal, he started smiling as he thought about the trip on which he was about to embark, barely noticing all of the gazes he was receiving from other travelers. He grinned and nodded at those who would look him in the eye as he anxiously searched the crowd for one specific face.

He finally spotted Janice standing at the counter where they’d agreed to meet. She, too, was searching the crowd. As he grew near, their eyes met, large smiles quickly covering both of their faces. They fell into each other’s arms and embraced tightly, remaining unmoving and silent for several minutes. Jack savored the nearness and warmth of the lingering hug. Eventually, Janice lifted her face from Jack’s chest and pressed her lips to his. Jack became fully absorbed in the pleasure of a long, open-mouthed kiss, despite the crowd bustling around them. When they finally separated, she backed up a step and looked Jack up and down.

“Wow, Jack! You look pretty sharp all dressed up like that. I’m impressed with all the chest cabbage. What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, uh...just had to finish up a little business in town—but now, it’s time to retire this uniform permanently.”

Janice looked at Jack but didn’t probe further.

“You’ve got the tickets I sent you?”

“Right here.” She patted the large purse hanging from her shoulder.

“Great! I hear the beaches on Barbados are wonderful! Ready for some sun and surf?”

“Yeah—and I can’t wait to finally see you in a swimsuit.”

He took her hand in his, and they started walking.

“And I can’t wait to get out of this uniform and into swim trunks.”

She squeezed his hand, smiling up at him with a twinkle in her eye. Each grabbed a bag and walked hand in hand toward their gate.

*This is not the end...*



JACK'S STORY CONTINUES with another hypnotic, spine tingling episode.

[\*Click Here To Read, Book Three, Death Management!\*](#)



KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured



[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)



EDWIN DASSO, MD, A USA Today and Amazon International #1 Best-Selling medical thriller author, writes works of fiction that leverage many of his "stranger than fiction" experiences from years of practice at major medical centers and community hospitals.

"You might be shocked at some of the events in the books that are based on an actual experience."

Member of the International Thriller Writers. His "Jack Bass Black Cloud Chronicles" series has been developed into a TV series, "Jack Bass, MD.". Network feedback has been very positive.

Fiction writing is reviving a lost love from earlier periods in his life where he enjoyed writing short stories. In addition to a number of years as a practicing anesthesiologist and critical care specialist, he has published articles in national healthcare journals, written many "Ask the Doctor" columns and has spoken frequently at national healthcare forums. He has also been instrumental in designing and deploying population health programs to help people deal with depression related to poor health.

Visit [www.eddassobooks.net](http://www.eddassobooks.net) and sign up with your email address to receive news, updates and special offers.





SURGICAL RISK  
BY ROBERT I. KATZ

**Author's Rating:**



**Language: \*\* Sexuality: \*\* Violence: \*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Surgical Risk Copyright © 2002 by Robert I. Katz

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form, without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.





**D**o you love a hero who pulls no punches and never gives up?  
When a former girlfriend is found strangled in a hospital call room, surgeon Richard Kurtz and detective Lew Barent are drawn into a twisted tale of bitter revenge.





“SO THIS CHARACTER COMES into the Emergency Room,” Nolan said. “He’s well dressed. He looks normal. He smiles politely, apologizes for bothering us, and says he has six acupuncture needles up his penis.” Crane, Liebert and Kurtz silently ate their pizza while they considered Nolan’s statement. Six acupuncture needles up the penis, all of them felt, deserved at least a moment of silence.

Crane wiped olive oil from his fingers, opened the box and picked out the last slice of pepperoni. “Didn’t that hurt?” he asked.

“It didn’t seem to bother him,” Nolan said.

“But why did he do it?”

Nolan grinned. “Probably because he’s a pervert.”

“He didn’t say that, did he? ‘I like to shove things up my penis because I’m a pervert.’”

“I guess not,” Nolan said.

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said that he had an itch.”

“Hell of an itch,” Crane said, and took a bite out of his pizza.

Crane was stout, with broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms. Nolan was tall, stooped and lean. Both men were pale, pasty faced and sunken eyed. It was a body habitus endemic to surgery residents, a breed that rarely saw the sun and subsisted for the most part on pizza, take out Chinese and junk food.

“So what did you do?” Kurtz asked. Richard Kurtz had been an attending surgeon for nearly three years. He was almost as pale as the residents but somewhat better rested and much better fed. The others stared at him. Nolan gave a quick, cautious smile. Three nights before, a skinny kid with a pierced tongue, a pierced nose and probably a pierced brain, tripping out of his mind on amphetamines, with tattoos covering most of his torso, had tried to strangle one of the orderlies; but beyond the simple application of brute force the kid had no technique whatsoever. Kurtz had knocked him down and sat on him, an act which considerably reinforced Kurtz’ already macho reputation. Privately, Kurtz thought the reputation absurd, but he wasn’t going to fight it.

“We took him to the O.R., did a cysto and managed to grab them with a biopsy forceps. Turned out there weren’t six of them. There were eight.”

“Jesus,” Crane said with a shudder.

Kurtz raised a brow, shook his head and took a sip of his coke. “That’s even weirder than a gerbil up the ass,” Liebert said.

They all nodded in unison but the gerbil story was old hat, and probably untrue. Kurtz had heard it from several different sources over the years. Supposedly one of Hollywood’s top action heroes, a guy married to a gorgeous model whose face had appeared on every magazine cover in America, had come into the E.R. at New York Hospital with a gerbil up his ass. It made a great story—but no such case report had ever appeared in the medical literature.

“Does anybody know which particular foreign body in the rectum is responsible for the greatest number of E.R. visits?” Kurtz asked.

“Dildos,” Nolan said immediately. “And vibrators.”

“Very good,” Kurtz said. “What’s number two?”

“Cucumbers?” Crane said.

“Nope. They’ve been reported, but they’re not in the top two or three. Anybody?”

Nolan shrugged. Crane ate his pizza. Liebert smiled like the good little medical student that he was, waiting to be enlightened.

“Depends on the study, actually,” Kurtz said. “One says rubber balls, one says glass bottles, another one says wooden dowels.” He shrugged.

Crane visibly winced. “I’ve seen a couple of vibrators. I haven’t seen any wooden dowels.”

“Trust me,” Kurtz said. “You will.”

“I read a letter in the *New England Journal of Medicine* a couple of years ago,” Nolan said. “It was written by a British urologist visiting America. He was invited to look in on a cysto and he sees a sign in the patient’s bladder saying, ‘Drink at Joe’s Bar.’ At first, he thought it was the American penchant for advertising carried to an extreme, before he realized that the guy had shoved a swizzle stick up his urethra.”

“That’s bullshit,” Kurtz said. “There are just as many nut cases in England as there are over here.”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what it said.”

Crane leaned back in his seat and covered a yawn with his fist. “I read a letter in *The New England Journal* from a physician who was out jogging in the middle of winter. It was really cold out and his running suit wasn’t warm enough. By the time he got home, he could barely feel his penis. Nobody was home, so he dropped his pants and began to warm it up with his hand. At the same time, while he’s standing there in the foyer, he begins to flip through the latest issue of the *New England Journal*, which is sitting there with the mail. Just then, the front door opens and in walks his wife. The letter said that she wasn’t amused.”

“I don’t get it,” Liebert said. “What do you mean?”

Crane rolled his eyes. Nolan grinned. “The wife thought he was jerking off while reading the *New England Journal*.”

“And the *New England Journal* printed this?” Liebert said.

“I guess they figured it was sort of a human interest story.”

Kurtz put his feet up on the edge of the desk, took a slow deep breath and willed his tight muscles to relax. The hall outside his office was dimly lit and silent. It was one A.M. Only an hour before, they had finished sewing up a young woman who had been stabbed in the chest by a jealous boyfriend. But at the moment things were quiet: no cases in the E.R., all the patients tucked in and sleeping, no vomiting or sudden fever or cardiac arrest. Nothing to do but sit tight and wait for the shift to end. They should go get some sleep themselves, Kurtz thought. You never knew.

“But wasn’t he embarrassed?” Liebert asked.

“Who?” said Nolan.

“The guy with the acupuncture needles: wasn’t he embarrassed?”

“Oh, him.” Nolan yawned, seemingly bored with the subject. “Not in the slightest. The attending urologist told me afterward that the guy would probably get a stricture. He’ll have trouble peeing for the rest of his life.” He shook his head again. “Crazy.”

“Crazy,” Kurtz murmured. He put his feet down from the desk, opened a drawer and began to rummage through it. “You want to see crazy?” He found what he was looking for buried under a pile of old papers. “This is really crazy.” He held it up.

Crane scratched his head. Nolan slowly nodded. Liebert blinked, wrinkled his nose and stared.

It was a chest x-ray. Three flat razor blades nestled between the lungs, obscuring the shadow of the heart. “A psych patient,” Kurtz said. “His name is Bill Mose; he’s a schizophrenic. He sits around,

watches T.V. and smokes cigarettes.” Kurtz shrugged. “You talk to him, he makes no sense whatsoever but he occasionally expresses the opinion that he’s being persecuted. He considers himself to be misunderstood and perfectly well adjusted. He likes to eat things.”

“Jeez,” said Crane, “like Hannibal the Cannibal.”

“He doesn’t eat people,” Kurtz said, “just things.”

“I thought they didn’t allow smoking in the hospital,” Liebert said.

“They do for the long-term inpatients. Some idiot decided to make a civil rights case out of it and threatened to sue.”

“What happened to him?” Liebert asked.

“We got the razor blades out with an endoscope. Within a week, he had swallowed a pencil eraser and a couple of pens, so we took him to the O.R. and did it again.”

“Is he still alive?” asked Crane.

“So far as I know, he’s upstairs,” Kurtz said. “On the locked ward. He’s been there for years.”

Three nights later, a pharmacist’s aide came to the door of the locked ward, peered in through the glass and waited until every patient within sight had moved away to a healthy distance. At this hour of the night, there were only a handful: Bill Mose and a few others whose inner clocks ticked to their own distinctive beat. The aide looked to be a new one. Mose didn’t recognize him, but he obviously knew the routine, quietly waiting by the doorway while the patients shuffled off. As always, Mose was the last, but finally he too reluctantly moved down the hall, and the aide turned the key in the lock and entered, closing the door behind.

The patients ignored him, all except Mose, who pretended to as much apathy as the rest but whose attention focused like radar on the jangling keys that represented freedom.

The pharmacist’s aide handed over his shipment of pills while the head nurse signed for them and a little redhead with a sour face named Weems began to put the pills into each patient’s medicine drawer.

The pharmacist’s aide walked back down the hall, scanned the immediate area to make certain that none of the patients were near enough to slip out and inserted his key. The door opened. The door closed. Sadly, Mose shook his head and shuffled up to the solid steel barrier, staring down the hall outside the unit to the elevators. As he always did, Mose grasped the doorknob and tried to turn it, expecting the usual solid resistance, but this time something was different. It took him a moment to realize what it was: the doorknob turned smoothly in his fist. The door swung open.

Confused, Mose peered out into the hallway, then back into the ward. He frowned, uncertain, then he slowly smiled. His heart pounding, fully expecting to hear the nurses’ excited voices yelling behind him, he stepped out into the corridor, closed the door silently and padded down the hall, whistling between his teeth.

Dr. Sharon Lee let the hot water run over her face and stood under the shower for a long, luxurious moment, forcing herself to relax. It was three A.M.

Sharon Lee hated stat C-sections. Everybody did. A fifteen year old girl, with no history of prenatal care, had come into the E.R. in labor and been rushed up to obstetrics with a frank breech. Sharon shuddered and breathed a long sigh and felt her heart finally begin to slow down. The residents had started without her and a good thing, too. Mother and baby were both doing fine but they had been very, very lucky.

Sharon had a clinic in the morning but it would take a half hour to get home and the same amount of time to get back. The call room beds were lumpy but the rooms were quiet and it wasn’t worth the bother to leave and then return.

She finished her shower, got into clean surgical scrubs and crawled under the covers. Then she turned out the light and rolled over, snuggling into the pillow. Her eyes closed and within minutes she was asleep.

The sound of a door creaking open awakened her and she wondered for a hazy moment where she was before a pair of hands gripped her throat. She tried to struggle, to cry out, but the hands were too strong and soon a red haze settled over her eyes and her struggles grew weaker and then she shuddered one final time and was dead.

At nine A.M., as he did every weekday morning, Oscar Hernandez knocked on the call room door and waited. After a moment, he slid his key into the lock and pushed the door open. He stopped suddenly, gulped and stared. "Oh, my God," he whispered. Carefully, he closed the door and re-locked it, then he hurried down the hallway to the nearest phone.





KURTZ' FIRST PATIENT in the morning was a burly construction worker who clung to a conviction that nothing was really wrong with him, despite the pain that made him wince whenever he moved his right side. The anesthesiologist, Vinnie Steinberg, had given the patient a sedative as soon as they entered the room and now his eyelids fluttered and he smiled sleepily while they put on the EKG and the blood pressure cuff. Steinberg took a quick look at the monitors, made a notation on the anesthesia record, winked at Kurtz and pushed the plunger on a syringe of propofol. The patient mumbled once more that he only had a "stomach ache," then his eyes glazed over and Kurtz went outside to scrub.

When he got back ten minutes later, Nolan and Crane had already put the drapes up and Nolan was standing by the patient's side, holding a knife and looking at Kurtz expectantly. "Go ahead," Kurtz said.

Nolan's knife slid in, split skin, fat, fascia and muscle. Crane helped him while Kurtz silently watched. Nolan reached the bowel, followed it along to the cecum and pulled it up onto the skin. The appendix sat there on the end, long, red and swollen, oozing a bit of serous fluid from the tip. "Just in time," Nolan said. Kurtz nodded. The appendix would have ruptured soon; the patient was lucky.

The operation went smoothly. Nolan circled the appendix with sutures, tied off the blood supply, put two clamps around the base, cut between the clamps and handed the specimen off to the nurse. Then he cauterized the stump, inverted it into the serosa, tugged the sutures tight, tied them and began to close.

"Okay," Kurtz said, and removed his gown. He ignored the whispering at the head of the table. The anesthesiologists were always talking about something and unless there was a problem with the patient, it didn't concern him.

"Hey, Richard."

Kurtz looked up. Steinberg peered at him over the drapes. "Did you hear the news?"

"News?" Kurtz frowned. "What news?"

Steinberg shook his head dolefully. "Sharon Lee," he said. "She's been murdered."

Scene of the crime: a bedroom. A single bed, a nightstand, a desk with a lamp, a bathroom with a toilet and a shower that connected with another bedroom on the other side, a green linoleum floor. All hospitals had such rooms, Barent had been told: a call room for the staff to sleep in at night when they had to be there but didn't have to actually work. There were two wings of such rooms, one for the residents and another for the attendings. The residents were required to spend their nights on call in house and so their rooms saw a lot of use. The attendings' rooms were usually empty. Barent wondered about this fact but doubted that it would be much help in narrowing things down. Most likely, everybody who had ever worked here knew it.

The Medical Examiner had already come and gone, having solemnly declared the cause of death to be strangulation. No surprises there, considering the deep bruises on both sides of the neck. The body was still lying on the floor where it had fallen, evidently after a struggle, since the bedclothes were tangled together and thrown about the room. The victim was wearing green surgical scrubs. The shirt was torn and pulled up over her face. She was a good-looking woman, if a corpse could ever be described as good-looking—slim, firm, nice breasts. Sharon Lee: Doctor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, thirty one years old, never married, no children, father dead, mother still living, one sister. Successful. Barent sighed and shook his head. Not any more.



Barent walked over to the window, parted the drapes and allowed the bright winter sunlight to shine in. They were on the Seventeenth Floor of a twenty story building on the West Side of Manhattan. Below, cars drove silently along the pavement. A row of apartment buildings, most of them less than five stories high, rose on the opposite side of the street. Beyond the apartments, the grass and trees of Riverside Park sloped down to the Hudson River, covered now with gleaming chunks of ice.

Easton had started out in 1912 as the Riverhead Psychiatric Institute, a rest home and rehabilitation center for wealthy alcoholics and neurotics. Then, in 1930, a grateful patient named Ernest Easton had died and left the place his entire fortune, on condition that the institution expand into surgery and general medicine. The Board at the time had eagerly accepted the proposed changes, but even today, more than seventy years later, nearly a quarter of Easton's patients were psychiatric, a situation that the present Board had no desire to change. Psychiatric patients rarely needed CAT scans, respirators or Intensive Care Units. Psych patients were, more often than not, low tech and cut rate.

The central courtyard of the building contained a playground, scattered trees and half a dozen picnic tables where residents of the locked wards were often brought for exercise, recreation and fresh air. In the late 1950's, the hospital had constructed an office tower for its physicians called the Hampshire Building. The Hampshire Building was made out of glass and red brick. It connected to Easton by a Third Story walkway built over the street.

"He didn't escape through the window," Moran said.

"No." It was two hundred feet to the ground. Barent turned away from the window and blinked, his eyes adjusting slowly to the relative darkness of the room. "Why do you say 'he?'"

Moran puffed up his cheeks and surveyed the dimensions of the room. "Pretty young woman. It seems likely."

Privately, Barent agreed. Statistically, most murderers were male, and women, when they did commit murder, were rarely strong enough to do so with their bare hands. "We don't know that yet," Barent said. He said it as much to himself as to Moran, who looked down at the body and ignored Barent's comment.

Barent flipped through his notebook and opened it to a clean page. The notebook served to keep his thoughts in order but its primary function was to act as a prop, something to impress the witnesses, maybe intimidate them a little. People tended to think very carefully about what they were saying, watching their words get written down as soon as they left their mouths.

"What have we got?" he asked Moran.

Moran glanced at the lab techs methodically quartering the room, taking measurements, dusting for fingerprints, preserving it all on film. They went about their business as if Barent and Moran were not there. "Presumably she locked the door but forgot about the bathroom. The doors to the bathroom and the bedroom on the other side were both unlocked."

"I see," Barent said. "Unless she did check the locks and somebody else had a key."

Moran gave a little shrug of his shoulders and glumly nodded. Beyond the barricade at the end of the hall, a small crowd of people were clustered, doctors and nurses and other hospital employees curious about what was going on.

Barent looked once more at the still body, shook his head and walked out. He followed Moran down the hall and sat behind a desk in one of the small call rooms. "Bring in the janitor."

Moran gave him a reproving look. "I believe that the preferred term is 'environmental service technician.'"

Barent barely cracked a smile. "Of course."

The 'environmental service technician' was plump, about fifty, with faded gray eyes and a bewildered, frightened expression. He sat in the chair and hunched his head down onto his shoulders.

"Can you tell me what happened, Mr. Hernandez?" Barent asked.

Hernandez blinked at him. "I opened the door," he said. "She was lying there, not moving. I went and reported it. That's all I know."

"The door was closed?"

"Yes."

"Was it locked?"

"I put the key in and turned it. If it wasn't locked, I didn't notice."

"But it might not have been locked?"

Hernandez spread his hands to the side and shrugged.

"Have there been any robberies reported from any of the call rooms? Any fights?"

"I don't know about any of that stuff," Hernandez said. "You should talk to Security."

"Security..." Barent tapped his pen against the notebook. Hernandez eyes stayed glued to his own hands, folded in his lap.

"Did you notice anything different in the hallway outside or in any of the other call rooms? Any signs of a struggle? Dirt on the carpet? Blood? Overturned furniture?"

"No." Hernandez peered glumly up at Barent. "Nothing like that."

"Did you know Dr. Lee?"

"I seen her around. I never talked to her."

Doctors, reflected Barent, probably didn't have much to say to 'environmental service technicians.' "Alright, Mr. Hernandez. Thank you. That's all I have to ask you for now."

Hernandez looked at him uncertainly. "I can go?"

"Yes." Barent scribbled in his notebook. "We'll get in touch if we need to talk to you again." Hernandez quickly nodded, got up and lumbered out. Moran shook his head. "Too bad nobody else was up here," Barent said. "They might have noticed something."

"Yeah, and we might have had a few more bodies."

A point. A definite point. "Not much in the way of witnesses, though," Barent said.

"There is one guy outside who wants to talk."

"Who?"

"Guy named Richard Kurtz: a surgeon, former boyfriend."

"Really?" Barent was frankly surprised. Former boyfriends of murdered young women usually walked quickly and quietly in the opposite direction. "Show him in," he said.

Kurtz came in and sat down. He stared at Moran, who shrugged and left the room. Kurtz was tall and lanky, with a pale complexion, dark eyes and dark curly hair. He looked at Barent impassively.

"Why did you want to talk to me, Doctor?" Barent asked.

Kurtz barely smiled, a thin humorless line in his white face. "I figured that sooner or later you would want to talk to me. Better to get it over with."

"I see," Barent said. What Kurtz said was most likely true, but still, Barent didn't like being anticipated. He frowned, picked up a pencil and made a notation in his book.

Kurtz peered at the notebook and suddenly grinned. "When I was in the Army, I spent about a year as a clerk for C.I.D. One of the investigators used to carry around a tape recorder. It made the suspects real nervous. You could see their eyes watching the spools go around, getting down

everything they would say. Then he'd smile at them and switch it off. "This is just between you and me, now. O.K.?" Real confidential." Kurtz shrugged. "Sometimes it worked."

C.I.D. Barent hadn't known that, but then of course he knew nothing at all yet about Richard Kurtz or any of the other people who worked here. Kurtz had just a hint of a drawl in his speech, not quite Mid-West but not pronounced enough to be Southern.

"You were a cop?"

"No. The cops were mostly career types. I was just a kid. I enlisted right out of high school. My family had no money and I figured it was a good way to get out of West Virginia."

That accounted for the drawl. "Where were you stationed?"

"Munich. Nineteen-Eighty-One to Nineteen-Eighty-Four."

"Munich." Barent puffed up his cheeks and gave a sour little laugh. "Munich...I passed through there once. Real nice city. I was in the Army a little earlier. Da Nang and Kwang Tri.

"How did you get to be a doctor?" Barent asked.

Kurtz gave Barent a long, brooding look, his head cocked to the side. "One of my classmates used to be a traveling groupie with the Allman Brothers' Band, though I don't suppose she put that particular qualification down on her application. She went into pediatrics. Another guy who was a pretty good friend of mine used to run with a street gang. He got kicked out of high school when he was sixteen. He told me about some fights he got involved in. It seems he didn't enjoy that part of it very much, so he would just hang out near the edges of the crowd and kick the ones who were down. He's a gastroenterologist in South Carolina now. We had a former Broadway producer, a professional trombonist, at least three lawyers, four with M.B.A.'s and probably ten or more who had been in the military." Kurtz shrugged. "The science nerd stereotype is not entirely accurate."

"The Allman Brothers..."

"So she said. I didn't check her references."

Barent took a moment to try the idea on for size. Kurtz was right. People—which certainly included Barent—were not likely to imagine their doctors "traveling" with a rock band or getting kicked out of school for juvenile manslaughter.

He shrugged. "What can you tell me about Sharon Lee?"

"I met her here in the hospital. We went out for about three months."

"Was your relationship sexual?"

Kurtz barely blinked. "Now and then."

"Why did you break up?"

"I guess you could say we got on each other's nerves."

"How so?"

"Sharon's father was a partner at one of the big law firms in the city: Cravath, Swaine...Milbank, Tweed... I forget which one. Her mother has lunch with the girls and goes to garden shows. Sharon was rich, smart, good looking and used to getting her own way." Kurtz smiled wryly. "She liked men she could order around."

"And were you a man that she could order around?"

"Well..." Kurtz drawled. "I wasn't Sharon's usual sort. When she met me, Sharon had just broken up with a guy named Barry Kantor who ran a car dealership in Rahway, New Jersey. Barry was a nice fellow but not very exciting and Sharon was in the mood for something different. It turned out that she didn't like different. Sharon thought I was some sort of natural man or something, just because I didn't hold a teacup the way her JAP friends did. She thought that was great, at first, but it wore thin pretty fast. I wasn't *sensitive* enough for her."

Barent could understand that. Kurtz didn't exactly look sensitive. He had a square jaw and massive shoulders and looked like he was carved from a piece of granite.

"She was Jewish?"

"The family was non-religious but the name used to be Levine."

"Who broke up with who?"

"It was mutual." Kurtz shrugged. "We both made a mistake."

Barent nodded, wrote a few words in his little book. He looked up. "You have any idea who might have wanted her dead?"

Kurtz stared at him, his eyes unblinking. Barent met the stare with perfect equanimity. After a moment, Kurtz let his breath rumble out and grimaced down at the desk. "No," he said.

"How about Barry Kantor?"

"He got married a few months later. Last I heard he had two kids. I doubt it."

"After you, who was she involved with?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"I see." Barent stared at the walls, then he shook his head. "Thanks for your time. I'll give you a call if I have any further questions."

Kurtz made no move to get up from his chair. "Can I see the body?" he asked.

Barent frowned. Kurtz looked like he meant it but it wasn't exactly the usual procedure. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," Kurtz said shortly.

"C.I.D., huh?" Barent closed his notebook. "I really shouldn't." Kurtz waited, hunched forward a little, sitting very still. "Okay," Barent finally said. "Come on." He rose to his feet.

The lab techs were almost done. There was only one left in the room, down on his hands and knees, gathering samples of dust from under the window. "Don't touch anything," Barent warned.

Kurtz nodded but didn't look at his face. He stared down at Sharon Lee's body, saying nothing, while Barent stared at him. Barent wasn't sure about Kurtz. Usually he was pretty good at reading people, but not Kurtz. Finally, Kurtz breathed a long, slow sigh and glanced back at Barent with tired eyes. "Thank you," he said.

Barent nodded. "Don't mention it."





EXCEPT FOR THOSE INFREQUENT occasions when a delusional patient grew violent, there was rarely any excitement on the locked ward. Breakfast tended to be the high point of the morning and none of the patients missed it. There were three fold out tables in the Unit cafeteria, seating six patients each. Bill Mose always sat in the chair nearest the door. Only when he did not show up for breakfast did anyone become suspicious. The Head Nurse, a woman named Reilly, ordered, “Search the Unit.” Within minutes it had been established that Bill Mose was no longer on the ward and Miss Reilly alerted Security.

Security already knew.

The voices were particularly loud this morning, so loud that Mose could barely make out what they were saying to him, but the message they carried was a familiar one nonetheless. He looked down at the knife in his hand and almost snarled in frustration. He had already tried more than once to get it down but the knife was just too big to navigate the back of his throat. There was a lot of noise here. Confused, he shook his head.

“Don’t let him get us!” a little girl cried. She clutched a raggedy teddy bear to her chest and began to cry even louder.

A nurse—Mose knew she was a nurse from the white uniform—grabbed the little girl, dragged her into a room and slammed the door. Suddenly, the hallway was nearly silent. The knife in his fist swayed slowly back and forth, leaving trails of colored light in the air.

Mose giggled. He hadn’t had such fun in ages. The nursing station was nearby, filled with interesting things. Mose shuffled up to it. A container of paper clips sat near the phone. Mose smiled, and his mouth began to water. Perfect, he thought.

Just then, a pinging sound from the end of the hallway distracted him. He looked up. A squad of five men dressed in uniforms emerged from an elevator and raced toward him. They stopped abruptly, a few feet away. One of them, a large, black man said, “Put down the knife.”

The knife? Mose stared at the knife. A beam of light flew at him and Mose flicked at the air. The men backed slowly away. “Spread out,” one of them whispered.

The big, black one looked at him. “We can’t spread out,” he said. “We’re in a hallway.”

“Oh.” The first man blinked at the walls. “That’s right.”

The big one reached down to his belt, removed a billy club attached to a loop and hefted it in his fist. “Let’s get him,” he said.

They stared at each other, then inched forward, the big one up front.

Flickering beams of sunlight shone in through a latticed window at the end of the corridor. The beams of light hurt his eyes and Mose stabbed at them. “Get away!” he shrieked. His hands trembled. Random twitches danced along his skin. He howled, stabbing randomly at the light that clawed at his eyes. While the men stared, he stumbled against the wall, shrieking, and the knife clattered out of his hand.

“Alright, men,” the big man yelled. “Get him!”

It took all five guards to subdue him. Mose struggled wildly, squirming and twisting. He called constantly upon the name of Christ as he fought. “Jesus!” he screamed. “Jesus, help me! Help me! Ahhh!” He fought and shrieked and struggled and finally they had him face down on the hallway with

his hands behind his backs. The big one pulled out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on Mose's wrists and then he slumped down in relief, wheezing.

"Oh, man," he said. "I'm too old for this." He shook his head and hauled himself to his feet. "Okay, let's get him down to the E.R. They can call Psych." He looked at the knife lying on the floor and pointed. "And bring that. It's evidence."

Barent scratched his head and watched Bill Mose struggle. Two large orderlies had arrived from the Psych Unit upstairs a few hours before and methodically put Mose in a straight jacket. They had wanted to bring him back to the Unit but the E.R. docs had vetoed this idea, feeling obligated to work Mose up for any physical injury before releasing him. Mose seemed hardly aware of what they were doing. He panted and moaned and cried out to his own private demons while dribbling bloody saliva.

"What makes him any more of a suspect than anybody else in this place?" Barent asked.

The Chief of Hospital Security was a retired cop named Wellesley. Wellesley had a red face, a bull neck and enormous, rolling shoulders. His thighs were so large that they rubbed together when he walked, making him waddle. The buttoned down collar, maroon jacket and restrained black tie seemed absurdly out of place on Wellesley's squat, massive body. He seemed bewildered by Barent's question. "He's a known lunatic and he's been rampaging around the hospital with a knife."

This was true, Barent reflected, but it had no obvious connection to the death of Sharon Lee. "Dr. Lee wasn't killed with a knife," he said. "She was strangled."

"Then whose blood is on it? Nobody else has reported an injury." Barent looked at him and shrugged. "Probably his own. His mouth is bleeding. Is there anybody around here who knows this character?"

"I do." A tall young man with frizzy black hair, horn rimmed glasses and a pale face stepped out of the crowd gathered in front of the Emergency Room desk.

"Who are you?" Barent asked.

"William Werth. I'm his psychiatrist."

William Werth looked like an eager puppy. Barent peered at him doubtfully. "Is there any place around here we can sit down and talk?"

"Sure. Come this way."

Werth led him down the hall to an empty examining room and closed the door. The room had a treatment table covered with a roll of white paper, a metal cabinet filled with tape, gauze, sutures and other medical instruments, a round, vinyl chair on rollers, and a tiny fold down desk.

"I'll take the table," Barent said. He hoisted himself up and let his legs dangle over the edge. Werth sat in the chair.

"Okay," Barent said. He fixed his own glasses more firmly on his nose and glanced down at Werth. "That guy is your patient?"

"Ever since I've been here."

"How long is that?"

"Four years."

Four years...Barent shuddered. Not a place he would want to spend four years. "He's been here all that time?"

"He's been here for seven."

"Jesus," Barent muttered.

"We let him out sometimes, always with a group. You had to keep an eye on him. He tended to bolt."

"Does he have any family?"

“He had an older sister. She died a few years ago.”

“Inpatient psychiatric care doesn’t come cheap. Who pays his bills?”

“Actually, Mose is pretty well off. The sister left him everything.”

“Really?” Barent’s ears pricked up. “And if he dies, who gets it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Who would know?”

“Mr. Robinson might know. If he doesn’t know, he ought to know who would know.”

“Robinson?”

“The Hospital Director.”

“Seven years...” Barent carefully removed a sharp pencil from his inner jacket pocket. He wrote *Robinson* and *seven years* down in his notebook. While he was writing, he looked at Werth out of the corner of his eye. “Any women up there?” he asked.

“On the Psych Floor?”

Barent nodded. “Yes.”

“Sure, there are,” Werth said. “But they’re in a different Unit. We keep the men and women separate.”

“Why is that?”

Werth folded his hands on top of the fold out desk and looked up at Barent with earnest surprise. “To put it in layman’s terms, these patients are completely out of their minds. Reality is a concept that they cannot deal with, or even recognize—but the sex drive stays with you until you’re pretty much dead.”

“So what? I thought sex between consenting adults was legal in this state.”

Werth swiped a hand through his hair and suddenly looked like a puppy that had just been spanked. “They’re not consenting adults. In order to give consent you have to be mentally competent. If one of these women got pregnant, we’d get our asses sued.”

Barent blinked at him. “That ever happen?”

“Not here.” The look on Werth’s face said that it had happened somewhere.

“So far as you know, did Mose ever have a relationship of any sort with another patient?”

“No,” said Werth. “Never. Mose is a schizophrenic. They can’t relate to other people. They have no capacity for any but the most superficial emotions.” Werth shook his head. “He was one of the easier patients to handle, actually. He’s totally dissociated from reality but except for his obsessions, he was almost always docile.”

“Obsessions? What obsessions?”

“He eats things. Any small, inanimate object he can get his hands on.”

Barent’s brows rose. “Sounds like quite an obsession.” He scribbled in his notebook. “And so far as you know, is there any relationship between these sorts of obsessions and a tendency to murderous behavior?”

“None at all.” Werth shook his head again. “The two things have nothing to do with each other.”

Barent tapped the tip of his pencil against the notebook while he considered. Certainly, Mose was now a suspect in the murder of Sharon Lee, if for no other reason than his obvious capacity for violence—despite what Werth said about it—and his lack of an alibi. Where had Mose been all night? Nobody seemed to know how long ago he might have vanished from the locked ward upstairs or where he might have been hiding. But Barent distrusted the whole situation. Murderers were rarely so obliging as to drop into his lap like a plum. Still...



“I’m going to have to take Mr. Mose into custody,” he said. “His medical problems won’t be neglected. He’ll be brought to a Psychiatric Hospital.” A quick grin flit across Barent’s face. “One a little more secure than Easton. If it turns out that he had nothing to do with the murder, then he’ll be returned here in a few days. Is that alright with you?”

“Do I have a choice?” Werth’s pale, freckled face turned abruptly red.

“No,” Barent said. “You don’t.”



• • • •

“MOSE?” KURTZ WHISTLED softly through his teeth. “I don’t believe it. I simply do not believe it.” He drained his beer and signaled to the waitress for another.

Bill Werth nursed a Rusty Nail, stirring it with a plastic straw every minute or so. “Running around the hospital with a knife didn’t exactly help his cause.”

“He’s psychotic, for Christ’s sake!”

“So?”

“What do you mean, *so*? Who knows why schizophrenics act the way they do?”

Werth shook his head. “Certainly not me.”

Kurtz gave him a disgusted look. “I’m sure your patients would love to hear that.”

“Let me amend my statement,” Werth said. “We do know that schizophrenia is a disturbance of dopamine transmission in the brain, leading to delusions, hallucinations and an inability to accurately perceive reality. We have a pretty good idea of the pathophysiology involved in the condition, and we have had some minimal success in treating it. What we have been totally unsuccessful in doing is figuring out why a particular patient suffers from a particular delusion.” Werth shrugged. “So sue me for malpractice.” He sipped his drink and crushed a piece of ice between his teeth.

Shrinks. Nothing amazed them, nothing surprised them. And they were so used to dealing with failure that failure quickly ceased to bother them. Kurtz had the surgical outlook; you fixed what was wrong with them and they got better. Kurtz expected his patients to walk out of the hospital on their own two feet and not come back. “Do you believe he did it?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” Werth said.

Kurtz heard him with only a part of his mind. He kept seeing Sharon Lee lying on the floor, naked and dead. Sharon and he had had a rocky relationship from the beginning and they had broken up more than two years before but that vision still bothered him. It bothered him a lot. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. They took him away. Barent said he would be returned in a few days if the evidence cleared him.”

“Bill Mose weighs about a hundred twenty, hundred thirty at the most. He couldn’t have done it even if he wanted to.”

“Sure he could.” Werth held his drink up his mouth and took a long sip, then patted his lips with a napkin. “He could have if he stumbled across her when she was sleeping. And anyway, psychotics tend to be a lot stronger than they look. They don’t have normal inhibitions. If they want something, they go all out.”

“Bizarre behavior does not constitute evidence.”

Werth sipped his drink again and frowned down at the melting ice. “Barent seemed pretty sharp. If there is any physical evidence, I’m sure they’ll find it.”

Kurtz barely heard him. He stared into his beer and felt like grinding his teeth.

“You want something to eat?” Werth asked.

Kurtz shook his head. “No.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to get going. I have a date.”

“Kathy?” Werth asked. Kurtz nodded.

“Lucky girl,” Werth said.

Bill Mose spent the first few hours exploring. Mose was confused. The place seemed like the locked ward he was used to but somehow, it wasn’t. The people had different faces. The rooms had

different layouts and were spaced differently around the floor. There were bars on the windows. The nurses were all male, large and well built. He didn't spend too much time thinking about it, though. Mose had always been intimate with the inexplicable. He accepted it. He had no choice.

He wondered a little about the events of last night but they were already hazy in his memory. The policeman had asked him a lot of questions and Mose had tried to answer them but the policeman had not seemed happy. Then there was another man; Mose was uncertain of his name but he had seemed to be his friend. A lawyer, the man had said, appointed to represent him. Mose recognized that word...*lawyer*. He had seen a lot of lawyers on T.V.

The food here was no different than it had been in the other place. The pills were the same. One of the large nurses handed him his thorazine with a cup of water and waited until he had swallowed it. Then they showed him his new room and his new bed and locked the door.

That was just fine with Mose. Mose tended not to worry too much about the future. The future was a concept that he had heard of but did not really understand or believe in. The bed was soft and Mose was tired and he lay down and prepared to sleep.

Tomorrow could take care of itself.

Kathy Roselli was a Teaching Assistant, working toward her Ph.D. in the English Department at N.Y.U., where Dina Werth had recently been promoted to Associate Professor. The two women were good friends. Dina and Bill Werth had introduced Kathy and Richard Kurtz at what they had described as a "dinner party." It had been an obvious fix up since Kurtz and Kathy were the only guests, a state of affairs that had annoyed Kurtz at first and seemed to please Kathy no better.

Kurtz quickly decided, however, that annoyance in this case would be counterproductive. Kathy had very pale, clear skin, straight, jet-black hair, enormous brown eyes and a lithe, willowy body that set Kurtz' imagination to happily dancing.

Kathy's annoyance lasted a little longer. "A surgeon?" she whispered, and glanced at Dina with a frown on her face.

"He's very nice," Dina said firmly. "Aren't you, Richard?"

Kurtz, who had found himself so hypnotized by watching Kathy's lips that the words coming out of them were just a blur, barely noticed the interchange. He had been trying to discuss the Knicks' chances of going all the way with Werth and he had completely lost the thread of both conversations. Kathy had white, even teeth and very full lips, moist and (he thought) succulent. He found his mouth watering as he watched her. "What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing," Dina replied. "Nothing at all. Would you like a drink?"

"I'll have some white wine," he said, his eyes fixed on those plump, succulent lips.

"I knew a lot of pre-meds when I was an undergraduate," Kathy ventured.

"Oh?" Kurtz replied.

"They studied quite a bit." That was kind of her, Kurtz thought, very kind. He really admired how delicately she put that.

"It's unfortunate," Kurtz agreed. He was determined to be agreeable. "Pre-meds aren't exactly popular, even among themselves."

"Well, they did seem rather narrow minded."

Kurtz nodded. "In general, an unsavory bunch," he said. "But some of us do manage to resist the stereotype. I try to keep an open mind, myself."

"Really?" She smiled at him. "Do you like opera?"

"Can't stand it," Kurtz said agreeably. "How about you?"

Her smile grew wider. "I prefer ballet."

“Ballet,” Kurtz said. “I like ballet. I understand Alvin Ailey is in town. Would you like to go?”

She looked at him and said, “Maybe.”

He called her a few days later and renewed the invitation. She accepted.

That had been four months ago.

He met her tonight at a little place downtown called the Rathskellar. It had wooden tables and dim lighting and served beer, schnitzel and bratwurst. Kurtz ate there often. It reminded him of his days in the Army. Tonight, however, the menu sat listlessly in his fingers and Kurtz noticed neither Kathy nor his surroundings.

Kathy looked at him doubtfully. She had never before heard the name Sharon Lee, but he had blurted out the whole sorry story as soon as she arrived and now he sat silently, staring into his opened menu, unable to concentrate.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” Kathy asked.

Kurtz blinked. “Excuse me,” he said. “What was that?”

“The whole thing is terrible. Wouldn’t you rather just go home and forget about dinner?”

“No,” Kurtz said. “No. That’s alright.”

“What were you thinking about?”

He had been thinking of Sharon Lee’s dead body and Barent and the investigation, and how the guys he had known in Germany would have handled the case. Kurtz had turned down the opportunity for full C.I.D. training because it would have meant at least one more tour of duty and he had already decided what he wanted to do with his life, but he did wonder sometimes how things would have turned out if he had decided differently.

“I was thinking of the Army,” he said. “And Munich. Have you ever been to Munich?”

Kathy shook her head. “I was in Europe the summer of my sophomore year but I never got to Germany.”

“My favorite place was the Hofbrauhaus, the largest beer hall in the world. It dates back to the fourteenth century. The waitresses look like linebackers in dirndl skirts. They carry four steins of beer in each fist. I remember one time, I was sitting outside on the balcony. It was sunset. It must have been July, maybe August. Two guys came in with a young woman and sat down not too far from where I was. She was the most German looking girl I’ve ever seen in my life, about six feet, blonde, broad shoulders, gorgeous. She could have been an advertisement for Lufthansa or the Hitler Youth. The guy I was with—his name was Jimmy Schwartz, from Brooklyn—he looked at this girl and he shook his head and he said to me, ‘My God, it’s Brunnhilde.’ They must have seen us talking but I don’t suppose they heard what he said because all of a sudden the girl turns to me, leans over and says, ‘I know what you’re thinking: typical American tourist. Right?’ Turned out she was a kindergarten teacher from Wisconsin.” Kurtz shook his head. “Things aren’t always what they seem. You know?”

Kathy smiled doubtfully. “I’m afraid I don’t see the connection.”

“I just can’t believe he did it,” Kurtz said.

Kathy peered down at her menu and studied it for a long moment. “Did you know,” she finally said, “that the state of Wisconsin was largely settled by German immigrants? So maybe things are exactly what they seem to be, after all.”

Kurtz stared at her. “Really?”

“Really,” she said.

“I didn’t know that.”

Kathy gave a small, apologetic smile. “Do you still want to stay?”

“Sure,” Kurtz said. “We’re here. We might as well eat.”

“Okay...then I guess I’ll have the sauerbraten, with red cabbage.”

“A wise choice,” Kurtz said. He looked at her, then looked down at his menu. “But I still don’t believe he did it.”

“You’ll have to talk to Mr. Wellesley. He’s our Chief of Security.” The Hospital Director’s name was Edwin Robinson, a tall, thin man with a bald head, prominent jowls and a red face. He wore a blue, three-piece suit with a watch chain stretched across the vest. Barent couldn’t remember ever seeing one of those outside of an old movie. “I already have,” he said. “But I was wondering if you could give me your impressions as well.”

“Impressions? I have no impressions. I believe in facts, and if I don’t know the facts then I keep my mouth shut.”

Not a bad philosophy, Barent thought. “Did you know Sharon Lee?” he asked.

“We have over five hundred physicians on our staff. I believe I’ve met her. I don’t really remember.”

“How about Bill Mose?”

“The psych patient?” Robinson laughed softly. “I do remember him. He’s been here for years. On Christmas and Easter, the hospital holds a special dinner for all the inpatients. The Administrative Staff helps to serve it. We feel that it’s good for morale.”

“Dr. Werth told me that you might know the disposition of Mr. Mose’s money. It seems that he has some.”

Robinson frowned. “He has a lawyer...” Robinson scratched his head. “What was his name?” Then he snapped his fingers. “Pike,” he said. “Jeremy Pike. He’s the one who pays all the bills.”

Barent wrote Jeremy Pike down in his notebook.

“How about Richard Kurtz?” he asked. “Do you know him?”

“A surgeon. He finished his residency and went into partnership with Edward Ornella, one of our senior staff, about three years ago. People here seem to think highly of him. That’s all I know.”

Barent nodded, made a few more scribbles in his notebook, then closed it. “Thank you,” he said. “We’ll keep in touch.”

The staff on the Obstetrical Unit seemed subdued, almost shell shocked. Barent hardly blamed them. Complications and crises were supposed to happen to the patients, not the doctors. Two of the nurses and one of the secretaries were quietly crying. Barent noticed one of them in particular, an attractive young woman with long brown hair and soft, green eyes. Her nametag said Peggy Ryan.

He spent an hour on the Unit, talking with most of the staff. The ones who had worked the late shift had been asked to stay until he finished with them. One or two seemed annoyed at this but none had actively protested.

“Did Dr. Lee receive any phone calls last night?”

“You mean at home?” The ward clerk at the main desk was named Rita Mendez. She was about forty, a thin, homely woman who seemed quietly competent.

“No. I know that she had an emergency case last night, and I know that somebody must have called her in. I mean while she was here, on the Obstetrical Unit.”

Rita Mendez shook her head. “I don’t think so, but I really couldn’t say.”

“Did she have any particular friends on the Unit, anybody that she socialized with, or even talked to very much while at work?”

“Nobody that I know of.”

Sharon Lee, it seemed, was not the most sociable person in the world. She took care of business and kept her personal life private.

“How about the ones with the sniffles?” Barent asked.

“Were they friends of hers?”

Rita Mendez shrugged. “You’d have to ask them.”

He did. Peggy Ryan was still tearful. Her voice tended to crack unexpectedly. “I hardly knew her,” she said. “But she was so young and so attractive. She had everything to live for. It’s terrible.”

The other nurse, a woman named Alice McMahan who appeared to be in her late thirties, said pretty much the same thing. “Dr. Lee was the quiet sort. I don’t think any of us knew her personally.” She shook her head. “I hate it when someone I know dies, particularly someone with their whole life ahead of them. It makes no sense.”

The secretary, a girl barely out of high school named Carol Jennings, could hardly speak. “How could this happen?” she sobbed. “How?”

Barent tapped his notebook and wondered the same thing.

Sharon Lee’s office staff had consisted of a secretary named Barbara James and a nurse named Audrey Parker. Barbara James was a thin, middle-aged lady with prominent white teeth and dyed blonde hair. Audrey Parker was an overweight young woman with a plain, round face and acne. Both of them seemed to have the I.Q. of a flea.

“Arguments?” Barbara James looked at him stolidly. “No. I never heard any arguments.”

“Had she received any threatening phone calls? Any patients upset about anything? Any of the staff who didn’t get along with her, for any reason?”

“Upset? Phone calls?”

Barent wondered if maybe there was an echo in the room. “Yes,” he said.

She shook her head. “No.”

Audrey Parker was just as bad. She stared at his face with round, colorless eyes, her jaws working steadily on a piece of gum. “I don’t know anything,” she said. “Don’t even ask.”

Barent could believe it. Where had Sharon Lee gotten these two? And why? Maybe she had wanted to be the only attractive woman in the office. “I’m afraid that I have to ask,” he said.

Audrey Parker shrugged, a ripple going down her shoulders, spreading across her chest and down to the tops of her fleshy thighs. Barent waited for an instant but she didn’t say a thing.

Ten minutes later, he closed his notebook. Audrey Parker was right. She knew nothing and she couldn’t have cared less.

Wellesley also had been cooperative but unhelpful.

“I miss it sometimes, the action; you know what I mean?” Wellesley had a wistful look on his face.

“How long were you in?” Barent asked.

“Twenty-three years.” Wellesley sighed. “I know it’s dumb. I go home at five every night. I drink a martini and watch T.V. and shoot a round of golf with the Missus. I get to watch the grandchildren grow. I’m not sorry to be out of it, but sometimes...” He shrugged. “Ah, well, you know how it is.”

Actually, Barent didn’t, and he sincerely hoped that he never did. Barent planned on leaving when he hit sixty and never looking back. Wellesley, he suspected, was merely indulging in a little nostalgia, brought on by shooting the breeze with another old pro.

“You like it here?” Barent asked.

“It’s okay.” Wellesley said it without enthusiasm. “The only problem is these people don’t take it seriously. They hire me to do the job but they don’t understand that ninety per-cent of security is the people who work here having the right attitude. After the World Trade Center went down, it worked a little better for a few months, but then it slacked off. I don’t have enough men to make this place

secure. I never will. They want it secure, they've got to take the initiative, ask people who don't belong what they're doing here, assume some responsibility." Wellesley shook his head sadly. "We have guards posted by the front doors, by the E.R. entrance and by the elevators. Anyone going up to the floors is supposed to show either a hospital I.D. card or a pass, which they get at the information desk in the lobby. After eleven at night, they're supposed to sign a book by the elevator. But the fact is that during the day the place is so crowded that anyone can just walk up. Late at night the system works a little better."

"I understand," Barent said, and nodded. About what he had expected. The evening and night shift guards had noticed nothing suspicious. The day shift people had been uncommunicative. They seemed embarrassed, probably unwilling to admit that a murderer had walked in and waltzed right out and they had never noticed the difference. "Can you give me copies of the sign in book for the past forty-eight hours?"

"Sure," Wellesley said.

They were unlikely to be much use but you never knew.

The nurses on the Psych floor had been equally unhelpful. Nobody had any idea how Mose had gotten out. "Probably somebody left the door open." The Head Nurse, a tall, red headed woman named Burke, who had a round face and nice green eyes, said it with gloomy satisfaction. "Maybe the orderly who delivered the pharmacy cart."

The orderly swore it wasn't him, but you couldn't expect him to admit it, and it didn't matter anyway.

Jeremy Pike was equally unhelpful. "The will was quite specific," Pike said. "A trust fund was established, sufficient to pay Mr. Mose's medical care for the remainder of his life. After that, any equity left over is to be donated to the American Cancer Society. Miss Mose died of cancer, you know."

Barent didn't, but he made appropriate, regretful noises and hung up. Scratch that idea, he thought. Nobody seemed to have a motive to frame old Mose.

The preliminary lab results and the initial autopsy findings on Dr. Sharon Lee were ready by the afternoon of the next day. The tox screening would take a little longer but Barent would be very surprised indeed if it showed anything. This was not a case where the subtleties of poison or drug overdose seemed likely.

He closed the door to his office, sat down behind his desk and read the report slowly and carefully. Cause of death: asphyxia. She had been strangled, which they already knew. Deep bruises on both sides of the neck. Microvascular hemorrhages in the lungs and in the brain. There were small bite marks on her breasts and some tiny lacerations in the vagina. But no semen. Too bad. If Mose had raped her, he hadn't ejaculated. There had been a Bic pen lying next to the body. They had examined it for blood or vaginal secretions but it was clean. Barent grimaced. There were a number of foreign hairs on her scrub suit, but they could have come from anyone. The call room was not cleaned as often or as well as it should have been. A lot of hair and skin fibers were mixed in with the dust gathered from the room, and a few of these seemed to match the ones found on the scrubs. Similar fibers had been found on Dr. Lee's clothes, hanging in the call room's tiny closet. Some other, thicker strands seemed to be horse hair, in varying colors. Barent made a note to find out if Sharon Lee had been into horses.

Plenty of fingerprints—only to be expected in a room shared by many people—but none that the Police or FBI files had flagged.



Barent's eyes narrowed at the next section. He read it through carefully, then read it again. There were traces of blood under the victim's fingernails—A negative—which was Bill Mose's blood type. DNA analysis was not yet completed. Barent made a soft, clucking noise and smiled to himself. He picked up another folder, the one on Mose. They were still trying to figure out where Mose had been all night long but so far, no luck. That bothered Barent but it was a big building and much of it was largely deserted at night. Even during the day, it was rare that anyone would find a need to go into the basement storage rooms or the boiler plant. Mose's clothing was dirty, but no dirtier than the corners of Sharon Lee's call room. The knife was a typical dinner knife. Trays with dishes and dirty utensils had been found in five out of the twenty-one attendings' call rooms, some of them obviously there for a day or more. It seemed to have been customary for the doctors to bring food up from the cafeteria. There was no such tray in the room where Sharon Lee had been killed, but Mose could easily have picked the knife up in one of the adjacent call rooms.

Strip search of the suspect had revealed four small lacerations on his left upper arm. The blood stains on the knife were not from Sharon Lee. As Barent had suggested to Wellesley, they appeared to be from Mose himself. There were cuts on his tongue and the inside of his lips. Barent remembered what Werth had said about Mose's propensity for swallowing small objects and shuddered. Evidently the knife had been too big for him to get down. Luckily for Mose, the knife was rather dull. Otherwise he could easily have bled to death.

So that was it. If the DNA typing matched, the case was pretty much wrapped up. They would have enough to go to trial and Bill Mose would spend the rest of his life locked up in the custody of the State. Barent thought about that for a moment and found that he regretted it. It seemed so completely inadequate. Mose was going to spend his life locked up in any case, and Barent doubted that Mose would ever notice the difference between his old Unit and an institution for the criminally insane. People who commit murder ought to be punished. They should have to live in a cramped, crowded cell and sleep on a narrow cot and eat lousy food and dream of a world that they would never see again. Their lives should change, and not for the better.

Barent shrugged and closed the folder.





“SO WHO DO YOU THINK is the most obnoxious surgeon in the hospital?” Steinberg asked. “It doesn’t really matter, just give me a name.”

“Farkas?” the resident said. “He’s pretty obnoxious.”

“Okay, Farkas. Now suppose Farkas turns to you in the middle of a case and says, ‘Doctor, I need a laser beam. I want you to turn that overhead light into a laser beam.’ What would you say to that?”

Like all anesthesiologists, Steinberg thought of himself as a philosopher and a diplomat but was really a repressed personality, hostile, passive aggressive and full of resentments over petty, imagined slights. Kurtz bent over his patient’s abdomen, sewed over an ulcer and listened with half an ear as Steinberg talked to his resident, a kid named Chao.

“I’d tell him he was out of his mind,” Chao said.

Steinberg shook his head. “Big mistake. Of course, he probably is out of his mind but telling him so is not going to help matters. Look at it this way—your job is to make the case go smoothly, right?”

The resident nodded, looking doubtful.

“Now telling him he’s out of his mind is treating him like he’s *not* out of his mind. It’s pretending that he’s really a normal human being, even though he’s acting like a jackass. But you got it right the first time. He *is* out of his mind. You don’t tell a lunatic that he’s out of his mind. What’s the point?”

“So if Farkas asks you to do something asinine, the proper response is to give him a big smile and say, ‘Gee, Dr. Farkas, I don’t know if that’s going to work. But I’ll try!’ Then after you’ve tried, you turn back to him and you say, ‘Gee, Dr. Farkas, I couldn’t do it. I’m sorry, but I tried!’ And he’ll probably think you’re not the best anesthesiologist in the world but, oh, well, you tried. And that’ll be the end of it.

“Now think what would happen if you did what you suggested. You tell him he’s out of his mind, you’d get into an argument and then you’d both end up pissed off. How does that help the situation? Believe me, it doesn’t. It’s completely counterproductive. What you have to do is think of yourself as a psychiatrist of the operating room. You have to always keep in mind that the guy with the knife in his hand is almost as much your patient as the patient. Try to maintain what the psychiatrists call a ‘therapeutic relationship.’ Believe me, things will go smoother.”

“Steinberg,” Kurtz said amiably, “you are such an asshole.”

“Whoops,” Steinberg said, “the walls have ears. Now remember, be therapeutic.”

Kurtz sniffed but otherwise maintained a dignified silence.

Chao smiled behind his mask as Steinberg beamed over the drapes at Kurtz.

“Okay, Steve,” Kurtz said to Nolan. “Why don’t you close?” Steinberg continued to beam. Kurtz gave him a disdainful glance and walked off, his head held high. Behind him, Steinberg chuckled.

Older hospitals, Kurtz reflected, did have a certain elitist charm. Most of the newer places had one large cafeteria, where patients and staff mingled indiscriminately, but Easton still preserved the tradition of a separate dining room for the doctors. The food came from the same kitchen that supplied the patients and the rest of the workers, but they dressed it up with a sprig of parsley or a carved carrot. The tables in the Doctor’s Dining Room were made out of old oak and the chairs had armrests and cushioned seats. The walls were covered with faded oil paintings of distinguished physicians from the hospital’s past and they charged about thirty per-cent more for the privilege of eating there.

Kurtz resented getting ripped off but he ate there whenever he wasn't tied up in surgery; it was expected.

He took a tray through the cafeteria line, shook his head sadly at the day's choices and settled for beef stew, with a side order of French fries and a slice of cheesecake. While he was paying, he surveyed the tables. It was a little past noon and the place was crowded. One table near the window had a few empty seats and he walked over and sat down.

Jim Farkas was holding court. "The Dow can't keep going up this way. I've been raising cash for the past two weeks. We're overdue for a correction; then I'll buy back in." Farkas was a plastic surgeon, and therefore rich. He was also middle aged and stout, with a bald head and a smooth, unlined face that popular rumor attributed to an advertisement for his own wares.

Phil Longo was an orthopedist, a frequent fishing buddy of Kurtz and Bill Werth. Dick Weber was a pediatrician. Pediatricians made a lot less money than surgeons, a fact that the pediatricians, along with all the other practitioners of the self-styled 'cognitive specialties' such as family practice and internal medicine, complained about constantly. In Kurtz' jaded view, a view shared by all members of the 'technical specialties,' the internists and pediatricians deserved to make less because when you came right down to it, they really didn't do much of anything, spending the majority of their working hours either dealing with chronic illness that couldn't be cured or prescribing pills for minor ailments that would go away in a few days no matter what you did for them.

Weber looked both bored and vaguely pissed off, which Farkas seemed not to notice. Longo flashed Kurtz a grin and squinted down at his tray. "I pity your coronary arteries," he said.

Kurtz nodded thoughtfully while he chewed a French fry. "My cholesterol is one-sixty. I've got good genes."

"Lucky you."

"I saw a cartoon once," Farkas said, "I think it was *The New Yorker*, a little guy is sitting in a chair surrounded by elephant tusks, African spears, carved wooden statues, paintings—all sorts of stuff. He's looking at his wife and saying, 'I've decided to put my money into things.'" Farkas nodded decisively. "That cartoon was supposed to be funny but it had a good point. Rare coins have been doing great and now is the time to buy them, just coming out of a pullback. Also art. I've picked up a collection of Miro lithographs for a great price. They should double in three years, maybe triple."

"You do any interesting cases lately?" Longo asked Kurtz.

"Yeah," Kurtz said. "Two weeks ago I had a guy with a hepatic cyst. Echinococcus."

Longo wrinkled his brow. "That's a tapeworm, isn't it?"

Kurtz nodded. "He's from New Zealand. It's common around sheep. People eat the eggs, the larvae migrate to the liver, or sometimes the lungs, and form cysts. If a cyst ruptures, it can be fatal."

"I've never seen a case."

"Hey, Kurtz," Farkas said. "You ever been to Sanibel Island?"

"Sanibel Island?" Kurtz said. "No."

"It's down in Florida, off the Gulf Coast. I've got a little condo there, place on the beach. Perfect for getting away from it all and forgetting the cares of the world."

Kurtz grunted and Farkas peered at him. "Weird, this thing about Sharon Lee. I'm glad they got the guy who did it. You used to go out with her, didn't you?"

"Yes," Kurtz said carefully, "I did."

Farkas nodded, and then, amazingly, he said. "Sorry to hear about it. She was okay." This display of compassion seemed to exhaust Farkas' store of sensitivity. He immediately took off on a tangent

into the realm of Commodities Futures and how Fed policy on interest rates would affect the course of the market.

Kurtz frowned down at his stew, suddenly no longer hungry.

Longo gave a tight little grin and said to Kurtz, "I hear Sanibel Island is pretty nice. We should all go down there and borrow his place for a few weeks. You think he'd mind?"

Kurtz' secretary had gray hair and narrow shoulders and sat very straight in her chair behind the front desk. Her name was Rose Schapiro. The patients liked her. So did Kurtz. She was always cheerful, she never called in sick, she typed eighty words a minute and she had never lost an insurance form.

He arrived back at his office at one o'clock. Mrs. Schapiro looked up from her computer screen and said, "Have a nice lunch?"

"Not bad. Has Ed shown up yet?"

"He's in Room Three," Mrs. Schapiro said, "removing a mole."

"Good," Kurtz said. Edward Ornella was one of the Grand Old Men of the surgical staff but he was overdue for retirement and for most of the past year had been easing himself out. He had recently stopped operating and now confined his practice to consults and office work.

Just then, Ornella came out of the back treatment room, drying his hands with a paper towel and smiling. "Richard," he said. "Nice to see you."

"Hello, Ed."

"Well, I've made my contribution to the ledger for today." He threw the paper towel in a wastebasket and wagged a finger at Kurtz. "Now remember," he said, "time is money." Still smiling, he put on his coat and walked out of the office.

Mrs. Schapiro watched him go and shook her head sadly. "Ten years ago, he was a great surgeon."

"He's still a great surgeon, when he wants to be."

"I guess that's what I mean, then. It's sad."

"I don't believe he sees it that way. He's really looking forward to shucking the rat race."

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Schapiro laughed softly. "I don't think anybody looks forward to being old and useless."

Maybe not, Kurtz thought, maybe not. Not having to work for a living was hard for Kurtz to imagine, much less not wanting to. "Is Mr. Gallinas in yet?" he asked. Gallinas had a lump in his thigh that was probably a benign sebaceous cyst but every once in a while the most innocent appearing lump surprised you. It made sense to take it out.

"He arrived a few minutes ago. He's in the back."

"Okay," Kurtz said. He took off his jacket, hung it in the closet and put on a white doctor's coat. "Room Two?"

Mrs. Schapiro nodded.

Kurtz smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Lead me to him," he said. "And don't ever forget, time is money."

At four A.M., Herman Delgado climbed up the fire escape in back of a brownstone on the lower West Side of Manhattan. The stars shone overhead but there was no moon out and the night was very dark and very cold. Herman's breath steamed in front of him.

All good citizens, even the citizens of the city that never sleeps, were dormant at this hour of the morning. Herman Delgado had little fear of being seen as he lay on his stomach on the cold steel grating of the fire escape and cut a triangular patch out of the window with a glasscutter. He had fixed

a piece of duct tape to the middle of the patch, and when he gave it a quick tap with his gloved fist, it came loose but did not fall. Gently, Herman Delgado lowered the piece of glass into the apartment inside, reached his hand in and released a clasp on the window. He slid the window up and clambered inside.

The apartment was dark. Delgado carefully closed the blinds and pulled a flash light from his pocket. A cone of light played over a stove, dishwasher and refrigerator. Confidently, as if he knew that nobody would be home, he walked down a narrow corridor and into the living room. The main light switch had a dimmer on it. He set it to low and turned it on. Herman Delgado smiled and rubbed his hands together.

The apartment was decorated with low, white leather couches, white shag rug, solid oak coffee table with a glass top, abstract paintings on the wall whose muted purples and pinks blended unobtrusively into the room's decor. Delgado moved into the empty bedroom and began to rummage through the dresser drawers. He took his time and did it right, searching thoroughly and carefully and not bothering to put things back where they belonged. In the middle left hand drawer, he found the jewel box. Opening it, he held up a white gold ring set with a single emerald cut diamond, nodded and stuffed it into the inner pocket of the denim jacket that he wore beneath his coat. He shuffled through the rest of the pieces in the box, selecting most of them and discarding only the few that he knew were not worth trying to fence.

When he was done, he walked back into the kitchen, peered out the window, just to make certain that nobody was lurking down below, then clambered back onto the fire escape and vanished into the night.



• • • •

“IT STILL BOTHERS YOU, doesn’t it? Sharon Lee, I mean.”

“What was that?” Kurtz asked.

Kathy smiled at him. “See? You’re so pre-occupied, you hardly hear a word that people say to you.”

Kurtz shifted uncomfortably in his seat and cracked a weak grin. “Did Nolan ask you to talk to me?” “Liebert,” she said.

“Liebert?” Kurtz blinked. “I’ll have to have a little talk with Liebert.”

“Better not. He might complain to the Dean.”

Kurtz nodded but he barely heard her. “Okay, I won’t have a little talk with Liebert.”

Kathy had a two-bedroom place on Bank Street that she shared with a post doc in history named Jennifer Levy. Jennifer was away for the weekend. Kurtz sat on Kathy’s couch and sipped Scotch and soda and tried to act like what Steinberg might have called a “normal human being.”

Kathy sat next to him and held her own glass of white wine with both hands and took a small sip.

“I’m sorry,” Kurtz said. “I really am. I can’t figure out why I feel this way. Sharon and I broke up almost two years ago. I hardly ever thought about her.” He shrugged. “I’ll get over it. I just don’t know when.”

Kathy nodded. “She was important to you at one time. You can’t forget that.”

“No.” He gave a shaky laugh. In reality, while the murder of Sharon Lee was the focus for his current sour mood, Kurtz knew that he had been vaguely unhappy for quite some time. He had a sort of desperate longing for...something. Something he had trouble defining. Certainty, perhaps. Or maybe just significance...Kurtz had been on the staff at Easton for nearly three years. Long enough to get comfortable. Long enough to get bored. A lot of physicians felt this way. The process took these very smart, very hard driving, very competitive people and it tortured them: all the endless, obsessive work to master the enormous reams of material, the agonizing fear that a moment’s ignorance or lack of attention could result in a mistake and the knowledge that even a small mistake could wind up killing someone. The stark reality was that you had to be perfect because nothing less than perfection was allowed—and nobody was perfect.

All that pressure...for years, always climbing the ladder toward the ultimate, elusive goal: four years of college, four years of medical school, five years of surgical training. Two years at least to build a practice. And then you were there: physician and surgeon, respected practitioner of the art. Real life. No more steps on the ladder, no more goals to strive for, nothing to do but do the same things you were doing day after day—operate in the morning, see patients in the afternoon, never let the battery on the beeper run down because a disaster could strike at any instant—always pretending that you were in control, that you were good enough to do the job when only God Himself was good enough to do the job because sooner or later everybody died.

Doctors were freaks about control. You had to know everything. You had to be on top of everything. Nothing happened by chance. And if anything—anything at all—went wrong, you could be absolutely certain that the god damned lawyers would look at the situation just exactly in that light. It was your fault—even if it wasn’t. No excuses allowed.



And then Sharon Lee had been murdered and it seemed like the last straw, because nothing was more out of control than cold-blooded murder.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just the way I feel.”

Kathy sipped her wine and looked at him over the rim of the glass and said, “Nobody can argue with the way that you feel.”

“Yeah.” He gave his head a little shake. “Like I said, I’ll get over it.” He stared into his drink and hoped it would be soon.

“Barent?”

Barent sighed. He knew this voice and he rarely enjoyed hearing it. “Yes?”

“It’s John Costas. At The News.”

“I know,” Barent said.

“Hey, what’s the matter? You don’t sound glad to hear from me.”

“Well, John, you don’t usually make my job any easier. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Come on, Barent. I gave you great press on the Carmody murder.”

“You gave us credit for catching the perpetrator. That was after calling us idiots for three weeks because we didn’t.”

“I was just doing my civic duty, Barent.”

“And selling newspapers. Don’t forget selling newspapers.”

“Well, selling newspapers is my job.”

“Really? Gee, I didn’t realize that. And here I thought your job was journalism. You know: informing the public, telling the truth, exposing corruption—that sort of stuff.”

“Ouch,” the voice said amiably.

“What can I do for you, John?”

“I hear you have positive evidence regarding the suspect in custody, the wacko. I’m talking about the murder at Easton.”

“Where did you hear that?”

The voice was cagey. “I have my sources.”

Barent grunted.

“Well, do you?”

Briefly, Barent considered denying it but decided against it. Costas had no monopoly on inside sources. If Costas had heard it, then every other reporter in Town would be trumpeting the story and he might as well keep the son-of-a-bitch at least minimally friendly. “Yes. But that’s off the record. Anyway, the Commissioner’s called a Press Conference for tomorrow. He’ll announce it officially then.”

“Hey, no problem. Off the record’s my middle name. I prefer it that way. If they can’t check your sources, then they can’t check your quotes. Know what I mean?”

“Yes, John,” Barent said. “I’m afraid that I do.”

Bill Mose was not bored. He woke up in the morning when the nurses told him to and he brushed his teeth and washed his face and then shuffled out to eat breakfast. After breakfast, he wandered into the social room and smoked cigarettes and watched T.V. Tom and Jerry were followed by Porky Pig and Porky Pig was followed by Chip and Dale. Mose lacked the ability to follow the plots but the colors and the action held his rapt attention.

Vaguely, as he watched, Mose became aware of an uncomfortable sensation somewhere in his abdomen. He ignored it. He had had such sensations in the past and they had always gone away.

He smoked his cigarettes, taking deep sucking drags. Ten other men sat on the couches, all of them smoking and staring at the T.V. When one cigarette burned down to the filter Mose would light another. Once, when he had finished a cigarette, he glanced around the little room. The patients stared blankly at the television screen. Two beefy aides sat in the corners. Nobody was looking at him. He smiled to himself and swallowed the filter, then puffed contentedly away.

Herman Delgado sat on the roof of his building and snorted a couple of lines in the frigid cold. Herman didn't mind the cold. The air was clear and still and the sky was very blue. From up here, the dirty snow down on the street looked clean, white and pure. Sitting out on the roof, he felt like he had the city all to himself. He liked that feeling.

Across the roof, a single pigeon had set up housekeeping in the old pigeon cote that Herman had placed there. When he was sixteen, Herman had seen *On the Waterfront*, with Marlon Brando. He had loved the scenes with the pigeons on the roof and he had gone out and bought himself a pigeon cote. What he hadn't figured on was the fact that birds made a lot of birdshit and cleaning up birdshit was not Herman's idea of a good time. So after a couple of days he had decided to ignore the pigeon cote. He left it where it was, though, and the stupid birds still used it.

His nose and the tips of his ears grew numb, partly from the cold but mostly from cocaine. Herman laughed softly to himself and watched his breath steam away in the frigid air. After a little while, he felt the need to move and he went back inside and climbed down the stairs.

Ten minutes later he was out on the street, feeling good. The money he had gotten for the stolen jewelry would keep him in crack and eager women for a month. He wriggled his toes in his new Bass shoes as he walked down the icy sidewalk.

A black Lincoln Town Car slowed as it passed by him and a window lowered. From the back seat, a grating voice issued. "Herman," the voice said. "I want to talk to you."

Herman hesitated, the hair on the back of his neck prickling. He forced himself to smile. "Boss?" "Get in, Herman."

Herman shrugged and opened the door and slid into the back seat. The door closed and the limousine pulled away from the curb. Inside the car sat the man Herman had referred to as "Boss." Next to him sat the driver, a big guy named Tony, plus another man who did not turn around or even move but who Herman recognized with a jolt of sudden fear. In the back seat, smiling at some secret joke, moving his head to music that only he could hear, staring straight ahead, sat a man whose real name was unknown but who was called "Bose", because his deep voice had reminded the Boss once of the sounds issuing from a stereo speaker.

They traveled for about a mile with the Boss frowning out the window, then he turned to Herman with sad, hooded eyes and shook his head sorrowfully, saying nothing.

Herman stared at him. "Boss?" he said uncertainly.

The Boss drew a deep, resigned sigh. "Herman. Why do you have to be so stupid?"

Herman drew himself up, offended.

"You've been warned, Herman. You're not operating alone any more. You're part of an organization. You show initiative, that's fine. But initiative is supposed to contribute to the good of the organization. Simply put, Herman, you do a job and the organization doesn't get its cut, you become a liability that the organization can no longer afford."

Herman looked at him, at his set expression and empty eyes, and knew sudden fear. He turned to the man sitting next to the driver. "What's he mean?" he whispered.

The man said nothing. He gave a tiny, disgusted snort and shook his head.

"No! You gotta help me!"

Bose turned toward Herman, holding a gun. The black opening at the end of the silencer on the barrel seemed to stare at Herman like an accusing eye. The gun went off with a soft pop. A tiny gout of flame came from the muzzle, and Herman felt something cold spread out from the center of his chest. He looked once at the little dribble of red leaking down the front of his jacket, then his eyes glazed over and the world faded. The last thing he heard before death took him was Bose' deep, beautiful voice saying, "Goodbye, Herman.





IT SNOWED AGAIN ON the night before Christmas, covering the potholes and piles of garbage with a soft, white blanket. The sounds of bells ringing and people singing Christmas carols drifted through the air, and the city— or at least the section of it that was Lew Barent’s main concern—seemed to have grown curiously and unusually calm.

Barent spent most of the week following Sharon Lee’s murder on routine matters. In the mornings he sat behind his old wooden desk and did paperwork. On Tuesday afternoon and again on Thursday he went to court to testify in a case involving a prostitute who had stabbed her pimp. The case was unusual in that the girl was an undergraduate at N.Y.U. with no prior record who claimed to be putting herself through college on the proceeds.

“Men?” she sniffed at one point. “I don’t have a very high opinion of men, thank you, but I didn’t stab him because I hate men. I stabbed him because he beat me. He deserved it and I don’t regret it one single bit.”

She was blonde, freckled, pretty and demure and the jury seemed inclined to believe her. So did Barent.

On Wednesday morning Barent reviewed a report on the current activities of Bill Mose, who had done nothing at all out of the ordinary for a schizophrenic—which is to say, he had done nothing at all except eat, sleep, smoke cigarettes, stare at the T.V., go to ‘occupational therapy’ (which meant pasting paper and sticks of wood together with glue in a futile attempt to make ‘art’) and wander around the Unit.

On Friday morning he received a call from Harry Moran. “Lew?”

Barent breathed a sigh. It had been, he thought fleetingly, much too good to last. “What’s up, Harry?”

“I’m down by the Hudson, opposite 23rd Street.” Moran’s voice stopped.

“Yes?” Barent prompted. “You were saying?”

“Oh, sorry. One of the blues was telling me something. It’s a body in a trash bin. Hard to say how long he’s been in there but long enough to be frozen stiff. Shot once in the chest.”

Barent looked at the diminished pile of papers on his desk and sadly shook his head. “I’ll be right there,” he said.

Bill Mose was off his feed. Usually a careful and meticulous eater, he seemed to have lost his appetite. The uncomfortable feeling in his abdomen had grown over the days to a constant, throbbing pain. He looked at his food and felt nauseous. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead. When he sat up suddenly, a wave of dizziness washed over him.

On the morning of his fifth day in the new place, he found himself unable to get out of bed. When the aide came in to usher him up, he ignored the insistent voice and simply lay there, huddled in misery around the pain in his gut.

“Come on,” the aide said. “None of that.” He reached out a hand, shook Mose by the shoulder. Mose ignored him.

The aide shook his head. “It’s time to get up. You know you’re not allowed to just lie there.” He gave Mose another shake, then grabbed him under the arms and attempted to haul him out of bed.

It was too much. With a convulsive heave, Mose’s stomach spasmed. He groaned in misery and collapsed back onto the bed as a torrent of green bile spewed out of his mouth and covered the legs of

the astonished aide.

“Shit!” the aide shrieked. “Look what you’ve done to me!”

Mose ignored him. He was too busy retching.

“Goddammit...” The aide stuck his head out into the hall and called out to the nursing station. “Get somebody in here with a mop and a bucket!” He wrinkled his nose. “And get a doctor!” He muttered, “They better pay me for these pants. God damn nut case...”

Three hours later, Mose was in an ambulance back to Easton. The staff psychiatrist had had enough presence of mind to evaluate his distended abdomen and high pitched bowel sounds, make a tentative diagnosis of bowel obstruction and put down a nasogastric tube. Mose pulled it out through his nose as soon as the ambulance got under way.

After that, they tied his hands together, which served little purpose since the damage had already been done but which made the aides feel better. The two policemen assigned to guard the prisoner *en route* watched impassively and said nothing.

When they arrived at the E.R., Mose was trundled in on a stretcher and deposited on a hard metal table while his entourage sat down in chairs to wait. After a half hour, Mose again began to vomit. The policemen looked at each other and decided to wait in the hall. One of the aides stuck his head out and said to a passing nurse, “This guy is throwing up. Can’t you get a doctor in here?”

The nurse puffed up her cheeks and gave him an irritated look. “We’re very busy,” she said. “Someone will be with you shortly.”

“But—” the aide began.

The nurse cut him off. “You’ll just have to wait your turn.” Defeated, the aide went back into the room and watched helplessly as Mose continued to retch, covering himself, the table and the floor around him with foul smelling, watery green fluid.

Finally, a harried looking intern came in, took as much of Bill Mose’s history from the aides as they could recall, listened to the patient’s heart, lungs and abdomen, called for x-ray, started an I.V. and phoned in a consult to surgery. Then he left.

Fifteen minutes later, a technician rolled in a portable x-ray machine. The technician glanced at the order sheet and said, “Chest and abdomen?”

The aides looked at him. One of them shrugged helplessly.

The technician grunted. “Help me up with him, would you?” he said. The aides lifted Mose while the technician slid an x-ray plate under his back. “Okay,” he said, “step back.” The aides left the room until the machine buzzed, then returned.

“Now the chest,” the technician said. They repeated the process and the technician left to develop the films.

Mose, his stomach finally empty, closed his eyes and had almost dropped off to sleep when Nolan arrived, accompanied by Liebert. “Oh, boy...” Nolan muttered. “Kurtz isn’t going to be too happy about this.”

Liebert wrinkled his brow and gave Nolan a worried frown.

While they were examining Mose, the technician arrived with the films and Nolan snapped them into a view box on the wall. “What do you think, Doctor?” he asked Liebert.

“Dilated small intestine with air fluid levels. A bowel obstruction?”

Nolan gave him an approving look. “Very good,” he said. “How about this?” He pointed to a hazy shadow surrounding a clear density in the middle of the abdomen.

Liebert wrinkled his brow. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “It looks like metal.”

“Well, it’s not soft tissue and it’s not bone,” Nolan said. He grinned. “He probably swallowed something.” Nolan sat down, quickly wrote up an admission History and Physical and some orders while Liebert examined the somnolent Mose more thoroughly, daintily stepping around the puddles of vomit on the floor.

“Okay,” Nolan said to Liebert. “Let’s go tell the O.R.”

A half hour later, Nolan and Liebert wheeled Mose into the operating room, his hands tied to the rails of the stretcher. Nolan had put down another N.G. tube but Mose had managed to twist himself around and once again pull it out. The two policemen, wearing surgical headcaps, shoe covers and white paper “bunny suits” over their uniforms followed along behind.

Liebert was still arguing. “The patient is incompetent. There’s no consent. You can’t operate without consent.”

“It’s an emergency,” Nolan said. “You don’t bother getting consent in an emergency.”

“Kurtz shouldn’t do it. He’s too involved.”

“Tell it to him.”

Liebert frowned unhappily. “I already did. He told me he’s on call, it’s his patient and I should mind my own business.”

“Good advice,” Nolan said.

“Well, then we should get an ethics consult. There’s always an ethics counselor on call. That’s what they told us.”

Nolan turned and gave Liebert an annoyed look as the stretcher skidded around a corner. “Look, kid, you want to call the chaplain or the hospital lawyer or whatever other bureaucrat they supposedly have available to help us poor nincompoops make difficult moral decisions? Jesus. These people get bothered so seldom with this sort of stuff it would take ten, maybe fifteen minutes for whoever it is to wake up and even understand what you want. Then he’d probably decide to consult the rest of the committee, because frankly, the people who are supposed to make difficult moral decisions are usually better at passing the buck than doing their jobs. All told, you’re going to waste at least another hour, probably a lot more, and this guy needs to be operated on right now. So forget about it.”

Liebert shook his head. “Hell,” he said. “I’m only a medical student. I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“Well, the right thing to do right now is to shut up and let’s start operating.”

Kurtz met them in the O.R. Mose had already been placed on the table. The EKG showed a rapid but regular rhythm and his blood pressure was normal. Steinberg nodded to him when he walked in but was too absorbed in what he was doing to talk and Kurtz sat down in a corner of the room. Truthfully, Kurtz hardly knew how he felt about this case. Bill Mose was small, dirty, miserable and sick. He didn’t look like Kurtz’ conception of a murderer. Still, Kurtz knew that Liebert had a point. Maybe his personal involvement should have disqualified him from operating. Morosely, Kurtz shook his head. Mose was his patient and he wanted to do it, and he was going to do it. And if anybody had a problem with that, they could argue about it later—after it was too late.

With great concern, he watched what Steinberg was doing, ready to step in and lend a hand if he was asked. The induction of anesthesia was particularly dangerous in a bowel obstruction. The intestines were bloated and full and even if the stomach was de-pressurized with a nasogastric tube, there was no guarantee that the tube had gotten into every fold and corner. The patient had to be presumed to have a stomach full of vomitus, and if Mose happened to vomit after the anesthetic had deprived him of his normal reflexes but before the trachea was protected by an endotracheal tube,

then the acidic bile would flow down into the lungs and the patient would most likely die from aspiration pneumonia—if he didn't drown outright.

“You ready?” Steinberg asked his resident. The resident nodded. “You checked your laryngoscope? The suction is on?”

The resident gave him a harried look and nodded again. “Okay,” Steinberg said. He glanced once more at his monitors, then pushed a syringe of a short acting narcotic, waited thirty seconds and gave propofol, followed immediately by succinylcholine. He pushed down on the larynx with his left hand, compressing the trachea onto the esophagus, and waited.

The patient's eyes glazed over and he stopped breathing and thirty seconds later, he began to shake all over as the succinylcholine took effect and every neuromuscular junction in his body discharged at once. Then he stopped shaking. For three minutes at least, he would be completely paralyzed. “Go,” Steinberg said.

The resident inserted the laryngoscope into Mose's mouth and lifted the jaw. “You see it?” Steinberg demanded.

“Good view.” The resident kept his eye on the vocal cords and held up his hand. Steinberg, still keeping pressure on the larynx, handed him the endotracheal tube and the resident slipped the tube between the vocal cords and into the trachea.

Steinberg breathed an audible sigh of relief and turned to Kurtz. “He's all yours.”

“Nice job,” Kurtz said. He stepped outside to scrub and by the time he returned, Nolan had opened a huge incision from the sternum all the way down to the pelvis. The bowel lay inside the abdominal cavity, swollen and distended. Kurtz elbowed Nolan aside, reached into the pelvis and ran his fingers up the length of the descending colon, which felt entirely normal. The same for the transverse and the ascending colon. The ileum too was fine, undulating with peristalsis like a gigantic earthworm. Midway through the jejunem, he found it. “See here?” he said.

Nolan and Liebert peered in. Nolan nodded, reached in, felt the area that Kurtz had indicated and nodded again. “Something hard.”

Kurtz lifted the bowel up onto the skin, made an incision and inserted a suction catheter. At least five hundred cc's of green fluid drained out. Then he put clamps on both sides of the obstruction, cut off the offending segment, plopped it into a basin and handed it to the scrub nurse. He stapled the ends together, told Nolan to close and went over to the scrub table. “Could I see that?” he said.

The scrub nurse handed him the basin. With the clamps on, the segment of bowel looked like a stuffed sausage. Kurtz picked up a knife and cut into it. In the middle, blocking the passage, was a sodden mass of fibrous material. With a Kelly clamp and a pair of forceps, he delicately spread the fibers. In the center of the mass was...Kurtz frowned.

“What is it,” Nolan asked.

Kurtz picked it out. It glinted in the light. “It looks like a gold ring,” Kurtz said.







SHARON LEE AND RICHARD Kurtz had been a beautiful couple. Everybody said so. None of their friends could understand it when they broke up. “It’s my fault,” Kurtz would tell them. “She’s too good for me.” Since nobody felt it prudent to ask him exactly what he meant, the comment tended to forestall further questions.

What he meant, actually, was that Sharon Lee had been a lunatic. He never did completely figure her out, though when he met Sharon’s mother he thought he understood her a little better. Children of alcoholic parents often grew up with a chip on their shoulder and a need for control, which made medicine an appropriate career choice because it was a field where Sharon’s particular craziness was almost admired. Great doc, that Sharon Lee, really takes care of her patients. Except that she was nuts. Kurtz had given her a key to his apartment and once, when he called to tell her he had to break a date because he had an emergency case in the O.R., he arrived home later to find Sharon gone and the telephone ripped out of the wall. Kurtz shook his head in amazement, remembering. Nuts. If there was anything an obstetrician should have understood, it was the unpredictable nature of both their jobs. She was wild in bed, though. She had made love obsessively and passionately, groaning and crying out, almost screaming, which had embarrassed Kurtz at first but which he got a kick out of once he got used to it. But even in bed, she had to keep control. You get on top. Turn that way. Kiss my nipples. Rub there. *Harder.*

Kurtz figured that he was probably not the easiest person in the world to get along with but Sharon Lee had been something else entirely.

Kurtz sighed and looked out the window and sipped his brandy.

His apartment was on the Eighteenth Floor of a building across town from the Medical Center, overlooking the East River. One whole wall was covered with plate glass. Two nights after he had operated on Bill Mose, he lay on the couch in his living room with a snifter of Courvoisier X.O. and watched the water flowing by. The Gil Evans Orchestra with Miles Davis was playing softly in the background: “Summertime,” from Porgy and Bess.

He and Sharon had been together in the summertime. For three whole months, they had spent all their nights together, sometimes at Kurtz’ apartment, more often at Sharon’s place on the lower East Side. There was a little park-like area out back, almost a courtyard, which had a winding stone path surrounded by a garden. They would lie in bed at night after making love and hold hands and stare out at the stone path surrounded by yucca and Japanese maples and azaleas, the stars shining overhead and the moths flying through the beams of antique copper lamps that made their wings glow like they were on fire.

Real romantic. Except it had only lasted for three months, which was probably about a month and a half too long.

Sharon hadn’t been a bad sort, he reflected. Be generous. Their personalities had simply been incompatible. Everybody has their little quirks. Their quirks just hadn’t meshed.

After the breakup, they had hardly spoken for a year. After that...it no longer mattered. They were simply two people who knew each other. They said “hello” when they passed in the hallways and that was about it.

Kurtz had gone out with a lot of women. He had never felt like sticking with any of them...until Kathy. Kathy, he had to admit, was different. He thought about Kathy a lot lately. Kathy could let a

man be. Kathy felt no obligation whatsoever to conform to anyone else's expectations and she didn't expect anyone else to conform to hers. Sharon, in addition to her need to keep the upper hand in a relationship, had always seemed to define herself in terms of other people: her snide, rich friends, her almost but not quite adequate boyfriend. Kurtz, frankly, had no desire at all to re-make himself into anybody's image of the ideal man.

Who might have wanted Sharon Lee dead?

That was the question, wasn't it? Barent thought Mose had done it... Even Bill Werth thought so, and truthfully, Kurtz had no good reason to think otherwise. Only a feeling.

Just then, the phone rang. Kurtz gave it a frown but it kept on ringing. Finally, he reached over and picked it up.

"Hello, Dr. Kurtz?"

"Yes?"

"This is Harry Moran. Sorry to bother you, but Detective Barent and I were wondering if you might be able to come downtown and talk with us."

"Now?" Kurtz glanced at the clock across the room. "It's eight o'clock. I have surgery in the morning."

"Something's come up. We think that you might be able to help."

"Is this about Sharon Lee?"

"We're not interested in your parking tickets, Doctor. You know what I mean?"

Kurtz hesitated. "Where are you?"

"We'll send a car."

"Coffee, Doctor?"

"No, thank you."

"You mind if I smoke?"

Kurtz grimaced at the air outside the glass separating Barent's office from the rest of the squadroom. The place was filled with desks, most of them empty at this hour. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather you didn't. It gives me a headache."

Barent shrugged. "Sure."

The door opened. Moran came in, sat down in a corner and proceeded to look bored. Moran, Kurtz had already figured out, liked to look bored.

"We have a problem," Barent said. He stopped, frowned down at his desk and swirled his cup of coffee with one hand. "Harry and I are no longer as certain as we were that Bill Mose is the one who murdered Sharon Lee."

"Really..." Kurtz sat up straight in his chair. "That's a surprise."

Barent morosely nodded. "Two nights after she was killed, Sharon Lee's apartment was robbed. All of her jewelry was stolen."

Kurtz frowned, mulling this over. Barent gave him a moment to think about it, then said, "Yesterday afternoon, the body of a man named Herman Delgado was found in a dumpster near the Hudson River. He was murdered—shot in the chest." Barent held up a photograph of a white, circular smudge, perhaps six inches across. "You know what this is?" he asked.

Kurtz shook his head.

"It's a gloveprint. You wear them for awhile, leather gloves pick up oils from your hands and your fingers. The pattern of pores and ridges on a piece of leather can be just as distinctive as a fingerprint."

"Go on," Kurtz said.

“That’s an enlargement of a print taken from Sharon Lee’s apartment. It matches the forefinger of the right hand glove that Herman Delgado was wearing when he was killed.” Barent reached into his desk and held up a small object. “And then there’s this.” He flipped it to Kurtz.

Kurtz caught it. It sat delicately in his large fingers, a man’s gold ring, with a black onyx face. The letter “D” was inscribed on the face next to a single small diamond. The ring glittered in the bright light. “It looks like the ring I dug out of Mose,” Kurtz said.

“It is the ring you dug out of Mose. The Pathology Department at Easton didn’t want to give it to us, claimed it was confidential. We had to threaten them with a subpoena.”

The ring had lodged in Bill Mose’s small intestine and a mass of fibrous material, presumably a collection of cigarette butts, had adhered to it, making an obstruction that had blocked his small bowel. Kurtz turned it every which way, but it remained a simple gold ring.

“When he was a kid, Herman Delgado used to run with an uptown gang that called themselves the ‘Blades.’ He had a fairly extensive criminal record. Petty larceny, assault, car theft.” Barent shrugged. “Of course none of this proves anything at all. D for Delgado? Who knows? There are twenty six letters in the alphabet and millions of rings around. No way to tell for certain where Mose ran across it. Still, psych patients don’t move around much and there were never a lot of visitors up there on the Unit.”

Barent leaned back in his chair, emptied his coffee cup and smiled. “No real evidence to tie Herman Delgado to the murder—though I think it’s fairly safe to say he was the one who robbed Sharon Lee’s apartment—just enough to make me look at the possibilities. For instance, it’s possible that Herman Delgado knew something about Sharon Lee’s murder. It’s possible he was killed to keep him quiet. It’s possible that he knew her apartment would be empty because he was the one who killed her—or he knew who killed her.”

“Anything’s possible,” Kurtz said. “It’s possible he knew she was killed because he read about it in the newspaper.”

The corner of Barent’s mouth twitched. “True,” he said. “Sad but true.”

“Why tell me?” Kurtz asked.

“Why, indeed?” Barent shrugged. “If Bill Mose didn’t do it, then who did? You think maybe you could fit the bill?”

Kurtz pursed his lips and stared curiously at Barent’s face. Barent was about fifty-five. He was short for a cop, barely five nine, but he had kept in shape. He had thinning black hair with a bald spot on top and gray eyes behind wire rim glasses. The eyes were looking at him keenly. “Gee, Detective,” Kurtz said. “Why don’t you go fuck yourself?”

Barent smiled thinly and almost laughed. “I could speculate about possible motives—Sharon Lee and you were romantically involved; perhaps there was jealousy, or resentment.” Barent tipped his head to the side, peered into his empty coffee cup. “I have no real reason to think you did it. I have no reason to think you didn’t.”

“Well, I’m not going to give you one,” Kurtz said.

“Could you re-fill this for me, Harry?” Barent handed Moran his cup. Moran poured it full from a pot in the corner of the room and brought it back. “Motive is the question,” Barent said. “Was it just some punk looking for a cheap score?” Barent held a hand up and rocked it from side to side. “Unlikely. There are easier places to find someone to rob than a hospital in the middle of the night. And this business with Mose. Assuming of course that it wasn’t Mose who killed her—about which I am still uncertain—the way he was set up shows a lot of cool nerve. It also implies an inside job, because the average crook on the street who’s committing murder would not have hesitated to kill a

witness who stumbled on what he was doing. The murderer must have been able to recognize that this guy would never be able to identify him, was in fact a human being with about three functioning brain cells.

“And who killed Delgado? You might say that people in Herman’s line of business get killed all the time, and you’d be right. But the timing is certainly curious.”

Kurtz frowned at him, still angry but unable to think of anything constructive. “I think I’ll take that cup of coffee you offered me,” he said finally.

“How do you like it?” Moran asked.

“Cream. Two sugars.”

Moran grunted, went over to the pot and poured Kurtz a cup. Kurtz sipped it. The coffee was good. No reason it wouldn’t be good. Policemen, like physicians, spend a lot of time working at night. They probably consumed gallons of the stuff.

Kurtz felt off balance and vaguely unreal. He hated the feeling. Control, he thought. Kurtz had spent years dealing with an environment that defied absolute control, but one that he at least understood. He was no longer used to feeling so out of his depth and he resented it. Barent sat there while he drank, looking at him with a sad expression on his craggy face.

“So you think someone in the hospital did it,” Kurtz finally said.

“I think someone in the hospital had something to do with it. I doubt they were working alone.”

“Why not?”

Barent smiled his sad smile. “Who killed Herman Delgado?”

“Oh,” said Kurtz. “Right.”

Barent shrugged. “You’re a smart guy, Doc. It takes a lot of brains to get through medical school, learn to do the things that you do. Most crooks are stupid, but in any line of work you’ll find that some people are more successful than others and the really successful crooks are not stupid at all.” He stared down into his coffee, shook his head sadly and sighed. “One more thing,” Barent asked. “Did Sharon Lee ride horses?”

Kurtz looked at him sharply. “She rode all the time. They kept three horses on the estate. When she was a kid, she used to dream about going to the Olympics.”

Barent wrote something down in his notebook, then looked up at Kurtz. “So much for dreams. I wish I could make something profound out of that but I can’t. The only thing I can do is try to catch the people who killed her. Somebody had something to gain by Sharon Lee’s death. Now who could that somebody be?”





KATHY ROSELLI'S FATHER was a professor of Sociology at Stanford. Her mother taught Anthropology. Kathy had grown up in an environment where diversity of thought was supposed to be cherished (so long as it was politically correct thought) and where money was considered to be crass (though it was a constant source of irritation that the academic life paid so poorly). Other cultures—even the most brutally repressive—were accorded endless tolerance and respect but members of one's own culture who happened to think differently from themselves were assumed to be misguided.

Kathy, Kurtz knew, had enough insight into herself to realize that this outlook was, at heart, parochial and contradictory. "I think it was Woody Allen who said, 'Intellectuals are like the Mafia; they only kill their own.'" She had said this to him once while discussing her parents. Kathy liked to think that she had outgrown the dogmas of her youth. Kurtz sometimes had his doubts.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"You look beautiful," he said. "Stop worrying."

She sniffed. "These women spend half their time at the tanning salon and the other half getting their hair done."

"Very few of them start out with your natural advantages."

"Nice of you to say so." She examined her face in a hand mirror, searching for imperfections. There were none.

"I like your dress," he said. The dress was dark blue, slit up the side of one leg and cut low in front. Kathy's hair, usually hanging down her back in a dark cloud, was pinned up in a chignon. He held her coat for her and she slipped her arms in. While she was doing so, he kissed the back of her neck. Her breath caught and he felt her shoulders tremble.

"We could stay in tonight," he suggested.

"What would the doctors think?" she chided. "Not to mention their assorted wives and concubines."

"We could leave early."

"Why would we want to leave early? I'm sure the conversation will be fascinating: gall bladders and esophagogastrectomies, limited partnerships and closed end mutual funds. What could be better than that?" She gave her hair a last little pat, then turned around, gave Kurtz a grudging smile and reached up to straighten his tie, which he tolerated in silence.

"Come on," she said. "Let's not be late."

They said very little in the cab. A thin flurry of snowflakes drifted out of the sky and the wipers slapped at them lazily as they settled on the windshield. Kurtz stared without seeing at the lights and the snow and mulled over his conversation the other night with Barent. "Herman was twenty: the leading edge of the youthful underworld. These kids, they band together into gangs when they're twelve, thirteen, fourteen, sometimes even younger. By the time they're grown up, they've got ambitions. Herman served six months for armed robbery when he was seventeen. He was in and out a total of maybe a year after that on a variety of charges: assault, possession of marijuana, burglary. It's possible that this involves his old gang. It's equally possible that Herman was working alone or took up with another organization. We should know more in a few days. We'll keep you informed," he said.

"I'm not a cop," Kurtz said. "Why are you bothering?"

Barent smiled at him and blinked his eyes innocently. "It's possible that you may be able to help us."

Kurtz stared at him, the skin on the back of his neck suddenly prickling.

"It seems likely that the solution to the murder of Sharon Lee, and possibly Herman Delgado as well, can be found in Easton Medical Center. You already have some knowledge of police procedure. Believe me, we wouldn't ask you to do anything dangerous. Maybe gather a little information."

"Oh," Kurtz said. "Really."

Barent again gave him his humorless smile. Kurtz said nothing. "Like I said," Barent repeated, "we'll let you know."

Kurtz felt for a moment like an ice cold wire was penetrating his brain. He shivered. "Can I leave now?" he asked.

"Sure." Barent glanced at his watch. It was close to ten at night. "I'll have one of the boys drive you home."

That had been two nights ago.

The first drops of rain began to drizzle down and the cabbie turned up the speed on his wipers. Kathy sat next to Kurtz with a dreamy smile on her face.

Kathy's Ph.D. thesis was almost completed, something to do with the relationship between T.S. Eliot and J.R.R. Tolkien. The two men had been part of a literary group at Oxford that called themselves the "Inklings." When he was younger, Kurtz had not been much of a reader. He would much rather be on a trout stream or hiding in a duck blind with a thermos of hot coffee and a shotgun, but when he got to college, an inspired instructor in a required Philosophy course and another in Introductory Literature had grudgingly changed Kurtz' mind. Maybe his time in the Army had a little to do with it, seeing other people and other places, hearing other languages. Maybe it was simply growing up. Whatever it was, Kurtz had read both Eliot and Tolkien and he thought the association improbable, though he refrained from mentioning this opinion to Kathy.

The cab turned down Central Park South and stopped at a building near 56th Street. An elderly black man in a green uniform opened the door and they walked into a mirrored lobby with a red carpet leading across a marble floor to the elevators. The elevator let them out on the Fifteenth Floor.

The door opened to their knock and Phil Longo stood there wearing a tuxedo and holding a bottle of champagne. A pointed party hat with a crepe paper tassel dangling from the tip perched on top of his head. Longo had a big smile on his face. His eyes were bloodshot. "Happy New Year," he said. "Come on in."

Longo was tall, red haired and well built. Even drunk, he looked good. Longo always looked good. Kurtz wondered sometimes how he did it. His clothes were always straight, his expression attentive, even now through an alcohol haze. It was as if the liquor only affected the surface of his brain. The real Longo was immune to it, somewhere deep inside his head. Longo could spend ten hours in the O.R. on a miserable case and come out looking eager for a brisk round of golf.

"Kathy Roselli," Kurtz said. "Phil Longo."

"Pleased to meet you." Longo said. He blinked happily at Kathy's chest. Kathy gave him a smile and swept past him into the room.

The apartment was enormous, the furnishings varied and expensive. A Queen Anne desk sat in one corner of the foyer and a display case high-lighted a collection of American redware. Longo's wife, Kurtz remembered, collected antiques. Or was that his former wife?

"Nice place," Kathy remarked.

Kurtz nodded. "Phil is an orthopod. Orthopods do well."



“Better than general surgeons?”

Kurtz didn't even have to think about that one. “Absolutely,” he said.

“You doctors have quite a hierarchy, don't you? Who's number one? The dermatologists?”

“If you're talking only about money, probably heart surgeons, or maybe plastic surgeons. Orthopedists, neurosurgeons and ophthalmologists are pretty close. Dermatologists do make a lot but not nearly as much as the surgical sub-specialists. On the other hand, you don't get called out in the middle of the night for acne or psoriasis, so if you're factoring in life style, dermatologists would have to be pretty close to the top.”

Kathy frowned at the display case. “It's good to see that virtue is rewarded,” she said. “Let's get a drink.”

They sipped champagne and mingled. Most of the crowd were doctors, mostly male, along with their wives or girlfriends. And the conversation did tend to center around medicine and money. Also vacations. Everyone, it seemed, was just coming back from someplace or about to go someplace else.

“How well do you know Longo?” Kathy whispered to him.

“Pretty well. Bill Werth and I have gone fishing with him a few times and we've had some beers after work. I always thought he was a nice guy. He does a lot of charity work. He'll probably hit me up for a donation to Settlement House before the evening is over. His wife is on the Board. Why?”

“Just wondering. How about the rest of them? Do you know them all?”

“Most of them. Not all.”

A tray of hors d'oeuvres swept past and Kurtz grabbed a mushroom stuffed with crabmeat and a shrimp coated with barbecue sauce and popped them in his mouth. Kathy chose an endive leaf with a slice of goat cheese in the middle and nibbled on it.

A woman who appeared to be in her early thirties came up to them. She had dark blonde hair piled high on the top of her head. Her nose was straight, her skin perfect. She was small, not more than five two, but her figure was softly rounded, with a tiny waist and swelling breasts. “Hello,” she said, and held out a tiny hand. “I'm Sylvia Longo.”

The hand was hot. What was that movie, the one with Kathleen Turner? Body Heat. The character's passionate nature was supposed to be reflected in her temperature. Sylvia Longo even looked like Kathleen Turner.

“This is Kathy Roselli,” Kurtz said, “and I'm Richard Kurtz.”

Sylvia Longo looked Kurtz up and down with a wide smile. She seemed to like what she was seeing. “Phil has told me all about you,” she said. After the initial perfunctory handshake, she ignored Kathy.

“He has? Nothing truthful, I hope.”

“He says that you're a wild man from the hills of West Virginia, rustic, true to life and unspoiled.”

Kurtz nodded and sipped his champagne, wondering if he should be annoyed, also wondering if it was true. “And I thought the tuxedo hid the real me.”

Sylvia Longo's eyes fixed on his face and Kurtz felt suddenly as if she could see right through his clothes. “It's amazing,” she said. “We can talk about emancipation and equality all we want, but every woman I know dreams about being swept off her feet by some handsome, uncivilized savage.”

“Really?” Kurtz blinked his eyes, and felt as if an electrical connection had suddenly been snapped. He turned to Kathy. “Is that why you like me?”

Kathy shook her head. “She said handsome.”

Sylvia Longo's eyes flicked once to Kathy's face, then back to Kurtz. She grinned. “Well,” she said, “enjoy yourself.” And she walked off.

“Antiques?” Kathy said.

“Maybe it was the first wife.”

They wandered through the crowd. A string quartet played quiet music in the corner of the room. A steady stream of waiters offered assorted hors d’oeuvres to the guests and a table near the kitchen was piled with opened bottles of Veuve Cliquot Grande Dame.

“Hi, Richard,” Bill Werth said.

Standing next to Werth was a tall, fat man with a round, red face, who held out his hand. “How ya doing? I’m John Stills, O.B.- G.Y.N.”

Kurtz shook his hand.

“You’re Kurtz, aren’t you?”

“I used to be,” Kurtz said, “but now I’m Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Just a joke.”

Stills wrinkled his brow and peered at Kurtz. “What do you think about this thing with Sharon Lee?” he said after a moment. “Pretty strange, huh?”

Kurtz examined Still’s fat, innocently smiling face and reluctantly decided against strangling him. “Yup,” he agreed. “Pretty strange.”

“I did a lot of cases with her. Good surgeon, you know? Sort of a grouch but she knew her way around a uterus.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Great party, isn’t it?” said Stills.

“You bet.”

Werth tried to suppress his grin and failed, and Kurtz gave him a sour look. “Where’s Dina?” Kurtz asked him.

“She’s around somewhere,” Werth said. “I haven’t seen her in a little while.”

“She’s in the bedroom with my wife,” Stills said, “examining a Ming vase.”

“We’re going to have to leave soon,” Werth said. “The babysitter has to be home by 11:30.”

“Too bad.” Stills smiled widely and blew an alcohol laden breath at Werth, who silently gagged. “We’ll just be getting started by then.”

“I,” Kathy announced, “need more champagne.”

“I’ll join you,” Kurtz said. Behind them, Werth made a helpless gesture in Still’s direction and then rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Kurtz smiled at him blandly over his shoulder.

“A charming man,” Kathy remarked, “rustic, true to life and unspoiled.”

Kurtz gave her a wounded look and silently drank his champagne.

“You want to go to Vegas?” Jim Farkas peered blearily at Kurtz, glanced with drunken interest at Kathy.

“Las Vegas? When?” Kurtz asked.

“I’m getting together a little trip. Middle of March. We’ll stay at the Mirage, maybe Bellagio. Longo’s going, so is Stills.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Farkas turned to Kathy. “I’m Jim Farkas,” he said. “You like him?”

“Sometimes.”

“He’s a cheap bastard,” Farkas said with a crooked smile. “You should drop him, get together with a guy who’ll treat you right.”

Kathy nodded. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. General surgeons don’t make much money.”

“You said it.” Farkas felt through his pockets, came up with a card and handed it to Kathy. “Here’s my number. You get tired of him, give me a call. I mean it. You’re gorgeous.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Okay.” Farkas grinned at Kurtz, leered at Kathy and wandered off. Kathy fingered the card and smiled speculatively at Farkas’ retreating back. She put the card in her handbag. “You never know,” she said.

“Isn’t money supposed to be beneath the notice of the true intellectual?”

“I’m beginning to acquire an appreciation for the finer things in life. Dr. Farkas is a very attractive man.”

Farkas was short, stout and bald. Kurtz snorted. “Uh-huh.”

Kathy laughed softly and hugged his arm. “I think you were right, after all,” she said. “Why don’t we leave early?”





BARENT SPENT NEW YEAR'S Eve at home with the family. Betty made a turkey with stuffing and cranberry sauce and after dinner, they watched television in the living room. An old Western was on, *The Searchers*, with John Wayne and Montgomery Clift, one of Barent's favorites.

About ten o'clock, Michael, the Barents' oldest son, looked at his watch and said, "I've got to get going. I told Janet I would pick her up. We've been invited to a party at the LaRocca's."

Barent glanced at his wife, who gave an imperceptible nod. "Sure," Barent said. "Say hello for us."

Denise, their daughter, was already waiting for her date to arrive, a stockbroker named Paul Janus. Barent didn't like him.

The door bell rang and Denise glanced at Barent. "Don't be too late," he said.

Denise smiled, picked up her coat and kissed him in the middle of his bald spot. After she had gone, Barent felt his good mood beginning to desert him. A commercial came on the T.V. The house grew quiet. Betty watched his face with an expression that he found hard to interpret. Finally, he asked, "What's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing." She shrugged and looked sad. "I was thinking that they grow up so fast." She smiled fleetingly. "I think Denise is going to marry Paul."

Barent shuddered. "God forbid," he said

"Why don't you like him?" Betty asked.

Barent sometimes wondered the same thing. "I'm not exactly sure," he admitted. "I suppose he's okay." He shrugged. "I guess he's just not my sort. He's sort of wishy-washy, you know?"

"You mean because he's polite?"

Barent grunted and gave her a sour look.

"I mean it," Betty persisted. "The way you talk to him, he ought to punch you in the nose."

"Hey," Barent protested, "if he wants Denise, he can put up with a little ribbing from her old man."

"Like the time you said to him that stockbrokers were parasites and why doesn't he get a job that might be of some use to society?"

"Did I say that?"

"Yes. You did. Believe me, I was just as embarrassed as Denise." Betty's knitting needles clicked furiously together.

"Come on," Barent said. "I didn't say anything like that."

"You did, too. You know you did. And I don't want you to say it again."

"Well, I don't believe it." Barent shifted his gaze to the T.V. but a few moments later looked back at Betty. "But if I said it," he added, "I must have meant it."

On the evening of January 2, Barent walked into a bar on East Houston Street. The bar had a sign in the window that said Exotic Dancers. It was the fifth such place Barent had visited since the early afternoon. He sat down at a corner table and waited to be served. The waiter, a fat white man with greasy black hair, a handlebar moustache and a dirty apron, came up to him. "What'll it be?" he asked.

"Heineken," Barent said, "and give me a burger, well done, with some fries."

The bartender grunted and Barent turned to see the show but there wasn't much to see. Maybe it was too early. On a small stage behind the bar, a solitary dancer swayed to the beat of some hard rock that, thankfully, was turned down low. The girl was blonde, of indeterminate age. She looked vaguely into it but moved without much enthusiasm. She had on a g-string and a bangle of fake pearls around her hips and nothing on top. Most of the patrons ignored her. Her nipples, Barent noted, seemed to be painted. That deep red color could not possibly have been natural.

The bartender re-appeared with a green bottle and a tall glass, poured out half the bottle, plunked it down in front of Barent and said, "Your burger will be out soon. Anything else I can get you?"

Barent nodded. "You see that guy?" He pointed to a thin black man wearing a tan fedora and a bright maroon jacket, sitting at the bar and watching the blonde dancer. "Could you ask him to step over here? Tell him Lew Barent would like to speak with him."

The bartender glanced at the black man, glanced back at Barent without changing the blank expression on his face, and walked away. A few minutes later, Barent saw him leaning over, talking to the black man. They both looked in his direction. Soon after, Barent's hamburger arrived. The bartender put it down and turned away without saying a word. A few minutes after that, the black man slid into the seat opposite Barent.

"Barent," he said. "Don't see you much these days."

"Hello, Croft," Barent said. "How's business?"

Croft's business was prostitution. Croft was a pimp, an unusual pimp in that he took a straight thirty per-cent cut, had his girls tested periodically for gonorrhea and AIDS and never abused them. They wanted to leave, set up on their own, find someone else to peddle their wares, that was just fine with Croft. Plenty of others where they came from. Barent had a certain grudging respect for Croft, though he would never have let him know it. Barent, like most cops, had busted his share of prostitutes because that was part of the job but personally, Barent didn't believe in victimless crimes. Croft ran his business like it was a business. He was also a very sharp character.

Croft put a pained expression on his face. "Now what you wanting to ask me a question like that for?"

Barent cracked a smile. "Old times' sake, I suppose. It seemed so natural."

"Natural is over rated, you ask me. You got floods and earthquakes and cancer and everything else. What so great about natural?"

Barent couldn't argue. He shrugged and finished his beer. "I figured you might be here. You always were a creature of fixed habits."

"If you mean I'm a man who knows what I like, then you right."

"It occurred to me that you might be able to help me."

"Help you?" Croft smiled. He tilted his head back and peered out at Barent from beneath the brim of his hat. "Why should I do a thing like that?"

Barent let a hurt expression cross his face. "Didn't I put in a good word for you with the parole board?"

Croft looked doubtful. "You did? They never told me that."

"I need to know something." Barent went on as if Croft had not spoken. "You know a guy named Herman Delgado?"

Croft puffed his cheeks up, frowned. "Can't say as I do."

"Small time hood: robbery, assault. He used to run with a gang called themselves the Blades. He's dead—shot through the chest."

"Hard to establish a relationship with a man who's dead."

Barent shrugged. "Anything you can find out, I'd like to know. Who did he work for? Who didn't like him? Anything."

"Delgado..." Croft wrinkled his nose, nodded. "I remember the Blades real well: crazy little motherfuckers." Without another word, he got up and went back to his place at the bar and stared as if mesmerized at the jiggling breasts of the blonde dancer.

The burger was pretty good, Barent thought. He finished it slowly, left a nice tip and walked out. He had a few more people he wanted to see before heading home.

New York City was not where Richard Kurtz would have expected himself to wind up. Kurtz was an only child. His mother had died when he was three years old and he barely remembered her. His father was a quiet, hardworking man who never remarried. He had run the farm the way his father and his grandfather had before him and he seemed to assume that Kurtz would do the same.

Kurtz was a farm boy, small town all the way. He was a smart farm boy, though. He had graduated number three in his high school class, which surprised Kurtz almost as much as it would have surprised his friends, if they had only known it. They didn't know it because Kurtz never told them. He was embarrassed to admit it.

He knew he wanted out of there, though. His father might be disappointed in him but Kurtz was smart enough to know that scrabbling in the dirt for the rest of his life was not how he wanted to earn a living. Kurtz wanted out bad and the Army was the easiest, quickest way.

A lot of guys had hated the Army. Not Kurtz. Kurtz figured it was a good deal. You put in your time, did as you were told, they showed you a slice of the world and taught you some skills. Then they paid your way through college when you were done. For a poor kid, it was a very good deal indeed.

So here he was, thirty-six years old, with everything he had thought he wanted in life and somehow, it just wasn't enough. He looked out the window at the cold gray skies and felt a leaden weight on his soul.

I've been alone for a long time, Kurtz thought. A long time. Kurtz spoke to his father occasionally but they didn't have much to say to each other. Kurtz felt genuinely bad about that, but he didn't know what to do about it.

Kurtz had found himself waiting for Barent to call. He knew that he shouldn't. He told himself he was being an idiot, that Barent could only get him involved in something that he would regret, but he couldn't get the image of Sharon Lee, naked and dead, out of his mind. He wanted her killer found. His sense of the natural order demanded it. The thought that a murderer might be lurking in the hospital halls, walking to and fro, eating in the same cafeteria, perhaps working in the same operating room as Richard Kurtz, filled him with alternating horror and grinding rage. He found himself staring at the people he passed, wondering.

He had a week off starting Saturday. He performed no cases after Wednesday. He did not want to leave behind any patients who might go sour while he was gone. He saw a few people in the office, identified a hernia and a possible gall bladder and scheduled them for consultation by Medicine. By the time they were ready for surgery, he would be back.

As he walked into the office on Friday afternoon, he saw that Mrs. Nelson, Farkas' secretary, was sitting behind Rose Schapiro's desk. Farkas had surgery on Friday and the secretaries often covered for each other when their own doctors were scheduled to be out of the office. Mrs. Nelson was a plump, jolly woman with curly black hair. Kurtz liked her.

He saw his last patient, a lady who had had an axillary node biopsy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and who was now doing well after radiation therapy, and walked out of the office at four o'clock,

ready to party. Mrs. Nelson beamed at him. "Have a nice time, Doctor," she said. "We'll see you in a week."

Kurtz smiled at her. "Thanks. I'll do my best."

Freedom. He stopped on the hospital steps and breathed it in like a drug. It was January Fourth but the sun was shining, the day unseasonably warm. In a few hours he would be in an airplane, heading south. He could hardly wait.

"Jaime Ruiz," Moran said, "is a known psychopath."

"Yeah?" Barent squinted down the length of his cigar, puffed it alight and settled himself comfortably in his seat.

"Yeah," Moran said. "One time he sliced a kid's ear off in a bar because the kid didn't laugh when Jaime told a joke." Moran swerved the car to avoid a pothole and almost skidded on a piece of ice. "How come I always have to drive?" he complained.

"You like to drive," Barent pointed out. "I don't. I like to think."

Moran grunted.

"And do you know what I'm thinking at this particular instant?" Moran looked at him. Barent grinned. "You see that girl?" he asked. Walking along the street was a tall blonde with a red dress, a heart shaped face and a very hard body. "What about her?"

"Would it surprise you to know that I would very much like to walk up behind her, rip her clothes off and fuck her brains out, right there on the street?"

"Not at all," Moran said. "So would I."

"But you're not going to, are you?"

Moran pursed his lips and looked pained. "No?"

"I'm not going to, either," Barent said. "You know why?"

"Tell me," Moran said.

"Because my wife wouldn't like it."

"Yeah?" Moran said doubtfully.

"Yeah. There are rules, you see? Truth to tell, I've got just as many dirty little secrets running around my brain as anybody else. Even Jaime Ruiz. But I behave myself, because that's what all of us are supposed to do in a civilized society."

"Ah, of course," Moran said. "A civilized society."

"Yes, a civilized society. Did Jaime have an abused childhood?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because I don't care, that's why. I don't care why a psychopath does what he does. Lots of people have a tough life. Most of them get married, have kids, make money and follow the rules. They don't turn into psychopaths. So fuck him."

Moran looked at him. Barent gave a sour grin and blew a smoke ring into the air. "I'm looking forward to this," Barent said. "It's not every day I get to talk to a known psychopath."

The Vanity Social Club was on East 87th Street. It had opened only the week before and apparently was doing good business. Barent and Moran pulled the car into the parking lot on the side of the building and walked in. The front door opened onto a short corridor, which led up to a curled iron gate and a stand up desk where a tall Hispanic male in a tuxedo presided over those lucky enough to be allowed entrance. Beyond the gate, strobe lights flashed purple across the dance floor and a laser show went on over a stage where a redheaded singer was doing a passable imitation of Gloria Estefan. Her band would never be mistaken for Miami Sound Machine but they weren't bad, the sax especially.



Barent flashed his badge. "Detective Barent," he said. "Detective Moran. We're here to see Jaime Ruiz."

"You have an appointment?"

"An appointment?" Barent raised his eyebrows to Moran. "Do we have an appointment?"

"Why, I do believe so," Moran said. He screwed up his face in thought. "The precinct social director was supposed to call and make one. Why don't you check your book?"

The usher frowned down at his desk and said, "Just a minute." He walked off.

"An appointment," Barent said, and rolled his eyes. "Oh, man."

The usher came back and said, "Come with me." He led them around the dance floor to a set of stairs. Two more men with tuxedos stood at either side of the staircase. "Up there. Third door on your right."

"Thanks," Barent said.

He looked at Barent without expression, turned and walked away. "Well, what's the matter with him?" Moran asked.

The upstairs hallway was covered with a thick, burgundy carpet. Two crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The third door on the right was open. The room inside looked more like a bedroom than an office, except for a dark, wooden desk sitting beneath the window. The window was covered with red velvet drapes. A wet bar sat in the corner. An enormous bed lay against one wall and a bleached oak wall unit covered the entire opposite wall. A thirty-five inch television screen was set in the wall unit. It was playing a movie: *Blade Runner*, by Ridley Scott. Three men sat in felt covered reclining chairs in the center of the room. Two of these were big and burly and looked Barent and Moran up and down with idle suspicion. The third man was dressed in tight black jeans and a red silk shirt open nearly to the waist. His neck was covered with an assortment of gold chains that hid the upper part of his chest. He had black, slicked back hair and a thin black moustache. A small diamond earring sparkled in the lobe of his left ear. He said, "You Barent?" He didn't look up.

"Yes," Barent said.

"I'm Ruiz." He glanced at Barent from the corner of his eye.

Barent looked around for a place to sit down but there were no more chairs and none of the three looked inclined to offer him one.

"You like this movie?" Ruiz asked.

"It's not bad," Barent said.

"This movie kills me. At the end, when the replicant hold the cop out over the edge of the building and think about letting him drop, that just tears me apart. But he knows he's dying so what would be the point? Let the poor bastard live. Why not?" Ruiz shrugged. "I would have taken him with me, but what the hell?"

"To each his own," said Barent.

Ruiz looked up at him. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk." Barent frowned. "I could talk better if I had a place to sit down."

Ruiz looked at him, looked at the two men setting on either side of him and gave his head a little jerk. One of the men rose to his feet and walked over to the bar. Barent sat. Ruiz turned back to the screen.

"You know a guy named Herman Delgado?" Barent asked.

"Herman Delgado?" Ruiz frowned. "That name's familiar. What did he do?"

"I don't know what he did. He's dead."

The expression on Ruiz' face did not change. After a moment, he yawned. "People die all the time. Why come to me?"

"Our records indicate that Herman used to run with the Blades. The Blades answered to you."

"Oh?" For the first time, Ruiz looked interested. "What happen to him?"

"Someone shot him in the chest and dumped him in a garbage can."

Ruiz puffed out his cheeks and nodded. "That's too bad," he said.

"You wouldn't happen to know why, or even who, would you, Jaime?"

Ruiz gave a small shake of his head. "My people, they come to me when they're in trouble, I try to help them. This Herman Delgado, he a short fellow, little beard?"

"Yes."

"I remember him. He mind his own business. He leave the old neighborhood maybe six months ago. I don't know where. I don't know why. I had no reason to ask. One of my people, he want to go into business for himself, I can't stop him. He ever need me, I'm here."

"Regular little Godfather, aren't you, Jaime?"

Ruiz looked hurt. "What for you want to insult me, Barent?"

"No reason, I guess. We cops tend to be like that."

Ruiz smiled slightly and spread his hands. "Anything else I can do for you, Barent?"

"If you hear anything, you'll let me know." It was a statement, not a question.

Ruiz' smile grew wider. "I always cooperate with the law. It's how I got to where I am today."

Barent reached into his wallet, pulled out a card. "It's got my number," he said, and handed the card to Ruiz.

Ruiz turned the card back and forth in his fingers, as if not quite certain what to do with it. Then he shrugged. "Sure, Barent. I hear anything, I'll give you a call."





CANCUN: SUN, SAND AND fun.

Kurtz had asked Kathy to come along with him. She had seemed to think about it, searching his face with a crooked smile. Then she gave a tiny shrug and a shake of her head. “Thanks for asking,” she said, “but I need to work on my thesis and I could use the time. Have fun.” Kurtz couldn’t argue, but it seemed pretty obvious that there was something else on her mind. He was moody the whole evening after that, which Kathy ignored—if she even noticed.

A blast of heat took him in the face as soon as he exited the plane and he shuddered luxuriously, filling his lungs with the heavy, perfumed air. He walked into the terminal, retrieved his suitcase from the baggage checkout and took a cab from the airport to the Hotel Meridian, a brand new tower of adobe, red stucco and glass rising twenty stories above the beach.

He spent the next two days taking long walks by the water, soaking up the sun on his bare chest, eating *ceviche* and snapper baked in a salt crust and *arroz con pollo* and loin of pork with *mole*, swimming in the sea and floating on his back in the enormous pool.

As evening of the second day approached, he lay on a lounge chair by the water, sipping a piña colada and listening with sleepy contentment to a mariachi band composed of five young boys in Mexican hats playing *Guantanamera* in the shade of a grove of palm trees. Three more hats lay on the grass and people passing by would stop and listen for a few moments and occasionally throw some loose change into the hats.

Threading their way through the crowded forest of lounge chairs, an elderly lady with curled gray hair and a bald fat man wearing a striped bathing suit and carrying a beach bag walked in his direction. They settled themselves on lounges. The man took a tube of Coppertone out of the beach bag and squirted some on his abdomen. Then he pulled a paperback book out of the bag and idly flipped through the pages while rubbing in the Coppertone with his other hand. Kurtz, lulled by the sun and the warmth of the breeze, his eyes half closed, could see the woman looking him up and down. She smiled, showing large, perfect teeth, and said, “What do you do, young man?”

Kurtz shook his head drowsily. “Excuse me?”

“I saw you with that drink and I wondered, is that a piña colada? I always wanted to try a piña colada. I always think about asking for one but then I always change my mind at the last instant and order rum and coke instead. Isn’t that silly? So I thought I’d ask. Are you an American? You look like an American. What’s your name? Where are you from?”

Kurtz stared at her and shook his head, still half asleep.

The fat man reclined the head of his lounge and lay back, his enormous abdomen rising up like a white dome through his unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt. He gave Kurtz a quick look, shrugged his shoulders and stared at the pool.

“I’m Esther Brinkman.” She jabbed the fat man with her elbow. He ignored her. “This is Stanley, my husband. We’re from the Bronx. Do you like Mexican food? We love it. We come here every year. We used to go to Acapulco and we tried Ixtapa once but Cancun is much nicer. They give you everything you ask for and they have their own water system, all along the beach, but don’t try the restaurants in town, you might be sorry.

“I’m Richard Kurtz,” Kurtz said. “I’m from New York.”

“See?” Esther Brinkman jabbed her husband again, who grunted but didn’t bother turning his head. “I can always tell, something about the eyes. Are you here all alone? A good looking young man like yourself?” Kurtz, beginning to get a hemmed in feeling but not knowing how to get away without seeming rude, said, “Yes, actually. I am.”

“That’s a shame. Stanley, isn’t that a shame?”

Stanley nodded. “Uh-huh,” he said. “A shame.”

“So what do you do?” She held up a hand suddenly. “No! Don’t tell me. Let me guess.” She squinted at him, her little eyes almost closing, her mouth looking like a raisin. “You’re in sales. You’ve got that look, something very persuasive.” She nodded triumphantly. “I can always tell.”

“I’m a surgeon,” Kurtz said. It just slipped out, and immediately he thought, *You dope.*

“A surgeon?” Her eyes grew wide. “A real surgeon?”

“Yes,” Kurtz said weakly.

She stared at him. “Stanley,” she said, and clutched her husband by the hand. “He’s a surgeon.”

Stanley turned his head and gave Kurtz a blank look. He shook his head sadly and rolled his eyes.

“I have someone you just have to meet. Where is she?” Mrs. Brinkman half rose from her seat and urgently scanned the crowd.

*Oh, no,* Kurtz thought. “I have to be going,” he said.

Esther Brinkman ignored him. Her eyes lit up and she frantically waved at someone behind Kurtz’ chair, all five fingers wriggling in the breeze.

“Please,” Kurtz said. “You’ll have to excuse me.” He stood, turned, stopped, stared.

Oval face, long lashes, wide green eyes. She was tall. From the tips of her toes to the top of her head must have been a solid, willowy six feet. She wore a white string bikini, which covered very little of her tanned, lush figure. Long blonde hair hung halfway down her back, tied in a ponytail. Her hands were on her hips, head cocked to the side at a wary angle.

“This is Lenore,” Mrs. Brinkman said. “Our daughter.”

Kurtz turned his head, stared at Mrs. Brinkman. She gave him a thin smile. He turned back to Lenore and cleared his throat. “Pleased to meet you,” he said.

Lenore Brinkman said nothing and looked at her mother. She did not, Kurtz thought, look pleased. Mrs. Brinkman stared back at her, a triumphant little grin on her face.

“This is Richard Kurtz,” Mrs. Brinkman said, “from New York. He’s a surgeon.”

“A surgeon,” Lenore said. Her voice was smooth and deep, like molasses. Her eyes went back to Kurtz’ face. She gave her head a tiny shake, pasted a look on her face that was less than enthralled, and breathed a resigned sigh.

Kurtz said, “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure,” Lenore said. She glanced at her mother. “Not here.”

Mrs. Brinkman smiled like a bright, predatory bird. “Have a good time,” she said to Kurtz. “I knew you two would get along.”

“I don’t know what it is about the women in my family,” Lenore Brinkman said. She had put on a white jumpsuit and they sat on the hotel balcony, sharing a plate of shrimp with hot sauce and two Dos Equis. The sun was setting over the ocean and the sky overhead was shot full of purple and orange streaks. Far across the sand, phosphorescent waves broke rhythmically on the beach. “They’re all crazy. My uncles are such nice, sweet men but my mother and both her sisters are completely out of their minds.”

“She seemed to know what she was doing,” Kurtz said.

“She knows exactly what she’s doing.” Lenore peeled a shrimp, dipped it in sauce, and bit off half of it. “My mother is a very smart woman. She could have done something with her life, except that girls growing up back then weren’t supposed to do something with their lives. Instead, she bossed around my father and drove me and my sister absolutely nuts.”

Lenore Brinkman had a degree from Cooper Union in Graphic Art and worked in advertising. She was twenty-six years old. She was just getting over a relationship that had not worked out.

“Harrison’s father is an S.O.B. and Harrison didn’t have the backbone to stand up to him.” She shook her head. “Things have been difficult for them lately. They’re old money and money’s been tight, to which I say *tough*. Let them learn how the rest of the world has to live. They deserve it. Harrison’s father is president of a Savings and Loan.” Lenore snickered and took a chug from her beer.

“I had my doubts about coming along but maybe my mother was right. Get away from it all.” She shrugged and wrinkled her nose at the shrimp she was peeling. Then she said, “Look, I don’t want to string you along. You seem like a nice guy but I don’t know if I’m ready to get involved with anybody just yet.”

Kurtz sipped his beer and stared at the thin crescent of sun still barely visible above the horizon. “I understand,” he said. He thought about Kathy and wondered for an instant what she might be doing, back in New York. “Maybe I’m not ready either.”

Lenore suddenly grinned. “Mom was all over you like a pekingese chewing a bone. You looked pretty funny.”

“I was trying to escape without being rude.”

“Sometimes you just have to be rude.” Lenore put her feet up on the lower rail and leaned her head back. Her hair glinted in the fading light. “Doctors...” She glanced into her beer, then drained the glass. “Every Jewish mother’s dream.”

“Why is that?” Kurtz asked.

“Why?” Lenore shrugged. “I suppose it’s cultural. Jews admire education and it takes a lot of education to be a doctor. And there’s the old stereotype about Jews and money; it’s at least partly true. Jews like money. Doctors make money.”

“Everyone,” Kurtz said, “likes money.”

“With us it’s different. For five thousand years, sooner or later a Roman or a Cossack or a Nazi or the Spanish Inquisition would take everything we had and either kill us or kick us out. But if you had money, maybe you could buy a ticket to somewhere else; maybe you could bribe the soldier who comes to arrest you; maybe you could get away. Money buys security and Jews are nuts about security, an attitude that I can understand completely. I mean, Jews know they’re paranoid, but just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean nobody is out to get you.

“Now me...” Lenore shook her golden hair out over her shoulders and ran her hands through it. “I liked art. Art is cultured. Jews are very into culture so my parents approved—they could tell their friends I was a genius. But culture is chancy. From a financial perspective, there is nothing in the slightest bit secure about culture. It is absolutely astounding the speed with which a genius can turn into a bum in the opinion of your family if you actually want to do something cultural for a living. You want to play the piano, learn to paint, study ballet: wonderful! You want to *be* a pianist, or an artist, or a dancer? Forget it; you’ll never amount to anything. You’re a bum. Of course, if you somehow manage to actually be successful, then you’re a genius again.” Lenore shrugged, and peeled another shrimp. “Oh, well.”

Kurtz thought for a moment of his own boyhood, running barefoot through muddy fields in summer, trekking through snow that came up to his chest in winter. Nothing too cultural about that, and nobody he grew up with seemed to miss it.

"I'm twenty-six," Lenore said. "Mom's getting worried. A few years ago, if I wanted to go out with someone who wasn't Jewish, she'd threaten to disown me. I say 'she' because my father never had anything to say about it anyway. Now she's fixing me up with strange men." Lenore gave a little laugh. "I know my mother. She's willing to compromise. You're not a Jewish doctor, but you are a doctor."

The sun had set completely; only a faint orange glow still lingered over the horizon. A waiter walked around the terrace with a cart full of citronella lanterns, lit them and put them up on poles around the railing. Kurtz could hear the band beginning to play inside the Hotel. "Do you like to dance?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

"Let's dance," he said, and took her by the hand.

"Mrs. Delgado?"

She was short and fat, with round, plump arms and a round, moon face. She looked at him silently, with open suspicion.

"I'm Detective Barent." He showed her his badge. "This is Detective Moran. Could we come in?"

She stared at them, her large black eyes flitting back and forth between their faces. Finally, she stepped aside and they walked past her into the apartment. Paint was peeling from the walls. Tiny puddles of rust lay on the floor where radiator pipes had leaked. Cheap plywood tables covered with vinyl, three rickety garden chairs and an old collapsed couch with springs showing through the fabric were the only furniture. The faucet over the kitchen sink steadily dripped.

Mrs. Delgado stood in the center of the room, looking at their faces silently and expectantly. Barent cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about your son," he finally said.

She shrugged. "Why do you care? He wasn't your son."

Barent frowned at this and felt the muscles across his shoulders tightening. "That's true," he said carefully. "But I have children of my own, and I sympathize with what you must be feeling." Barent meant it. His own youngest son, Benjamin, had died from leukemia three years ago, at the age of fourteen. Ever since then, Barent had had a lot of difficulty dealing with the bereaved parents of dead children, even if the dead children were career criminals like Herman Delgado.

Moran, who knew this, looked at him with moody surprise. "May we sit down, Mrs. Delgado?"

She glanced at the couch and shrugged. Barent sat. Mrs. Delgado lowered her weight into one of the chairs, which swayed beneath her. Moran continued to stand.

"Mrs. Delgado, it's my job to try to find the people who killed your son. Anything at all that you can tell me might be helpful."

"You a little late to be helpful. Herman, he run with a bad crowd but that the only crowd he ever know. It's hard for a boy to grow up right when he don't have no one to show him how." She sat up straight, her face closed in, her eyes fixed somewhere beyond Barent's shoulder, staring into nothing.

Barent nodded. He flicked a glance at Moran, who gave a minute shrug. He took a small cardboard box out of his pocket and removed the cover. Inside the box lay the ring that Kurtz had retrieved from Bill Mose's intestines. "Mrs. Delgado, could you tell us if your son had a ring like this?"

She looked at it without much interest. "I don't know," she said. "We don't see Herman too much. He spend most of the day sleeping. At night, he was mostly out." She shook her head sadly. "I don't know," she said again.

"Could you tell us who his friends were? Did he have a job? Who did he work with?"

The door opened. A girl no more than twelve stood there, dressed in a green blouse and jeans, frowning first at Barent, then at Moran. "Herman hang out with Jimmy Ramirez," the girl said. "Jimmy Ramirez his best friend. And Carlos Rivera—but Carlos move away and we don't see him no more."

"My little girl, Angela," Mrs. Delgado said. "She's right. You ask Jimmy Ramirez. I don't know nothing about Herman's business. He come in late. He say nothing. Sometimes he give me money." She shrugged. "That's all I know."

Angela sat down at the table, cradled her cupped hands beneath her chin and swung her legs back and forth under the chair. She watched Barent and Moran as if they were strange creatures in a zoo.

"Have you seen this ring before, Angela?" Barent asked.

Angela stared at the ring for a long moment, frowning, then gave a little shrug. Barent glanced at Moran, carefully closed the box and put it back in his pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Delgado," he said. "Thank you, Angela."

Angela nodded her head. Mrs. Delgado said nothing. As the door closed behind them, Barent could see her staring at the cracked, faded wall. She looked as if she would stay there forever, Barent thought, staring, with no expression on her face.







ON THE EVENING OF JANUARY 6th, a street gang in the Bronx known as the “Black Dragons” invaded the territory of another gang that called itself the “King Cobras.”

Two days before, a fourteen-year-old named Shawna, who had been sleeping with a Black Dragon named Jackson, had gone into a convenience store to pick up some lipstick. Shawna browsed the shelves, turned her head quickly around to see if anyone was watching, and pocketed the one she liked. She stopped at the counter, paid a quarter for a chocolate covered cherry and went out the door.

“Yo.” A tall, well built young man smiled at her. He had a thin moustache and hair cut into a brush, with a gold skull set into the lobe of his left ear.

“What you want?” Shawna asked.

“What I want?” The young man looked her up and down and smacked his lips. “Why don’t you come along with me and find out?”

“With you?” Shawna thought about it while she chewed her chocolate covered cherry. The young man’s jacket was black and looked like real leather. He wore Adidas High Tops and his hair had twin lightning bolts cut down to the scalp on both sides. “You don’t look like so much.”

“No?” He smiled wider, reached into his pocket, pulled out a round tin container that said “Happy Days Chewing Tobacco” and pulled off the top. The tin was filled with soft white powder. He held it out to her. “I got what you want if you got what I want.”

Shawna looked at the powder, looked up at the boy’s grinning face and swallowed. Abruptly, she nodded.

The boy thrust the tin back into his pocket. “Come on,” he said.

“What’s your name?”

The boy looked at her. “Major.”

Shawna followed Major down the street and up the steps of a dingy brownstone. He pulled open the door of an apartment and they both entered. Sitting around a table, passing a pipe, sat five more boys. They looked at her blearily and they all smiled. The door closed.

“Now wait a minute,” Shawna said.

Major’s eyes danced in the light. “You gone get all you can handle tonight, girl. Indeed you are.”

Ten hours later, the boys allowed Shawna to leave. She was crying and she tottered down the street on unsteady legs.

Two nights later, fifteen young men, all of them armed with knives, three carrying pistols, walked into Cobra territory, seeking revenge. The Black Dragons moved in groups of three and converged on a small park where members of the rival gang were known to hang out. One bleary eyed boy sitting on a bench and smoking a joint by himself looked up and saw them. He shook his head, as understanding slowly penetrated. “Hey,” he said.

One of the Black Dragons stuck a knife in him and he screamed. Boys came running from all over the small park, saw what was happening, pulled their own weapons and jumped into the fray.

Somebody on the street must have made a phone call because within fifteen minutes, the distant sound of sirens began to penetrate the screams. Slowly at first, then quickly, the gangs disentangled themselves and melted away. They left behind five dead bodies and seven who were too badly wounded to run. One of these was Jimmy Ramirez, who belonged to neither gang but who had had the bad luck to be conducting a cocaine purchase in the park at the time that the attack took place.

Five police cars, lights flashing and sirens screaming, came roaring up. The cops surveyed the scene, made their calls and within another few minutes, the ambulances arrived.

“Oh, man,” Jimmy Ramirez said. He said it over and over. “Oh, man. Oh, man.” He held a hand over the hole in his side but blood still leaked out. His eyes darted this way and that and he licked his lips with a tongue gone dry. “Oh, man.” He mumbled something under his breath, coughed and then cried out at the sudden pain.

They carted him into an ambulance and sped off. At the E.R., the trauma team ripped off his clothes, put an I.V. into each arm and each leg and drew blood for routine labs and a Type and Cross. By this time, Jimmy Ramirez was almost unconscious, his blood pressure barely detectable. They rushed him out the E.R. doors and down the hall into an operating room where a surgical team stood waiting. Within minutes, Jimmy Ramirez was asleep and the surgeons began working.

The knife had carved a deep laceration in his liver. After six hours of surgery, his wounds had been repaired as well as could be. They still oozed but the liver was soft and held stitches poorly. Any attempt to place more of them was liable to make things worse. The surgeon put packs all around the abdomen, hoping that constant pressure would do the job, pulled the edges of the abdominal wall together and covered them with tape. He didn't suture. In a day or two, if Jimmy Ramirez lived, he would be brought back to the operating room for removal of the packs. They brought him to the I.C.U. unconscious and left him there, oblivious to the soft sigh of the ventilator forcing oxygen into his lungs.

Two hours later, Jimmy Ramirez went into D.I.C.—disseminated intravascular coagulation—his clotting factors and platelets all used up in a futile effort to stem the flow of blood through his wounds. The I.C.U. staff poured in plasma and platelet transfusions as fast as they could, but there was too much organ damage. The platelets were chewed up as soon as they were transfused and Jimmy Ramirez began to ooze from every pore. The heart, deprived of its blood supply, slowed and then fibrillated. A surgical resident began to compress Jimmy's chest while the nurses desperately squeezed in more blood. After an hour, after twenty-seven units of packed cells, twenty units of platelets and ten units of fresh frozen plasma, Jimmy's heart had irrevocably stopped. The Chief Surgical Resident looked at the monitors, shook his head and announced, “Okay, that's it.” Reluctantly, the team grew silent, stared at each other, drew long, weary breaths, shrugged and shuffled out. A respiratory therapist turned off the ventilator as she left. The nurses took a quick break for coffee, then wrapped the body in plastic and sent it down to the morgue.

The little man sitting in the chair across from Barent had coffee colored skin, black hair and a brush moustache. He wore a blue policeman's uniform. His name tag read *Arnaldo Figueroa*. “Call me Arnie,” he said.

“Okay,” Barent said. “Arnie.” Barent had requested help, somebody who knew the neighborhood that Jaime Ruiz, Herman Delgado and Carlos Rivera had grown up in, and Arnie had been temporarily re-assigned from a precinct uptown. Barent liked him immediately. He was quiet but he paid attention. Arnie used to be a member of a gang that called itself the Latin Sharks but his mother had placed him in a Catholic middle school when he was thirteen and the nuns, Arnie was fond of saying, had “beat it out of him.” He had been a policeman for two years.

“We're not getting anywhere,” Barent complained. “First Delgado, now Ramirez. Every lead we have in this case turns up dead.” Arnie nodded curtly. “I don't know how much I can do for you,” he said. “I mean, I know a lot of those guys but they know me too. Ruiz' men wouldn't give me the time of day.”

“I understand that,” Barent said, “the problem at the moment isn't Ruiz. It's Carlos Rivera.”

Moran, who was standing in the corner, glumly nodded. There were over fifty Carlos Riveras listed in the New York phone books. One of these was the former Fire Commissioner of New York. Seven were old men; two had left the city more than a year before; one was in jail; one was an Engineer who lived in Queens and worked for Computer Associates out on Long Island. None of them could possibly have been the Carlos Rivera who used to be friends with dead, twenty year old Herman Delgado. "Right," Moran said. "We can't find him."

"Carlos Rivera..." Arnie said. "I barely remember him: a tall guy, good looking."

"I don't know," Barent said. The Carlos Rivera they were looking for had been busted at the age of twelve for dealing crack. He had been placed on probation as a youthful offender and then vanished from the criminal justice system. He had no other record. "We've got a picture but he was just a kid." Just a kid who peddled cocaine. The picture had showed a skinny boy with a sullen smile and brooding dark eyes.

"You say he's gone?"

"Angela Delgado says he hasn't been around for at least six months. The neighbors confirm it."

"I still have some contacts," Arnie said. "I'll keep my eyes open but don't hold your breath."

Barent sighed. "Anything you can do would be appreciated."

"Sure." Arnie nodded, got up and left, leaving a leaden silence in his wake. After awhile, Moran shook his head and scratched the side of his cheek. "Maybe it's time to pursue the other angle: Sharon Lee."

"I suppose we're going to have to." Barent moodily drained his coffee, walked over to the pot and poured himself another cup. "God damn it, we let on that the investigation is still open, the media will start asking questions and suddenly it's a circus. Right now it's a closed case. Nobody cares. We have room to move."

"Move where?" Moran asked.

"Yeah." Barent shook his head. "That's the question, isn't it? Jesus, you would think we could find out something as simple as who some two bit hood was working for."

"Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was on his own. Maybe he had nothing to do with it."

"And maybe he just happened to fall into a dumpster after accidentally shooting himself in the chest." Barent cracked the wrapper off a Partagas cigar and puffed it furiously alight. "I admit the evidence tying him to Sharon Lee is hazy. But there's no doubt that Delgado was murdered and we are paid to find murderers. If it turns out that we're looking for two different murderers, then that's just fine with me."

The phone on the desk rang. Barent scowled at it for three rings and then picked it up. "Hello?" he said. "Barent."

Barent listened and said nothing for a long time; finally he said, "You're sure?" Then he nodded, drew a deep, slow breath and smiled.

"Okay," he said. "I understand. Thanks." He put down the phone and looked at Moran. "Tony Korda," he said.

Tony Korda was half German, half African-American. Tony's father, a soldier during the War, had met his mother in occupied Berlin and brought her back to the States. Tony, the youngest of five children, was born eight years later. Tony's father stayed in the military and rose to the rank of Master Sergeant. They moved frequently, spending time at half a dozen bases in half a dozen cities, finally settling in at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

Alone during the day while her husband was at work, and lacking any skills that would make her employable, Tony's mother drank. She took good care of the children when she was sober, but she

was rarely sober. When Tony was six, at four o'clock in the afternoon, drunk, Tony's mother fell asleep while smoking a cigarette in bed and died in the ensuing fire. Tony was rescued by a fireman who arrived just before the building collapsed but he suffered third degree burns over forty per cent of his body and burns inside his lungs that left him with pulmonary fibrosis and asthma. He spent the next ten years in and out of hospitals.

Tony Korda always seemed to be in trouble after the fire that wrecked his childhood and took his mother's life. He never touched alcohol, and the smoke from marijuana made his lungs wheeze like burning coals in his chest but he seemed to consider any other psychoactive substance that he could eat or snort or shoot up to be in a different, more acceptable category. At the age of sixteen, he stole a car, took it for a ride with a girl named Lucy and, high on cocaine, wrapped the car around a tree. Lucy died and Tony Korda, still a juvenile, spent six months in detention. He behaved himself for a while after that, graduated high school and went to City College for a year. Tony did well in college but was expelled during his Sophomore year after rape charges were filed against him by a female student.

Twenty years later, Tony Korda controlled a small criminal empire. He was an intermediate link in a chain that began in the jungles of Colombia and ended with a street dealer handing a packet of white powder to a poor kid in a back alley somewhere in New York. He took a bite out of local extortion, ran prostitution in a small segment of the South Bronx, had at least three prominent labor leaders in his pocket, owned illegal betting parlors and had his finger in every scam that took place along the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

"Oh, I would love to nail Tony Korda," Barent said. Just the name was enough to start his blood humming. "I would really, really love to nail Tony Korda."

"What would Tony Korda be doing with a small time guy like Herman Delgado?" Moran asked.

"Anything." Barent shrugged. "They all start out small time. Run numbers, deal drugs...Croft wasn't sure. He said Ruiz and his organization have been doing some business with Korda recently." He stopped for a moment. The cigar smoldered in an ashtray, slow coils of smoke rising up to the ceiling while Barent leaned back in his chair, thinking. There was plenty of precedent for one gang joining up with another. Sometimes they did it willingly, sometimes not. And sometimes no accommodation was possible and one or both sides got wiped out. New York had seen plenty of gang wars. The Blades were no longer just a bunch of kids. Kids have dreams but grownups have ambitions and a guy like Tony Korda could help turn ambitions into reality.

Barent stretched himself in his chair and scowled down at the cigar, which had gone out. He picked it up, lit it again and stuck it in his mouth. "The word Croft got was that Herman tended to be a bit headstrong but Korda was generally satisfied with the quality of his work. That's exactly the way he put it: 'satisfied with the quality of his work.'" Barent loosened his tie, snorted into his coffee cup. "Jesus, a fucking connoisseur of criminal aptitude."

"What business would Tony Korda have with Sharon Lee?" "Well, that's what we have to find out, isn't it?" Barent said. He knocked the ash off his cigar into an overflowing ashtray.

"Ruiz claimed he hadn't seen Herman in six months," Moran said. "You don't think he could have been lying?" He cracked a smile.

"It's hard to believe," Barent said sadly. "He seemed like such a nice guy, for a psychopath."





WELLESLEY HAD BEEN right, Barent thought. Even at night, the place hummed with suppressed activity, dozing now and then but never quite sleeping. A crowd of people milled about the Emergency Room waiting area, reading newspapers, staring into space, wandering up and down the hall. The one security guard posted by the corridor that led into the rest of the hospital had left his position twice in the half hour that Barent had watched him, once to grab a cup of coffee and once to go to the bathroom. Anybody could have waited for the opportunity and walked right in.

Barent himself carried a pass issued by Robinson, the Hospital Director. So far, nobody had asked to see it.

He shook his head, pasted a preoccupied look on his face, stuck his hands in his pockets and walked briskly down the corridor. As he passed the guard station, the officer looked him over, evidently decided that Barent did not look sufficiently suspicious and looked away.

*Oh, brother,* Barent thought. He walked by without saying a word. He turned right at the end of the corridor and soon came to the elevator bank in the lobby. Another guard was posted here but he barely even glanced at Barent.

Barent pushed the button, waited, and when an elevator arrived, went up to the Sixteenth Floor. From the lobby upstairs, two sets of double doors led into patient units on either side. Barent chose the one to his right, pushed open the doors and walked down the hallway. The corridor was dimly lit. Most of the rooms contained two beds and most of these held sleeping patients. At the end of the hallway was a nursing station. One nurse sat at the desk, writing in a patient chart. She looked up when he walked past. "Visiting hours are over."

Barent flashed her a grin and showed her his pass. "I'm just looking around," he said.

She looked at the pass doubtfully. "Well, please don't disturb the patients," she said. "They're trying to sleep."

"You bet."

He came to a stairwell, pushed the door open and walked up one flight to the call rooms. In the residents' wing, a few tired looking young men and women dressed in scrubs wandered up and down the hallway. They looked at Barent curiously but none of them bothered him. The attendings' wing was silent. A row of blank, closed doors stretched down the hallway. Barent tried a doorknob. It was locked. He tried another. It turned and he entered. The room was empty, the bed neatly made. Idly, he pulled open the top drawer in the dresser. A dirty coffee cup, two old *Playboys* and a copy of *Road and Track* sat there. He closed the drawer and walked out. About half of all the doors he tried were unlocked. The floor seemed deserted.

He turned and headed back to the elevators and punched the button for the Obstetrics Suite.

O.B. was brightly lit. Most babies, he seemed to recall, were born in the middle of the night. A team of doctors and nurses dressed in scrubs was pushing a bed down the hall toward what appeared to be a delivery room. A woman, obviously very pregnant, lay on the bed, groaning, while a man who might have been her husband held her hand and walked along beside, looking helpless.

"I've got to push!" the woman moaned. "I've got to!"

One of the doctors grimaced as he guided the bed around a turn. "Not yet," he said. "Just pant. We'll be there in a second." They vanished into the delivery room.

A nurse in a white uniform came bustling up to Barent. "Can I help you?" she asked.

He showed her the pass. "I'm just observing," he said. "Ignore me."

The nurse puffed up her cheeks and frowned. "Well, fine," she said, "but don't get in the way. And stay away from the patients."

Barent had no intention of bothering the patients. Like most men, he was more than a little squeamish regarding the mysteries of birth. "You bet," he said.

The Obstetrics Floor was arranged in a circle, with labor and delivery rooms around the outside. The central core of the circle contained chairs, desks, carrels where doctors and nurses could work on charts or dictate records, a large pot of coffee sitting on a table and a bowl full of donuts. A secretary sat at one of the desks, entering data into a computer. Occasionally, a laser printer hummed and spat out sheets of paper. Barent sat down on one of the chairs and watched. Over the next half hour, he saw women being pushed in and out on beds and stretchers, doctors and nurses bustling about, prospective fathers pacing back and forth, wringing their hands. It all looked quite routine. "Aren't you the policeman?" a voice said.

He looked up. It was the nurse who had been crying the morning that Sharon Lee was killed, the one with the round, cheerful face, Alice something...McMahon? Yeah, that was right. McMahon. "Detective Barent," he said.

"Of course." She hesitated. "If you don't mind my asking, what are you doing here?"

"We'll be going to trial soon. The alleged killer of Dr. Lee went from the Psych Unit up to the Seventeenth Floor without being seen. I wanted to take another look at the layout of the elevators and stairs. The defense will try to claim that it couldn't have happened." As a story, it wasn't much, but it would do.

"Alleged killer?" she said doubtfully.

"It's always the 'alleged killer' until the jury finds them guilty, even if you catch them standing over the body with a smoking gun in their hand."

"If you say so."

"Are things always this busy at night?" he asked.

She grinned. "Usually."

Barent was curious. His real reason for being here was to see who came and went and what the staff up here did about it. Sharon Lee had performed a Caesarian section, gone upstairs and been murdered. Who would have known when the case was finished, or where she would have gone afterwards? Apparently, the immediate world.

"Alice?" A pretty woman with dark hair came up to them. Barent remembered her clearly: Peggy Ryan. "The lady in Room Two is nine centimeters. She'll be pushing soon." Peggy Ryan frowned at Barent.

"Hello, Ms. Ryan," he said.

"Hi," she said uncertainly. "Detective Barent?" Barent nodded.

"I've got to get going," Alice McMahon said, and she hurried off. "Can I help you with anything?" Peggy Ryan asked.

"You work here long, Ms. Ryan?" "About four years."

"You like it?"

"I love it," she said simply.

From one of the delivery rooms, a long, agonized shriek rang out. Peggy Ryan ignored it. So did everyone else. Barent shuddered. Peggy Ryan suppressed a chuckle and then smiled. "You get used to it," she said.

"Better you than me," Barent said.



Peggy Ryan smiled even wider. "It's in my blood. My father was a doctor here. I was planning on becoming a nurse ever since I was a little girl."

"Not a doctor?"

"I thought about it, but nurses are closer to the patients. Doctors rarely have time to get to know their patients and that bothered me. A nurse is all I ever wanted to be."

Barent could understand that. His own father had been a cop. Being a cop was all he had ever wanted to be. He inwardly shrugged. "Well," he said, and hauled himself to his feet. "I'm not learning anything here and I've disturbed you all long enough. Have a good night."

She nodded. "Thank you," she said. Another shriek came from one of the rooms. Barent winced. Peggy Ryan smiled again and hurried away.

Kurtz spent most of the next three days with Lenore Brinkman. They swam in the pool together, snorkeled off the beach and went jet skiing across the placid blue water of the bay. They hired a boat and went out to where the reef dropped off into deep water, and they pulled in kingfish and snook and near the end of the afternoon, Kurtz hooked a marlin. He fought the great fish for an hour while it sounded, the line humming off his reel, then he frantically took in slack when the fish charged for the surface and jumped, its body flashing blue in the sunlight, water spraying in all directions like foam. Then, abruptly, he lost it. The line went dead and he reeled slowly in, the hook at the end empty, a deep aching fatigue settling slowly into his arms and shoulders.

The mate shrugged. The Captain looked at him, an unlit pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth, and then squinted out again at the water, already searching for new prey.

"Oh, Richard," Lenore said, and put her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

He smiled wanly. "The one that gets away is supposed to be the biggest." He shook his head and sighed.

Always he thought about Kathy. Kathy sitting with her legs curled under her on the sofa, reading while flames crackled in the fireplace. Kathy looking at him across a table, the light from a candle throwing shadows into the hollow between her breasts. Kathy with her hair spread out over her pillow like a billowing, dark cloud, reaching up for him in the night.

The time he spent with Lenore seemed unreal, like time spent somehow in a dream, in a time outside of time. They had no work, no cares, nothing to do but swim and play and eat and dance and listen to music and make love. Except that they didn't make love. Not yet—but, he thought, soon. Kurtz didn't push it. He didn't want to. The thought of Kathy kept intruding and Lenore—he knew it though they never spoke of it—had memories of her own to contend with.

The three days that he spent with Lenore were perfect. He loved to look at her, the way her eyes flashed green, the way her teeth sparkled, the way her golden hair floated around her head. She was beautiful. She was perfectly conscious of the fact and perfectly, completely, un-self-conscious.

Lenore's mother kept out of their way, her smiling, satisfied face studying their progress from a distance, charting off the milestones. They both ignored her.

On the afternoon of the third day, they walked together along the beach, searching for seashells. The sun was large on the horizon. The water lapped at their bare feet in little waves, which made soft, sucking sounds as they died and drifted back toward the sea.

"Here's one," Lenore said, she stooped and picked up a shining, bright green shell with brown dots, half buried in the sand. She brushed off the clinging grains of sand and handed it to Kurtz.

"It looks like a cowrie," he said.

He put it in the canvas bag he carried at his side. A wave ran over their feet, and he felt himself sink in just a little as the water washed out the sand from under him.

Lenore wrinkled her nose. "That tickles."

She pulled one foot out of the sand and stumbled and Kurtz quickly took her arm to steady her. She gave him a strange look, then slowly, she pulled her arm back and they began to walk, looking for shells. After a few hundred yards, she looked up at him and gave him a crooked smile and took his arm again and leaned against him. Kurtz said nothing. He looked down at the top of her golden head and stopped. Slowly, he turned toward her and put his arms around her back, not exerting any pressure at all, letting her know she could step away if she wanted to. She fixed her eyes on the sand, her head buried against his neck. Slowly, hesitantly, her arms came up and across his shoulders. Then she raised her head, her eyes closed, and he kissed her.

The kiss lasted a long time, and when they broke it she sighed and leaned against him.

"Let's look for shells," she said.

Kurtz held her tighter for an instant before letting her go. "Alright," he said.

Three hours later, they met for dinner at *Le Palais*, a French restaurant on the top floor of the resort. It was night. Stars shone in through the windows and a full moon glowed down on the rippling water. Kurtz wore a dark blue suit with a tie and Lenore had on a green, silk dress. The restaurant was half full. The lights were kept low and the tables far apart. Candles flickered, and waiters and wine stewards dressed in tuxedos discreetly patrolled the floor.

"Madame, Monsieur, my name is Ramon. I will be your Captain for the evening."

Ramon was tall, slim, young, with curly black hair. He looked like a movie star. He handed them both menus, flashed them a white smile, and vanished.

"Mine doesn't have prices," Lenore whispered. "I hate it when they do that."

"Don't worry," Kurtz said. "Everything is expensive."

She smiled, and he felt his heart go thump. Christ, he thought, I feel like an adolescent idiot.

"Monsiuer, Madame, something to drink?" The wine steward was short, slim and balding, with a pencil thin moustache on his upper lip. "Some wine, perhaps?" He offered Kurtz a wine list inside a red leather folder, then walked off while Kurtz studied it.

Kurtz ordered *Dom Perignon*, which the wine steward opened with a flourish and a pop of the cork.

"To good times," Kurtz said. Lenore smiled at him very slightly and they both drank. The waiter wheeled a cart over, removed the rounded lid from a tray and served the first course: lobster cocktail, with a sauce made from capers and mustard.

"This is wonderful," Lenore said.

Kurtz smiled in the flickering light and poured another glass full of champagne. "Are you trying to get me drunk?" she asked.

"Would you like me to get you drunk?"

She gave him a grin that vanished as soon as it appeared. "You don't have to get me drunk."

He nodded, and drew in his breath, the back of his neck prickling. She had a faint scattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her green eyes looked black in the dim light. Her golden hair glowed. He stared at her and it seemed suddenly as if she moved in slow motion, as if the two of them existed in their own private world in their own private Universe.

She moved her fork. She raised her glass. She smiled. Kurtz blinked and the moment vanished.

Kurtz hardly remembered what he ate after that. He could look at nothing but Lenore's face, wondering. They had an orange soufflé for dessert, with coffee. The waiter spooned a creamy sauce on top and they ate it quickly, before it collapsed.

By the Captain's stand at the entrance to the restaurant, a man stood talking. Kurtz noticed him from the corner of his eye but paid him no attention. The man showed something to Ramon, who looked at it, looked back toward Kurtz, and nodded. The man stared at their table. He straightened up, squared his shoulders, and walked slowly toward them. He was tall, as tall as Kurtz, with curling, light brown hair and a straight nose. Lenore had her back to him. He stopped, looked down at them, seemed about to say something, then shook his head. He walked past the table and turned, facing Lenore.

She looked up and blinked. For a moment, she said nothing, then her face turned abruptly white and she raised a hand to her cheek. "What is this?" she said. "A joke?"

The man grinned sheepishly. His face was as white as Lenore's. His eyes flicked to Kurtz, then back to Lenore. "No, it's not a joke. Can I sit down?"

Kurtz looked up. The tall young man refused to meet his eyes. He stared at Lenore with parted lips and an almost desperate look on his face.

"What's going on?" Kurtz asked her.

"This," Lenore said disdainfully, "is Harrison Thomas, Office Manager of First Amsterdam Savings and Loan, whose ancestors landed on the Mayflower and whose family never, ever forgets it, or lets anyone else forget it either." She gave a little sniff. "My former fiancé."

"Oh," Kurtz said. "Oh." He grinned, then coughed, and suddenly he felt laughter beginning to bubble up. He couldn't help it.

"What," Lenore demanded, "is so funny?"

"Nothing." Kurtz looked back up at Harrison Thomas. "Sure," he said. "Sit down."

Lenore seemed about to say something, then stopped. Harrison Thomas flashed Kurtz a quick, grateful grin, then sat.

Thomas glanced warily at Kurtz once or twice, but aside from that his eyes stayed glued to Lenore's face. They sat for almost a minute. More than once, Harrison Thomas opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Lenore refused to look at him. He was a good-looking guy, Kurtz thought, a good-looking guy who knows he's fucked up. Again, Kurtz almost laughed—but this time he managed to stifle it. Placidly, he stirred cream and sugar into his coffee. He sipped it slowly, then sighed and shook his head.

Lenore's eyes snapped toward his face. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

She frowned. Kurtz turned to Thomas. "Look, you wanted to sit down. Why don't you go ahead and say what you have to say?"

Thomas swallowed. "Alright." He turned to Lenore. "I was wrong," he said. "I'm sorry. I want you back. I love you."

Kurtz smiled at him, raised his glass of champagne and took a sip. *Bravo*, he thought. Short and sweet.

"You love me." Lenore said it clinically, in a level, detached voice. "Yes," Harrison Thomas said.

"But your father disapproves. You're supposed to marry a rich WASP bitch. Someone just like yourself."

"I don't want a rich WASP bitch. I want you."

"Finally figured that out, did you?"

"Yes."

"But what are you going to say to Daddy?"

“I already said it. He didn’t like it.”

For the first time, Lenore looked at him with interest. “No?”

Thomas shook his head. “No.”

“Good,” Lenore said.

Thomas looked at Kurtz longingly, silently begging him to leave. Kurtz cheerfully grinned back at him and sipped his champagne. Lenore smiled at Kurtz, then turned back to Harrison. “Go on,” she said.

He glanced desperately at Kurtz, who blinked at him innocently. “Alright,” Harrison said. “I love you. I want to marry you. I can’t live without you.”

“That’s sweet,” Lenore said. “Richard, isn’t that sweet?”

“Sweet,” Kurtz agreed. “Very sweet.”

“I’ll think about it,” Lenore said. She rose to her feet and turned her head so that Kurtz could see her face but Thomas could not, and silently mouthed the words, *Thank you*. “I’m going to leave now,” she said. “I can’t take any more of this.” She walked off, not looking back.

So much for the perfect evening, Kurtz thought. He raised his glass to Harrison Thomas and said, “Champagne?”

Thomas looked sick. His face was white; his hands trembled. “No,” he said. “Thank you.” Shakily, he rose to his feet. “I’m sorry. Really. I know how this must have looked to you, but there was nothing else that I could do. I meant everything I said. I was a fool.”

“I understand,” Kurtz said.

“Thanks.” Thomas spread his hands to the side and helplessly let them fall, then turned and walked out, his feet dragging.

Kurtz looked at him go and breathed a long sigh. The table looked awfully empty. He turned to the wine steward and motioned him over. “I thought I noticed Hennessy X.O. on the menu.”

“Of course, Monsieur.”

“Good,” Kurtz said. “I’ll take a double.” He smiled wanly. “And please ask Ramon to bring me my check.”





A LIGHT KNOCK ON THE door woke him up. The sun shone in through the window shades, making slanting lines of light across the bed. Blearily, Kurtz looked at the clock. Eight A.M. “Just a minute,” he called out. He put on a robe and opened the door. Lenore stood there.

“Can I come in?” she asked.

He grinned slightly. “Sure.”

She sat in a chair by the table next to the window and stared down at the beach, already filling with sun worshippers. From this distance, they looked as tiny and silent as ants.

“Would you like some breakfast?” he asked. “I can call room service.”

“No, thanks.” She shook her head. “I can’t stay long.”

“Ah...”

She smiled at him briefly. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.” Her voice held genuine regret.

“He seemed,” Kurtz said delicately, “to be an okay guy.”

“He is an okay guy.” She had on jeans and a white tee shirt with a *Big Apple* logo on it. Her hair was held back with a pink plastic hairband and she wore no makeup. But her cheeks glowed. “Look,” she said. “I’m really, really sorry. I felt that I owed you an explanation.”

“What’s to explain? The situation is obvious.”

She shrugged. “I guess it is, but I still wanted you to know: I liked you. I liked you a lot. If Harrison hadn’t come back...”

Kurtz folded his hands together and nodded. Down below, a surfer had just caught a wave. He rode it toward shore and stepped off his board just as it slid up the beach.

“I loved Harrison. I guess I still do. And I’m proud of him, too. It couldn’t have been easy telling his father to go to hell.” Lenore grinned. “I’m going to take a lot of pleasure out of tweaking the old bastard’s nose.”

“It’s okay.” Kurtz shrugged. He added, “I liked you, too.”

Lenore looked at him, nibbled the inside of her cheek thoughtfully. “I’m glad you understand. I would never have done anything to deliberately hurt you.” She grinned. “What I regret more than anything else is the way last night turned out. I was...looking forward to it.” She stared him in the eye and looked as if she were thinking it over. “I’m still tempted but I know I better not. I’m not sure how I would feel afterward.”

Kurtz gave her a wan smile. “That’s the nicest non-offer I ever received.

“What does your mother say?”

Lenore laughed softly. “She’s not saying. She hasn’t figured it out yet. She’s not certain if a rich executive is as good as a rich doctor, but since you’re both hunks and neither of you are Jewish, she’s withholding judgment.”

“Smart woman, your mother.”

“Yeah.” Lenore rose to her feet, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then shook her head with what seemed to be real regret. “I better not see you again,” she said. “It wouldn’t be smart.”

Kurtz nodded. “Good luck,” he said. He meant it.

“Thanks.”

He let her out and thought for a moment about facing the day. Then he smiled to himself and yawned and climbed back into bed. Later, he thought. I’ll think about it later. Right now, I’m too tired.

The rest of his vacation was restful and uneventful. He tried to enjoy himself. He swam and ate and worked on his tan, but something seemed to have gone out of it. He saw Lenore occasionally, across the pool or in the dining room. She would smile at him but that was all and Kurtz respected her wishes. He liked the way that Harrison Thomas hovered over her. Lenore was quite a girl, he thought with a pang. Quite a girl.

Two days later, he was on a plane back to New York, back to his patients and the mystery of Sharon Lee, and most of all, back to Kathy.

His plane got into Kennedy at eight P.M. on Saturday night. It was raining, a cold wet drizzle mixed with snow. He looked out at the rain through the window as they taxied up to the terminal and he shuddered. He hated New York winters, and the already fading memory of Cancun, of the endless sun and the glistening blue sea made the dreary weather even more repellent.

He caught a taxi cab and sat silently in the back, feeling the dark mood of the city settle into his soul as they drove into Manhattan.

“You got a nice tan,” the cabby said to him once. “Been on vacation?”

“Mexico,” Kurtz said.

“Yeah?” The cabby’s ears seemed to perk up. “I was in Mexico once. Tijuana. Burritos and chili peppers. I got the runs. I thought the place was a hole.”

Kurtz shrugged and said nothing. The cabby glanced back at him through the rearview mirror, saw Kurtz frowning at the rain, and grinned. After that they drove in silence.

His mood lifted a bit as he put his key in the lock and opened the door to his apartment. He put his suitcases down by the door, turned on the lights and hung his coat in the closet, then went into the kitchen. He made himself a Bloody Mary and sipped it while he inspected his answering machine. Four messages. The first two were advertisements, then one from Kathy confirming a date for the next afternoon. The last message was from Barent: “Dr. Kurtz, there have been some developments in the case that I would like to discuss with you. Please give me a call when you get in. Saturday until ten P.M. would be okay. Otherwise, please make it at the station during the week.” The message ended with Barent’s home phone number.

Okay, Kurtz thought, you asked for it. He dialed Barent’s number and after a couple of rings, a woman’s voice answered. “Is Detective Barent in?” he asked. “This is Dr. Kurtz.”

The woman’s voice seemed to hesitate. “We’re kind of busy right now,” she said. “Is it important?”

“I don’t know. He asked me to call him.”

“Just a second, then.” He heard her yell out, “Lew, it’s a Dr. Kurtz.”

Barent’s voice came on. “Good to hear from you. You have a nice vacation?”

“Passable,” Kurtz answered.

“Hold on a second.” Barent said something to somebody away from the phone, then came back. “Look, I know I said to call but things have gotten awful hectic at home.” He added in a voice that sounded less than thrilled, “It’s my daughter. She’s just told us she’s getting married. Could we talk during the week? Maybe Monday?”

Kurtz had patients scheduled for Monday afternoon but the morning was free. “Nine A.M.?”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll meet you at the station. Congratulations about your daughter.”

Barent grunted. “Thanks,” he said grudgingly. “I’ll see you then.”

They met for lunch at *Le Bibliotheque*, a little place on the Upper West Side. It was supposedly French, but the menu listed clam chowder and assorted varieties of cheeseburger as well as

croissants and bouillabaisse, and none of the waiters spoke with an accent. Each wall held a narrow bookcase rising to the ceiling, stacked with dusty volumes by Ernest Gann and Thomas Costain and other authors popular in the Fifties and Sixties. The patrons were encouraged to browse while they waited for their food but few chose to do so. The choice of reading material was not encouraging.

Kathy, however, loved books of all sorts, even forty-year-old best sellers by authors who had long since died and faded into obscurity. "Look at this one." She held a fat volume out to Kurtz, who took it reluctantly and weighed it in his palm. "*Lord Vanity*," Kathy said, "by Samuel Shellabarger. I read this when I was a kid."

"I've heard of him," Kurtz said.

"He was big: *Prince of Foxes*, *Captain from Castile*."

"Before my time."

"I'm going to buy it if they'll let me." Kathy put the book on the table and placed her elbow on top of it, as if the book might get up and walk away if she didn't stake her claim to it.

"How's the thesis going?" Kurtz asked.

"Pretty good. I've established some interesting parallels between *The Wasteland* and Mordor, Sauron's ruined domain. My preceptor is pleased. So..." She looked at him brightly and smiled. "You have a nice time?"

"Not bad," he said.

"You meet anybody?"

He gave her a wary look. "Anybody?"

"Hmmm." She squinted at him out of one eye. "You know, vacations are different from real life. They're supposed to be. That's what getting away from it all is all about. No cares, no worries. Everybody has that exotic glow. You fall in love; you fall out of love. It's easy." She grinned. "I spent two weeks on Ibiza once. You know Ibiza?"

"An Island in the Mediterranean?"

She nodded. "A vacation paradise. Anything goes. I met a guy named Russell who played the guitar and wrote poetry. He was from New York. We had a great time. I even saw him a couple of times once we got home but he seemed different." Kathy examined a roll, broke it in half and nibbled on the crust. "Actually, he seemed like a jerk. Hard to believe it was the same person."

"I did meet somebody," Kurtz said.

She frowned at the roll, picked up her knife and buttered half of it. "Oh?"

"She had a boyfriend. It was nothing serious."

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," Kathy said.

Kurtz smiled. "Then why did you ask?"

"Idle curiosity," she said. "But maybe I should have kept my mouth shut."

Except for the fact that Kathy was a brunette and Lenore a blonde, they looked a lot alike. Kathy's hair was straight and black and hung halfway down her back. She wore a green blouse with a flowered pattern, slacks and comfortable shoes that were good for walking. A modern woman, Kathy. Smart, self-assured, no bullshit. "I missed you," Kurtz said.

"Good."

Kurtz smiled. "Barent left a message on my machine. He wants me to call him in the morning."

Kathy's fork stopped halfway to her mouth. She looked at him over a piece of lettuce and frowned. "Why?"

"I'm not sure. He thinks I can help."

"How? You're not a policeman."



“No, but I know the environment in which the victim lived and worked.”

Kathy thought about that for a moment, then she said, “I imagine a case like this must become an obsession for a policeman. Good against bad. Innocence versus evil. There must be a lot of satisfaction in finding somebody who would commit murder. It must be terribly frustrating when you can’t.”

The waiter set a bacon blue cheese burger in front of Kurtz. He picked it up and took a big bite. “I can relate,” he said. “I can definitely relate.”

“See that you don’t get hurt.”

Good advice, Kurtz thought. He speared a French fry and silently nodded.





BARENT'S OFFICE WAS coming to seem quite familiar. Kurtz sat in the chair across the desk, swirled his cup of coffee and listened silently while the detective talked.

"Tony Korda..." Kurtz said when Barent finished. He felt cold suddenly and rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "I've heard of Tony Korda. I've seen his name in the papers."

The office seemed strangely quiet in the morning. Only a few patrolmen moved about in the squad room outside Barent's office and the haze of smoke was decidedly less than it had been the last time Kurtz sat in this chair. "So you have no more leads."

"Not exactly true. We have files on more than two hundred people who work, or used to work, for Tony Korda."

"But nothing to tie any of them to either Sharon Lee or Herman Delgado."

Barent barely hesitated, then said, "That's correct."

"Do you have any people in Korda's organization?"

Barent smiled faintly. "What are you, the Chief of Police? Even if we did, I wouldn't admit it to you." Barent shook his head in wonder. "Jesus."

Kurtz felt himself blushing. "Sorry," he said. "I guess you aren't interested in my advice. So what do you want from me?"

"Information." Barent nodded at Moran, who stood leaning against the door. "Harry thinks that it's time we went back to Sharon Lee. He's right. For the moment, Herman Delgado has proven to be a dead end."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want you to tell me who might have wanted Sharon Lee dead." Kurtz blinked. "I already told you I don't know that. How would I?"

"Hopefully, you know more than you think." Barent leaned back in his chair, stretched until his back audibly cracked, and cradled his hands behind his head. "There are only two types of violent crime," he said, "which of course includes murder; there are crimes of passion and crimes of pre-meditation. And there are only two reasons for crimes of pre-meditation: gain and revenge. Seen in this light, most murders are solved fairly easily. Most murders are crimes of passion, committed by a family member or another close associate of the victim. Crimes of pre-meditation are harder because the murderer will almost always plan on getting away with it and will do everything he can to cover his tracks. It's quite likely that the majority of such murders are never discovered to be murders at all. Some old guy dies of a heart attack or some other 'natural cause'"—Barent shrugged—"the body is cremated. Nobody's going to find out that the victim was poisoned, or maybe somebody held a pillow over his mouth. Nobody's even going to look."

"That's disgusting," Kurtz said. Barent shrugged again.

"It seems too simplistic. There are other reasons for murder. There are insane reasons."

"I would classify crimes motivated by reasons of insanity to be crimes of passion."

"There are also disinterested reasons—terrorism, for instance."

Barent frowned. Since the World Trade Center, terrorism was a subject that no New Yorker took lightly. Then he grudgingly smiled and glanced at Moran. "Smart. Didn't I tell you he was smart? A mind like a scalpel."

Moran dolefully nodded.

“It’s true that in crimes of terror the victim may be merely incidental, in that the victim is killed not because of who he is, but because of what he represents, and as often as not any victim at all would do equally well for the purpose—but there is no doubt that crimes of terror are pre-meditated and cold blooded. And the motive is clearly and always gain, political if not personal.”

“I suppose so,” Kurtz said.

“Good.” Barent nodded. “So who had reason to want Sharon Lee dead?”

“I still don’t know.”

“That’s because you’re not letting your imagination work. Alright, look at it this way—she had a sister, right?”

“Yes,” Kurtz said.

“If Sharon Lee is dead, then the sister will inherit a larger share of her mother’s estate.”

Kurtz’ brow wrinkled. “Are you seriously suggesting...?”

Barent held up a hand. “I’m not suggesting anything. I’m merely pointing out that from a monetary point of view, her sister would most likely benefit from Sharon Lee’s death.”

Kurtz drew a deep breath and allowed a slow smile to spread across his face. “Okay,” he said. “I get it. It’s a game: who can come up with the largest number of suspects.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay...you mentioned her sister. Her sister’s name is Sheila. Sheila might well have been jealous of Sharon. Sharon was better looking and got top grades and became a doctor. Sheila married a Psychology Professor at Northwestern and had two kids. She’s a housewife.”

Barent turned to Moran. “Put another check by the sister.” Moran grunted.

“And how about her mother?” Kurtz said. “Sharon’s father left Sharon a lot of money. Now that she’s dead, some of that money must go back to her mother.”

“Good.” Barent nodded approvingly. “Add the mother to the list.”

“Then there are the other obstetricians. Sharon was in solo practice and she was a woman. An awful lot of women want to go to a woman gynecologist; they feel more comfortable. The men in the department might have felt threatened.”

Barent looked thoughtful. “For that matter, every O.B.-G.Y.N. in the metropolitan area could have had reason to want her dead.”

“True,” Kurtz said, and shook his head. “I don’t feel like we’re exactly narrowing things down here.”

“We can narrow them down later. For now, let’s get every possible suspect on the list.”

“Every possible suspect...” Kurtz ran his hand through his hair in disgust. “I assume she was involved with somebody. Sharon always was. So there might have been a boyfriend who was jealous. Or an aspiring boyfriend who might have been jealous. Or a boyfriend’s girlfriend who might have been jealous.”

“We’ll check that out,” Barent said. “Who would know?”

“Her sister might. Despite what I said about her, they were close. They talked on the phone at least once a week.”

“Her sister’s in Chicago?”

“She lives in Chicago. She’s probably here, helping her mother. Sharon’s mother is not the most competent human being.”

“Anyone else?”

“She had some friends from college; I forget the names...Evelyn Something.” He frowned into his coffee-cup. “I think it was Hobbs, Evelyn Hobbs. And Joyce Davenport.”

“Good. Anyone else?”

“Jennifer Parks, her best friend from Medical School. I know Jennifer. She’s a family practitioner.”

“Did she have any business dealings? Any investments?”

“She had a broker at one of the big firms—I think it was Merrill Lynch. From what I remember, he was the staid, conservative sort, nothing too risky. He was an older man. Sharon inherited him, as it were, from her father.”

“Did she get along with her patients?”

“She wasn’t the warmest human being on Earth. I never did understand why she went into obstetrics. But she was dedicated to her work. She was a good doctor.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

Kurtz hesitated. “She tended to be impatient, and she didn’t have the greatest bedside manner. You probably know that obstetricians get sued a lot. There are always things you can’t control, complications that simply couldn’t be avoided. Patients are generally not willing to accept that, and obstetricians don’t like to admit it. Women come into the hospital to have a baby. Things are supposed to go right.” Kurtz shrugged. “Studies have proven that you can fuck up every which way from Sunday and your patients won’t sue you if they like you.”

“What sort of complications are you talking about?”

Kurtz smiled wryly. “All sorts of things. When I was a third year student, I had a patient once with a two-headed baby.”

Barent stared at him.

“It was really identical twins that didn’t quite separate. There was one body with two legs, two heads, two arms and a third vestigial arm coming up out of the shoulder between the heads. The poor thing was a mess. It died after a few hours.”

Barent grimaced at Kurtz’ blandly smiling face. “Does stuff like that happen often?”

“Not often, but it happens.”

Barent shuddered. “Do you know of any suits against Sharon Lee?”

“I think she had a few. I only know about one. It was absurd. A perfectly normal delivery but the kid came out floppy. A muscle biopsy showed viral inclusion bodies. The kid had a congenital viral myopathy, an infection picked up *in utero* from the mother. It was nobody’s fault but the parents weren’t willing to accept that. They sued.”

“What happened to the baby?”

“I don’t know. Sharon and I broke up around that time.”

“Who carried her malpractice insurance?”

“Probably M.L.M.I.C. They’re the largest carrier in the State.”

Barent made a notation in his notebook. “We’ll look into it. Did she get along with her colleagues?”

“Sure.” Kurtz sipped his coffee, wrinkled his nose as he realized it had gone cold and went over to the pot in the corner to fix himself a fresh cup. “One thing you have to realize: doctors all have tremendous egos. They’re all smart and hard working and successful. Every one of them thinks he’s God’s gift and most of them think all the other doctors are idiots, except, of course, for their own little group of colleagues and friends, who are idiots only part of the time.

“Sharon was no worse than most.” Kurtz shrugged again. “She got along.”

“She had no enemies that you know of?”

Kurtz shook his head. “No.”

“Did anyone in particular—that you know of—dislike her?”

“Beats me.”

Barent surveyed his notebook, frowning, and tapped the page with the tip of his pen. “You’ve given us a few leads. We’ll work on them.” He looked up suddenly and fixed Kurtz with a sharp glance. “Are you willing to do a little more to help us out?”

*Here it comes*, thought Kurtz. The catch. “Like what?”

“Doctors are touchy about their patients, confidentiality and all that. But confidentiality doesn’t extend to other doctors. Do you think you could get us some information about Sharon Lee’s patients?”

“What information?”

“Just their names.” Barent thought about it, added, “Addresses and phone numbers if you can.”

“You could subpoena them.”

“We could.” Barent nodded. “If we have to, we will. But that would certainly tip people off, now wouldn’t it?”

“You have some hope of keeping this investigation a secret?”

“You never know. Right now, the murderer thinks he’s gotten away with it. He might be more careful if he knew we were still looking. We’re going to try to keep the lid on as long as possible.”

“How long is possible? Sooner or later you’re going to have to indict Bill Mose or admit that you don’t have a case.”

“Mr. Mose is recovering from his recent surgery. He won’t be fit to appear in court for,”—Barent looked up at Kurtz with a bright smile on his face—“how long would you say? A month?”

Kurtz frowned at the haze of smoke outside the office and thought about it. “A month sounds about right.” Then he shook his head. “There’s no way that I can get any information about Sharon’s patients. The hospital computer system doesn’t code to doctors’ names, only patients’ names. If I have a patient’s name, I can find out the doctor, but it doesn’t work the other way around.”

Barent shrugged his shoulders and frowned into his coffee. “Oh, well.”

“Was there anything else?”

“Yeah.” Barent opened his desk and pulled out a sheaf of paper. It appeared to be a long list of words that Kurtz could not make out. “The hospital computer: what type is it?” Barent asked.

“You mean what brand? I think they’re Dells.”

“VAX? UNIX? Java? Microsoft NT?”

“Microsoft something. I’m not sure about the rest.”

“Are there terminals at all the working areas? The nursing stations? The secretaries’ desks?”

“Absolutely.”

“And how are appointments made? The old fashioned way, or by computer?”

Kurtz warily eyed the sheaf of paper in Barent’s fist. “When a patient calls to make an appointment, the secretary or clerk who takes the call is supposed to punch the name and time into the system.”

Barent looked happy. “Perfect. And how about afterward? You said that there’s a central computerized listing of patients. Are all the patients’ visits listed as well?”

“Of course.”

Barent extended the sheaf of papers to Kurtz, who eyed it with suspicion and made no move to take it. Barent carefully placed it down on the desk in front of Kurtz. “That’s a list of names,” Barent said. “Every individual who was ever known to be associated with Tony Korda or Jaime Ruiz. I would like you to see if any of them are listed in your hospital’s computer.”

“That’s all?”

“Names, dates and times.”

“Diagnoses?”

“If you think it’s relevant.”

“If I think it’s relevant,” Kurtz said with disgust. His eyes flickered from the sheaf of paper up to Barent’s face and back down to the paper. “I know I’m going to regret this.” He picked up the paper and settled it in his lap.

“Thank you,” Barent said simply.

“You know,” said Kurtz, “there’s one suspect neither of us has mentioned.”

“Who’s that?”

“The one we don’t know about—and haven’t thought of.”

Barent nodded his head. “True.” He pointed to the sheaf of paper sitting in Kurtz’ lap. “But maybe his name is on that list. Let’s hope.”







BARENT HAD NOT LIED to Kurtz, not exactly, but he had deliberately allowed him to labor under a misconception. The problem right now was not that they had no case, but rather that the case they had was too good.

“Baloney.” Ted Weiss was the Assistant D.A. He was average height, thin, with straw colored hair and narrow blue eyes. “Mose has no alibi and Sharon Lee had his blood under her fingernails. You can’t tell me that doesn’t make a case.”

Barent put a pained look on his face. “Come on, Ted, give me a break. What about the burglary? What about Herman Delgado?”

“What about them? So her apartment was robbed and Delgado most likely did it. Apartments get robbed all the time. You have nothing to tie Delgado to the murder. Sure, he turned up with a hole in his chest, but so what? People like Herman Delgado get murdered all the time. You have no evidence to point to Korda or anyone else. You’ve got nothing.” Weiss stabbed his finger at the air to add emphasis. “Nothing except a lunatic whose blood is under the victim’s fingernails.”

Barent opened his mouth to protest but Weiss held up a hand. “You’re going to mention the ring. Don’t. A *ring*, for Christ’s sake! A nut case swallows a gold ring and that’s supposed to be evidence? It could have come from anywhere. Anywhere at all!”

Barent sighed and slumped down in his chair. Hard headed, by the book: that was Ted Weiss. “I know it’s flimsy,” Barent said. “I know it’s circumstantial. But it makes sense. This thing with Mose...” He waved his arms in the air helplessly. “It’s too easy. It’s too pat.”

“What is this?” Weiss asked. “Policeman’s instinct?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Try taking ‘instinct’ to the jury.”

“The investigation,” said Barent, “isn’t over. I hope to be able to confirm my suspicions.”

“Okay.” Weiss nodded. “I understand that. But you have to understand that I’m under a lot of pressure with this case. A doctor...a young, pretty, *female* doctor. Right now it’s a scandal. The family is going to sue the hospital. They’ll get a nice settlement and that’ll be that. Everyone is embarrassed but the case is closed. It’s a one in a million occurrence and everybody sleeps well at night. If we let on that we don’t know who did it, the public will be upset, and when the public is upset, the mayor gets upset. When the mayor gets upset, my boss gets upset. Guess who gets upset then?”

Barent was already upset but he didn’t say it. “Give me another few weeks.”

Dolefully, Weiss shook his head. “I’ll give you *two* weeks. You come up with something better than you’ve got in two weeks or I’m going to indict Mose. I’ve got no choice.”

“Two weeks...” Barent slowly nodded, his mind already considering the possibilities. “Thanks,” he said grudgingly.

“Don’t mention it,” Weiss said. “And by the way, just so we understand each other, you should realize that I’m doing this as a favor because I think you’re going to come up with nothing. I think Mose did it. But I’m giving you the time because I want you to be satisfied. I hope you appreciate that.”

“They used to pay people to draw blood from patients. Usually they were med students trying to earn some extra money; sometimes it was a nurse or a nurse’s aide or a lab tech.” Nolan shrugged. “Anybody with hospital experience could apply for the job; it didn’t pay very much.

“There was this one guy—he was a pharmacy student—the guy was a whiz with a needle. I mean, he could get blood from a stone. He was always the first one finished with his rounds. Five hundred pounder with no veins? No problem. Just call Joe. But after a while people began to get a little curious. How could this character be so much better than anybody else? How did he do it? Joe would never tell. You’d ask him, he’d just smile and say, ‘Trade secret, man, trade secret.’ So one day one of the other phlebotomists decided to find out. He waited until Joe was in with a patient who was known to be a particularly difficult stick and he opened the door suddenly and looked in. There was the patient, lying back on the bed and there was Joe with an extra long needle stuck in her chest.” Nolan looked at the nurse. “Scissors,” he said.

The nurse gave him the scissors. “In her chest?” Liebert said.

Nolan tied off a stitch, then dabbed at the wound with a four-by-four and waited a moment. No bleeding. Satisfied, he nodded his head and said, “He was using cardiac needles and drawing the blood from their hearts.”

Kurtz shuddered. Franklin hunched his head down onto his shoulders and gave Nolan a disapproving look. Franklin was the serious sort. Crane had rotated out at the end of the month and Franklin had replaced him on the Service. Franklin was short, thin and quiet, and seemed to have no sense of humor at all, but he had good hands.

“Tie here,” Kurtz said.

Franklin didn’t look up but he did as he was told—two sutures around the cystic duct and the gall bladder, bulging from a stone obstructing the outlet, was swinging in the breeze. Nolan cut between the sutures and the specimen was free. Franklin handed the gallbladder off to the scrub nurse and Kurtz inspected the wound carefully. There was minimal bleeding from the liver bed but nothing unusual. “Lap pad,” he said.

The scrub nurse picked up a white square of cloth about the size of a kitchen towel, soaked it in a bucket of sterile saline and handed it to Kurtz. He packed it into the abdomen and they waited.

“What happened to him?” Liebert asked.

“Who? Joe?”

Liebert nodded. “They fired him.”

“That’s all?”

“What else were they supposed to do? Hey, his job was to get the blood. He was getting the blood. So his methods were unorthodox, nothing illegal in that.”

“But what if somebody had died?”

Nolan gave him a pitying look. “They didn’t.”

“But what if they had? Isn’t it assault? Or even murder?”

“More like malpractice, I think. But they *didn’t*, so why make waves? Get rid of the asshole and forget about it, and hope the whole thing stays buried.”

Liebert wrinkled his brow. “I see,” he said doubtfully.

“You know kid, you tend to be a little naive, sometimes.” Nolan looked at Franklin and said, “Doesn’t he tend to be a little naive?”

Franklin grunted and Nolan rolled his eyes.

Kurtz removed the lap pad. The wound stayed dry. “Okay,” he said. “Close it up.” He glanced at the clock and thought about the sheaf of papers sitting on the top shelf of his locker. It was 10:15 A.M. He had no patients scheduled in the office until after lunch: time to do a little searching through the computer.

*Nice*, Barent thought. *Real nice*. The Lee's home was a Tudor mansion set on three acres of rolling ground outside Stamford, Connecticut. Large oak trees straddled the driveway. The grass, even in winter, looked green and neat. A hedge of rhododendrons sat under the box windows and ran the length of the house. A marble fountain filled with a ring of dark, frozen water sat next to an iron lamppost.

Moran parked the car in the circular driveway. Barent pressed the doorbell and a short, plump woman dressed in a maid's uniform answered the door. "Yes?" she said.

"I'm Detective Barent and this is my partner, Detective Moran. Mrs. Lee is expecting us."

"Come in." Barent and Moran entered. "Please wait here." The maid turned and walked away. Barent looked up. An enormous crystal chandelier hung in the foyer. White marble tiles separated by black inlays covered the floor. To their left, a white, carpeted stairway curved up and around, leading to a second floor balcony that looked down on the foyer. A painting hung on the wall above the balcony. The painting was at least six feet long and brightly colored, a large white ball fading into green shadow, surrounded by dancing triangles in magenta, blue and rose.

"You like the painting? It's a Vasarelli." A tall, thin woman stood in the hallway. Her skin was wrinkled and she had bags under her eyes. She wore a light gray business suit with a lavender blouse. Her mascara was smeared.

"I like it very much," Barent said. He squinted upward. "But the style is hardly characteristic of Vasarelli. It looks more like an Ernst Gottlieb."

The woman frowned and looked up at the painting. She cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "You are Detective Barent?"

"And Detective Moran."

"I'm Estelle Lee." She held out her hand and Barent gravely shook it.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Lee, but it seemed necessary."

"That's quite alright, Detective. We all have our jobs. Please come with me."

Estelle Lee tottered as she walked. They followed her down a hallway and into a room that was completely lined with glass. The room looked out upon a red brick patio bordered by a dense line of mountain laurel. Beyond the mountain laurel stood a chain link fence surrounding a swimming pool covered with ice. A small, wrought iron table with a tea set on top stood in the middle of the room. "Please sit down," Mrs. Lee said. "Tea?"

"No, thank you," Barent said. Moran, as usual, said nothing.

A woman who looked like a younger version of Estelle Lee walked into the room. She had a look of what appeared to be perpetual disapproval pasted on her face. "I'm Sheila Hirschfeld." She said it without a smile. "Sharon's sister."

Barent shook her hand. Sheila Hirschfeld seated herself on a chair next to her mother. The two women stared at Barent, unblinking.

"As you know," Barent said, "we'll be going to trial very shortly, and there are certain things that we need to have clarified in order to tie up any possible loose ends in our case. First of all, can you tell me: who might have had anything to gain by your daughter's death?"

Estelle Lee's lips compressed into a rigid line. "How is that question relevant at this point?"

Barent looked at her sadly. "The defense will undoubtedly argue that people other than Bill Mose might have had reason to kill Sharon. We have to be prepared for that."

Sheila Hirschfeld leaned forward. "Nobody had anything to gain by Sharon's death. Nobody."

"I know this is difficult for you, Mrs. Hirschfeld, but please believe that I'm on your side. I want your sister's murderer to be brought to justice as much as you do."

"I doubt that, Detective. I seriously doubt that."

"My daughter is right," Mrs. Lee said. "Nobody could have had anything to gain by killing Sharon."

It must have been a nice view in the summer, Barent thought, with the trees all covered with leaves and the mountain laurel blooming. Not all cold and gray like now. He sighed to himself. Why did you have to hit people over the head? "Didn't Sharon have money?" he asked. "Her father was extremely wealthy."

The two women exchanged glances. Mrs. Lee cleared her throat and swayed a bit, then caught herself. Her hand, he noticed, trembled slightly and her eyes were puffy. Tea was certainly genteel, but without doubt Estelle Lee had been drinking something a bit stronger before their arrival. "Sharon had a trust fund," Mrs. Lee said precisely, "that was set up for her education. So did Sheila. Other than that, all of her father's money went to me."

"I see." Barent gravely made a notation in his notebook, then looked up. "Had she had any arguments with anyone lately?"

"Arguments?" Sheila Hirschfeld said.

"Disagreements. Fights. With anybody, anybody at all."

"Such as who?"

"You would know that better than I."

Sheila Hirschfeld shook her head. Estelle Lee stared out at the mountain laurel. If she heard them, she gave no sign.

"No," Sheila Hirschfeld said. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Do you know a man named Richard Kurtz?"

Again, Mrs. Lee and her daughter looked at each other. Mrs. Lee looked away without expression. Sheila shrugged. "He's a surgeon," Sheila said. "Sharon used to go out with him."

"What did you think of him?"

"I didn't like him," Sheila said. "He was overbearing and opinionated."

It occurred to Barent that Sheila Hirschfeld more than likely suffered from a touch of the same disease. "And you, Mrs. Lee?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember him particularly. He was a young man. Sharon went out with so many of them."

"Who was her latest?"

"Pardon me?"

"At the time of her death, was she involved with anybody?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Lee said in a faint voice.

"Mrs. Hirschfeld?"

Sheila blinked. "No," she said. "I don't think so."

Barent examined her face for a long, silent moment. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Sheila opened her mouth but no words at first came out. She swallowed, cleared her throat, and then said, "Yes."

He tapped his pen on his notebook and looked at her. She looked back at him without blinking. "Do either of you know a man named Jaime Ruiz?" he asked.

"No," Sheila said. Estelle Lee shook her head. "I never heard of him. What does this Jaime Ruiz have to do with Sharon?"

Barent sighed. "Probably nothing." He rose to his feet abruptly. "Thank you, Mrs. Hirschfeld, Mrs. Lee—you've been most helpful."

Sharon's mother barely nodded. Sheila frowned, then said slowly, "Call us if we can be of any further assistance."

"Of course." He turned on his heel and went out, Moran following.

They were back in the car and a mile down the road before Barent spoke. "What do you think?"

"She was lying," Moran said. "I wonder why."

Barent nodded. "Her sister is dead. Who does she think she's protecting?"

"Maybe her memory," Moran said. "Maybe someone else." Then he looked at Barent. "Ernst Gottlieb?"

"Ernie Gottlieb, friend of mine back in grade school; a regular genius with circles and triangles, if you know what I mean."

"Hmm," Moran said.

Barent chuckled. "Hey, she wants to talk art, we'll talk art." Barent looked out the window at the trees passing by and narrowed his eyes. "How much you think that stupid painting cost?" he asked. "A hundred- thousand? More?"

Moran shrugged.

"From what I remember, Ernie Gottlieb became a plumber. You think he makes as much money as Vasarelli?"

Moran grinned. "More than you and me, anyway."

"That is for sure," Barent said. He puffed on his cigar, watched the smoke curl up toward the ceiling. "That is for goddamn sure."





THERE WERE OVER TWO hundred names on the list. After an hour and a half, Kurtz had gotten through barely fifty of them. Patient data was accessed under the patient's Medical Record Number. If all you had was a name, you could type that in and the computer would give you the number, which you could then use to get biopsy reports, lab results and dates of both inpatient admissions and office appointments—but it took longer.

None of the fifty had ever been treated at Easton Medical Center. Kurtz was not surprised. It had seemed worth following up but it was a long shot at best. He glanced at his watch—he barely had time for a quick lunch before afternoon office hours.

Kurtz grabbed a sandwich in the Doctor's Dining Room, sitting by himself in a corner, then hurried back to his office. Mrs. Schapiro sat at her computer. "Mr. Callahan is a little early," she said. "Ellen showed him into an examining room."

Callahan. Kurtz repressed a shudder.

He took off his jacket, slipped on a white coat, swiped a hand through his hair, straightened his tie and practiced a smile in the mirror.

Ellen Grunfeld gave a perfunctory knock on the door and entered. She was a plump young woman with light blue eyes, ash blonde hair and a plain face. She wore a nurse's uniform. "Mr. Callahan is feeling poorly today," she said, and handed him a manila folder.

Mr. Callahan, Kurtz thought, is a grade A pain in the ass. "Mr. Callahan is under a lot of stress," he said.

Miss Grunfeld smiled knowingly. Kurtz took the chart and entered the examining room. Callahan sat on the metal treatment table with his white, hairless legs dangling over the side. He wore boxer shorts with blue polka dots and a sleeveless tee shirt. His outer clothes lay folded on a chair. Kurtz glanced at his chart. Five foot eight, two twenty. "You've gained a little weight, Mr. Callahan."

Callahan nodded sadly. "I know you said to exercise, Doc, but I can't exercise. My varicose veins are killing me."

Kurtz had operated on Callahan for a lipoma—a benign fatty tumor—on his back over a year before and the man had nearly driven him crazy. "Have you been watching your diet?"

"Like a hawk. I've cut back on the red meat, no animal fats, no tropical oils, no salt, lots of roughage. None of it does any good. I'm like cast iron in there, Doc—constipation like I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. I got cramps almost all the time."

"Cramps," Kurtz said.

"Like I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy." Mr. Callahan repeated it with a brave smile. "And I think I got a hernia."

"Yes, you said so on the phone. Lie down and let me take a look at you."

Kurtz palpated Callahan's abdomen, feeling for any masses, then listened to the bowel sounds with his stethoscope. "Where is this hernia?"

Callahan pointed to the region below his umbilicus. "Give me a cough," Kurtz said.

Callahan coughed. Callahan's smooth, rotund abdomen quivered slightly, but that was all. Nothing bulged. Kurtz palpated the area carefully. "Cough again." Callahan coughed and Kurtz shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Callahan."

"No?" Callahan looked disappointed.

“Any blood in the stools?”

“Blood?” Callahan seemed momentarily bewildered. “No, I never noticed any blood.”

Kurtz looked at the chart. The only trouble with Callahan was that he ate like a pig and sat around on his fat rear end dreaming up problems for himself. “You’re fifty-six,” Kurtz said.

“Fifty-seven in March.”

“Have you ever had a sigmoidoscopy?”

Callahan’s face brightened. “No,” he said. “Should I?”

“Well, anybody your age should have screening for colon cancer. A sigmoidoscopy is routine; a colonoscopy would probably be better.”

“Really? When can we do it?”

“They’re usually done by the internists,” Kurtz said.

“Oh.” Callahan’s face fell. “I don’t trust the internists. You’re the one who saved my life. Can’t you do it?”

“I appreciate your confidence, Mr. Callahan, but I hardly saved your life. It was very minor surgery.”

“But it could have been cancer. You don’t know how relieved I was.”

“I can imagine,” Kurtz muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing, Mr. Callahan.”

“Well, can’t you do it?” Callahan repeated.

Kurtz stared at the chart, peered at Callahan’s eager, beseeching expression, and mentally threw up his hands. “I suppose so, Mr. Callahan.”

“Great,” Callahan said. “When?”

“You need a bowel prep. That takes a little time. Set up an appointment with Mrs. Schapiro outside. The nurse will tell you exactly what to do.”

“Thank you,” Callahan breathed. He grabbed Kurtz’ hand with both of his own and shook it. Kurtz extricated the hand with some difficulty.

“That’s quite alright, Mr. Callahan. Quite alright. I’ll see you in a few days.”

By four thirty, the last patient had left, and by five o’clock, Kurtz had finished dictating his charts. Mrs. Schapiro and Miss Grunfeld had gone home a few minutes before. He locked the door, turned out the lights and walked down the stairs to Bill Werth’s office. Werth already had his coat on. “You ready?” Kurtz asked.

“You bet,” Werth said. “Let’s go.”

They caught a cab and drove across town to Werth’s apartment, where Dina and Kathy were waiting for them. Dina came up and kissed Werth on the cheek. Kathy gave Kurtz’ hand a squeeze and he glanced at Dina, who was looking at them both with a fond smile on her face. He felt himself blushing. Kathy snickered.

Dina Werth was a pretty woman, dark hair, dark eyes, thin nose and graceful neck. She was on extended leave of absence from N.Y.U. since the birth of her first child two months before. “Come on,” she said, “let’s get out of here before Junior realizes I’m gone.”

“Who’s with him?” Kurtz asked.

“My mother. She’s in the kitchen, stuffing his little face.”

Werth smiled and made a shooing motion toward the outside hall. They tiptoed out. When the door had closed behind them, Dina breathed a long sigh. “Freedom,” she said, “Thank God.”

Werth looked at her sorrowfully. “I tell you, she’s an unnatural mother.”



“Baloney. You try staying cooped up with a howling infant, you wouldn’t last ten minutes.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Werth said placidly. “But it isn’t a fair comparison. Men aren’t emotionally equipped to deal with babies. It’s genetic.”

Dina slapped him gently on the cheek. “Sexist pig.”

“No, really. I’m a psychiatrist. I know these things.”

Dina turned to Kathy. “Shall you kill him? Or shall I?”

“I wouldn’t dirty my hands.”

They caught another cab to the Garden, grabbed a quick bite to eat and settled into their seats.

The Knicks were playing the Bulls and the crowd roared from the opening tip off. The game should have been a slaughter. Jordan was long since gone, Pippen traded. The Bulls were a shell of their former championship team, but somehow, the Knicks were just not into it. They moved sluggishly. They shot poorly. By the end of the first quarter, they were down by ten.

“Looking bad,” Werth said.

“They’ll come back,” Kurtz said. “I have confidence.”

The second quarter went a little better than the first. Houston made a baseline jumper that hit nothing but net. Ward stole the ball, went to the basket, was fouled and made both free throws. The two teams traded baskets and then Camby muscled his way inside for a gutsy rebound and got hammered as he put the ball back up. He sank one free throw and suddenly the lead was only four.

“Look,” Werth said, and grabbed Kurtz by the arm. “Isn’t that Bill Cosby?”

“Where?” Kathy asked.

“Down there.” Werth pointed to the expensive seats on the arena floor. Kurtz squinted, then stared. Huddled close together on the edge of the court in a private box large enough for eight, not far from a man who might indeed have been Bill Cosby, were two people that he thought he recognized. “Hey,” he whispered to Werth, “what do you think of the blonde?”

Werth looked, and silently whistled. “She must be a movie star.”

Kurtz gave a non-committal grunt and nodded thoughtfully.

At halftime the Knicks were down by only two. The buzzer sounded and the crowd rose to its feet. “Come on,” Kathy said. “I need something to drink.”

Dina sat up and stretched. “My back still hurts,” she said. “And it’s already been two full months. The little sucker better be worth it.”

“See?” Werth said. “Unnatural.”

They pushed their way through the crowd and up to a concession stand outside. The line moved quickly. They had just paid for four sodas when Kurtz heard a familiar, unmistakable voice say softly, “Hey.”

He turned around, telling himself sternly to be casual. “Lenore,” he said with a smile. “How are you?”

Harrison Thomas held out his hand. “Nice to see you.”

Werth, who was standing on line with a wide grin on his face, gave Kurtz a pointed look. “Bill Werth,” Kurtz quickly said. “This is Dina Werth and Kathy Roselli.” He turned to Kathy. “Lenore Brinkman. Harrison Thomas. I met them down in Cancun.”

“Ahh...” Kathy said, and smiled. “Cancun.” She held out her hand and Lenore shook it.

“Where are you sitting?” Thomas asked.

“Pretty high up. You can barely recognize the players.”

“The Company buys season tickets. We have the whole box. Would you like to come down with us?”

Kurtz hesitated. "We'd be glad to," Kathy said. She had been quite obviously examining Lenore, who had been doing the same to her. They both smiled, apparently liking what they saw, which made Kurtz, for some unaccountable reason, begin to feel an uncomfortable itching sensation between his shoulder blades.

They went back into the arena and made their way down to the floor just as the third quarter was about to begin. "It is Bill Cosby," Werth whispered.

Somehow, Kurtz found himself sitting next to Werth and Harrison Thomas, with Dina, Kathy and Lenore on the other side of the box. The three women kept their heads together and chatted continuously, occasionally looking over at Kurtz and giggling. Whatever they were talking about, they seemed far more interested in the conversation than the game. Kurtz watched them surreptitiously, but if they noticed him glancing over, they ignored it completely.

Camby made a spectacular dunk and followed up with a twisting, fall away jumper from the top of the key that bounced off the rim. Houston grabbed a missed shot on the other end and slammed it home. The game went back and forth for the rest of the quarter, neither team managing to gain a lead of more than two or three points. As the fourth quarter began, both teams seemed to dig in. The pace slowed, the defense tightened. The shots became harder and the passes crisp and pinpoint and the ball moved back and forth, neither team able to penetrate. With fifteen seconds left in the game, Chicago was up by one with possession of the ball. They inbounded. Sprewell jumped in and swatted it away. Both teams scrambled and the ball popped up, floating above a pile of jumbled bodies. Jackson leaped in and grabbed it. Under the basket, Camby waved his arms wildly and Jackson shot the ball down court. Camby jammed it in just as the buzzer sounded.

"Wow," Werth said, and grabbed his head with both hands. Kurtz let his breath out slowly and shook his head.

"Great game," Thomas said. "Absolutely a great game."

Kathy and Lenore looked at them with superior little smiles on their faces. "Men are so competitive," Lenore said.

Thomas, Werth and Kurtz exchanged perplexed glances. Kurtz scratched his head while Werth frowned up at the ceiling. Thomas shrugged. "We're going to get something to eat," he said. "Care to join us?"

"Sure," Kathy said. "Why not?"

Dina Werth frowned and glanced at her watch. "We better get home, before Junior drives my mother out of her mind."

"We'll catch a cab," Werth said. "Don't worry about us."

"I'll go get the car," Thomas said.

"I'll go with you," Kurtz said.

"Why don't you meet us on the corner," Thomas said to Kathy and Lenore. "Thirty-fourth and Broadway. I'll swing around and pick you up."

Kurtz and Thomas went down three flights of stairs to the garage. "Second aisle and around to the left," Thomas said. He wore a black trench coat and black leather shoes. His fine curly hair was neat on his head.

"Strange, running into the two of you this way," Kurtz said. "I never thought I'd see either of you again."

Thomas turned, flashed him a quick smile. "The company has season tickets for the Knicks, Nets, Rangers, Mets and Yankees. You never know when you might have to stroke a client."

"You and Lenore seem happy."

“Couldn’t be happier. The wedding is set for June.”

Kurtz nodded. “What does your father have to say?”

“He doesn’t.” Thomas smiled at him again. “This is it,” he said, and stopped next to a dark blue Mercedes 560. “Hop in.”

Thomas opened the door as Kurtz went around to the other side. The door opened. A gun pointed at Kurtz’ face.

“You heard the man,” a voice said. “Hop in.”





THERE WERE TWO OF THEM. The one sitting up front with Harrison was tall and burly, with brown, slicked back hair under a black fedora. He wore a dark blue suit and a sedately striped red and gray tie. His gun pointed unerringly at Harrison's head. "Straight ahead and turn left when you get out of the parking lot," he said. The gun, Kurtz noted, was a Ruger .22 caliber; he hadn't seen one of those since he left the army. It barely fit inside the gunman's hand.

"What's this all about?" Harrison asked quietly.

"You'll find out."

The one sitting in back with Kurtz was smaller, very thin, with long, hairy fingers and a five o'clock shadow over sunken cheeks. He held his gun loosely in his fist but it never strayed far from the center of Kurtz' chest and his eyes never left Kurtz' face. The gun was a Colt .44 magnum. Small man, big gun, and vice versa.

"Who's he?" the one up front asked.

"His name's Kurtz. He's a surgeon."

The little one put a sour look on his face and rolled his eyes. "Where's your girlfriend?" the big one asked.

"Waiting for us on the corner."

The two gunmen exchanged quick glances. "Turn right," the one in front said.

Harrison turned and the headlights of a passing car shone in briefly through the windshield. The big car's engine hummed smoothly. Both hoods looked attentive but vaguely bored, as if they had done this sort of thing many times before. After his one question, Harrison drove without speaking, hunched silently over the steering wheel, staring straight ahead. Kurtz sat quietly in the back, studying the situation. The knowledge that he was a doctor seemed to have relaxed the little hoodlum, and why not? Surgeons liked to think of themselves as men of action but an M.D. and a loud voice wasn't much good against a bullet. Kurtz hoped he could take advantage of that. Meanwhile, the little gunman sat in back with a sleepy smile on his face. Once, he stifled a yawn behind his fist.

They went crosstown on Thirty Fourth Street until they had almost reached the Hudson River. "Turn left," the one in front said. Harrison turned the wheel and they drove downtown along the West Side Highway. To their left, expensive walk-ups gave way to small old buildings sub-divided into storage space and single room apartments. To the right, the Hudson River flowed to the sea, dotted with chunks of ice. Between the roadway and the River sat a row of pilings and empty, rotting wharves. "Pull in," the big one said. Harrison turned and went off the road, into what used to be a parking lot, the big Mercedes bouncing in and out of crumbling potholes.

"Drive down to the end."

Harrison grimaced. He blinked and seemed to have trouble pulling air into his chest, but he did as he was told. The car drove out to the end of the lot. Ahead of them, past the edge of a rusting metal bulkhead, the Hudson gleamed in the moonlight. To their right, an empty warehouse, its windows long since shattered, lay crumbling. "Stop the car. Get out. Slowly."

The big hoodlum kept his gun on Harrison's back as the door opened. They stepped out of the car.

"You too," the little one said.

The air was frigid but Kurtz barely felt it. A whisper of cold wind caressed his cheek as he straightened.

The big one motioned at Harrison with his gun, waving him forward, and Harrison took three steps. "Stop," the gunman said. "That's far enough."

Kurtz stood with his back against the car, his breath coming faster, his heart racing. Things seemed unreal. It occurred to him vaguely that the crystalline blackness of the nighttime sky, the rippling moonlight on the ice of the river, the decaying old warehouse might be the last sights that he would ever see. His thoughts moved in slow motion and the stars seemed to twinkle overhead forever. The little hoodlum smiled at him, a strange, crooked grin, like he was smiling at something only he could see. For a moment, they stood there, and then the big gunman reached into a pocket and pulled out a set of steel rings and slipped them over the knuckles of his left hand. He wriggled his fingers, settling the rings more comfortably, and then he stepped forward and delivered a long left hook to Harrison's face. Harrison cried out and his legs crumpled. He fell, kneeling in the dirt. A black trickle of blood oozed from his mouth and dripped onto the frozen ground.

The gunman reached down, grabbed Harrison by the hair and tilted his face up. "Tell your father it will be him next. You understand?"

The gunman kicked him in the ribs, then kicked him twice more. Harrison rolled weakly onto his back, his eyes slits in his face, his breath wheezing.

A clatter of gravel came from the wharf. Kurtz saw a quick motion from the corner of his eye as a rat darted behind a moldering log. The little gunman's eyes flickered. *Move*, Kurtz thought. His left arm snapped up. His fingers clasped the gunman's wrist, wrenched the little man's arm down and to the side, and snapped his elbow over Kurtz' raised knee. The little man screamed shrilly.

The big gunman turned. His eyes flashed in the moonlight and his gun came up and spat flame. The little man gave a tiny cry, shuddered, moaned once and went limp. Kurtz grabbed the pistol from his slack fingers, raised it and fired. The big man groaned, clasped his hand to his side and fell heavily. Then he rolled, scrambled to his feet and, crouching low, ran a zigzag pattern over the rough ground and darted around the edge of the building. Silence.

Kurtz' breath whooshed out. He let the little gunman drop to the ground and examined him quickly. He was dead. Then he went over to Harrison, who was lying on his back with his head twisted to the side. A single lock of hair drifted over his forehead in the cold wind. Kurtz dropped to one knee and put a hand on Harrison's neck. The pulse was strong. His breathing was shallow but steady.

The big Mercedes stood black and silent in the frigid night. Kurtz went over to it and opened the door. He leaned across the front seat, picked up the cell phone and dialed 911.

The CAT scan was negative. Harrison had briefly awakened, smiled at Lenore and then drifted back to sleep. Kurtz and Kathy stood next to her while Lenore stared at Harrison's face and silently wrung her hands.

"Well," a familiar voice said, "isn't this a surprise?"

Barent stood there, a faint smile on his face. Moran was behind him.

Kurtz snorted softly and shook his head.

Lenore glanced at Barent once without interest before her eyes went back to Harrison. Kathy stared at Barent with obvious curiosity.

"Any place around here we can talk?" Barent asked.

"My office alright?"

"Fine."

"I'll be back," Kurtz said to Lenore. She nodded without looking up.

"I'm going along," Kathy said. "I want to hear this."

"That okay with you?" Kurtz asked Barent.

Barent shrugged. "Sure."

They trooped to the elevator, not saying anything, went down to the Third Floor and took the walkway over the street to the Hampshire Building. The hallways were brightly lit but the building was empty. Kurtz turned on the light in his office, sat behind the desk and said, "Sit down."

Barent took the visitor's chair while Moran crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. Kathy sat on the couch.

"I thought you only worked homicides," Kurtz said. "Why are you involved in this?"

Barent grinned faintly. "I'm interested in bodies." He shrugged. "There's a body."

"I see."

"The dead man was easy to identify. His name's Charlie Flanagan. He free lances, but he's done a lot of work in the past for Tony Korda, which I hope is a coincidence that can help us."

"How about the big one?"

"We're not sure. Probably Jimmy Raines. He fits the description you gave, and he's been associated with Flanagan."

"I was lucky," Kurtz said. "He took his eyes off me." Moran smiled ruefully and shook his head in wonder.

"What made you try it in the first place?" Barent asked.

"Are you kidding? I figured there was a real good chance that I would wind up dead if I didn't."

"Didn't they say to warn Thomas' father that he would be next? You can't give a warning if you're dead."

"The general situation did not inspire confidence."

Barent leaned forward. "These guys are pros. What made you think you could get away with it?"

"One would think that you resented my survival," Kurtz said.

Barent said nothing. Kurtz put his feet up on the edge of the desk and stretched, trying to work the kinks out of his tight muscles. The adrenaline had almost worn off and his nerves were frayed. "The only thing that bothers me is that I missed. I should have killed him. He was barely ten feet away, for Christ's sake." This was not exactly true. What really bothered him was that he had been less than perfect. Kurtz knew it was absurd but it was the way he had been taught to think. Excuses were not allowed.

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Barent asked.

"No," Kurtz grudgingly replied.

"You were rushed," Barent said.

"I suppose."

"These guys were not expecting you to be there. They were expecting Thomas and the girl. They would have beaten up Thomas and maybe the girl also, and then delivered their warning. And we would never have heard a word about it."

Kurtz looked at him doubtfully. "You don't know Lenore."

"Don't be a dope. I know these guys. If Thomas or his girlfriend had said anything to anybody but Thomas' old man, then either they or the old man would have wound up very dead. You can be certain that *that* message would have been delivered loud and clear.

"And also, we can assume that the old man wouldn't have let them talk because if Korda, or anybody like Korda, was putting pressure on him, it means that he's involved in some business that he needs to keep hushed up."

Kurtz nodded, thinking it over. It made sense. "I suppose so."

Barent stood up. "Tomorrow, Harry and I will have a talk with Mr. Oliver Thomas. I'd like you to come down to the station house. We'll have you look at some photos. Maybe you can identify the other one."

"It will have to be after four. I have surgery in the morning and then some patients to see in the afternoon."

"Fine." Barent's eyes flickered to Moran. "Harry will meet you."

Moran gave a soft snort and fixed his eyes on the far horizon. "How are you doing with that list of names?" Barent asked.

Kurtz shook his head. "Nothing yet."

"Keep on trying. Maybe something will turn up."







“SO TELL ME,” ASKED Liebert, “what brings a man to colon and rectal surgery?”

Kurtz gave Liebert a long, brooding look and then grudgingly smiled. Liebert reminded Kurtz a little of himself at a much younger age. The kid’s cheerful certainty seemed somehow to be a rebuke, but a rebuke for exactly what, Kurtz could not quite figure out. Maybe his lost enthusiasm. Usually Kurtz enjoyed morning rounds but lately things had been coming unglued. The events of last night seemed unreal next to the easy familiarity of the Surgical Floor, but they sat in the back of his mind like a lead weight. This whole thing with Barent and Moran, Bill Mose and Sharon Lee and Tony Korda was ridiculous. He was a surgeon, not a cop, not an undercover agent. What did he think he was doing? “General surgery is more than just colon and rectal,” Kurtz said.

“But it’s mostly colon and rectal,” Liebert said. “So why would anybody want to spend their entire career poking around in somebody’s rear end?”

Kurtz shrugged. “It’s a living.”

“I’m going into radiology,” Liebert declared. “I’ve decided that people are gross.”

“Wise choice,” Franklin said, “lucrative, pleasant, good hours, no worries.”

“Boring,” Nolan put in. “Very boring.”

“Not to me.” Liebert shook his head. “I mean, *this* is boring. Think about it; we’re spending an hour and a half looking at incisions, prescribing pain meds, changing dressings, listening to people moan about constipation, diarrhea and urinary retention. You really find that exciting?”

Nolan looked amused, Franklin annoyed. “You know, kid,” Nolan said, “you’ve got the wrong attitude. You’re a med student. You’re supposed to look eager, even if you think it’s all bullshit—wow, surgery sure is amazing! You guys sure are great! Don’t you want to get a good grade for the rotation?”

“I am eager,” Liebert said. He gave Nolan a smug smile. “I’m eager to finish up surgery and start radiology.”

Liebert pushed the chart rack down the hallway. They stopped outside of each room and discussed the case for a few moments and then went inside to examine the patient.

Mr. Benson had bladder cancer. The urologists had done a radical cystectomy over a year before and Kurtz had been asked to assist with the ileal conduit, isolating a piece of small intestine to which the ureters would be sewn and then inserting the conduit through the abdominal wall so that the urine could drain into a bag. Unfortunately, the cancer had recurred and despite radiation was spreading into the pelvis. Benson was on a morphine drip. He was somnolent but every once in a while he let out a faint moan in his sleep. His wife, a thin woman with a narrow, bony face, who seemed to be here twenty-four hours of every day, looked up as they came into the room. “How are you today, Mrs. Benson?” Kurtz asked. He deliberately did not ask how Mr. Benson was. They all knew how Mr. Benson was. Behind Kurtz, Liebert shuffled his feet and the residents assumed a solemn manner.

“I’m fine,” she said. Her voice was so faint they had to strain to hear her. “Thank you.”

Kurtz nodded. He glanced at Benson, then backed out into the hall. Liebert and the residents followed. “How much is he on?”

“Morphine?” Nolan asked.

“Yeah.”

“Eight milligrams an hour.”

“Up it to ten.”

“Isn’t that awfully high?” Liebert asked.

Kurtz shrugged. “Depends on what you mean by ‘high.’”

“Enough to cause respiratory depression?”

“It might cause respiratory depression, but he’s in pain,” Kurtz said. “I won’t allow that.”

“But ten milligrams an hour could kill him!”

Kurtz gave him a level look. “We don’t let our patients lie there and suffer.” He turned to Nolan.

“Give him whatever he needs.”

“Right,” Nolan said.

Liebert gulped. He seemed about to say something, then thought better of it. Something that might have been a smile pinched the corners of Kurtz’ mouth. “Benson is going to die,” he said, “and there’s no power on Earth that can prevent that. But he doesn’t have to die in pain. It’s all we can do for him.”

Liebert blinked his eyes rapidly and nodded his head. The next room was Stan Nugent’s. Nugent’s problem was similar to Benson’s, but not so far along. Nugent was seventy years old, skinny, bald and pale. His wife, a short, stout woman with gray hair and red lipstick, stood at his bedside. Kurtz had operated on Nugent for colon cancer ten months before. Nine months later, Nugent had returned with a bowel obstruction. Kurtz had taken him to surgery and explored him but he had closed without doing anything except a colostomy. Nugent had metastases to the omentum and the liver. He had been on chemotherapy for a month now, which may or may not have been killing the cancer but was certainly killing Nugent.

They played a little game. Nugent didn’t want to know he had cancer. They talked around his diagnosis, employing euphemisms like “abnormal cells” and “probable cure.” Nugent would listen to Kurtz with an avid gleam in his eye, his attention fixed like a laser bolt on Kurtz’ every word. Kurtz had seen many patients close to death, and he had always been amazed—even awed—at the quiet courage with which most of them faced it. But a few got like Nugent: cross and demanding. They pouted. They threw tantrums. Kurtz felt guilty about it but he had come to hate dealing with Nugent. The man clung to life like a miser, clawing with all ten fingers, blindly and with willful ignorance.

“You’re doing better today, Mr. Nugent,” he said. “Your white count has stabilized.” Nugent’s white count had ‘stabilized’ at less than a thousand. He was a setup for every infection in the book, but so far the germs had not found him worth bothering.

“That’s good, Doc,” he whispered. “That’s good.” He licked his lips with a dry tongue and gave Kurtz a knowing, sly smile. “So when can I get out of here?”

“Perhaps in a week or so, Mr. Nugent.”

“Good.” Nugent whispered, and nodded his bald head. “Good.” Nugent was much too sick for his wife to take care of but he no longer needed to be in the hospital. The floor social worker was trying to arrange for nursing home placement. When that came through, Nugent would be gone.

Kurtz patted him on his stick thin shoulder, and they left. Mrs. Nugent stared after them as she did every morning, with wide, beseeching eyes, but she said nothing.

They pushed the chart rack back to the Nursing Station and Nolan, Franklin and Liebert sat down to write the daily orders. Kurtz glanced at his watch. He had time for a cup of coffee and a donut before going to surgery.

“This guy Kurtz is some piece of work,” Moran said.

Barent stared out at the midtown traffic. A thin haze of foggy exhaust covered the street and Barent imagined his lungs crinkling inside his chest, silently screaming for mercy. “Nolan told me a little

story about Kurtz: it seems that he was in the Emergency Room a few months ago, examining a patient with abdominal pain, when suddenly this character in the next room runs amok. Nolan said he was a biker, shaggy beard, black leather, tattoos running up both arms, smelled to high heaven and weighed close to three hundred pounds. His ‘friends’ had dropped him off, raving out of his mind on Angel Dust. The biker starts screaming, rips apart a row of cabinets, then grabs a nurse and begins to strangle her. Our boy Kurtz hears the ruckus, comes in and calmly knocks three of the biker’s teeth out. After that the biker got more mellow.” Barent took a cigar out of his inner pocket, frowned down at it and then squinted at the smog outside. He shook his head sadly and put the cigar back in his pocket. “There’s a lot of competition among the residents to be on his Service. Kurtz is a pretty popular guy at Easton. Have you looked at his records?”

Moran nodded. He kept both hands on the wheel and maneuvered deftly through the traffic.

Barent said, “Regimental pistol champ, marksmanship medal, runner up in the Divisional boxing tournament, first degree black belt in Tae Kwan Do.”

“He was a soldier,” Moran said.

“Hey, most people like to sit around when they get the opportunity, maybe relax a little. Not our boy Kurtz.”

“A black belt is not much use in his line of work,” Moran commented.

“Yeah? Don’t forget the biker. And then he takes a gun away from Charlie Flanagan and chases off Jimmie Raines in the middle of a job. Sounds pretty useful to me. You got a black belt in Tae Kwan Do?”

Moran took his eyes off the road, grinned at him briefly. “Shotokan,” he said.

“What the hell is that?”

“Tae Kwan Do uses a lot of kicks. Shotokan is mostly hands and arms. Legs have more power but hands are quicker. We like to think that we can get inside their guard and knock them out while they’re still thinking about it.”

“No shit?” Barent said.

Lenore Brinkman was sitting at a table by herself, looking tired and pale. Kurtz hesitated, then walked over, his coffee and a bran muffin balanced on a tray. “How are you doing?” he asked.

Lenore smiled at him wanly. “Not bad,” she said.

“Mind if I sit down?”

“Sure. I could use the company.”

The doctor’s cafeteria was closed for breakfast. Not enough business at this hour. Even the main cafeteria was almost empty. A cup of tea sat in front of her, along with a Danish pastry from which one bite had been taken. She had circles under her green eyes.

“You should go home and get some sleep,” Kurtz said. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll be fine.”

Lenore sighed. “I know that.” She sipped her tea and shook her head slowly, a sad expression on her face.

Kurtz put sugar and cream in his coffee and buttered his muffin. “Then what’s bothering you?”

She shrugged. “I like your girlfriend,” she said.

“Kathy?”

Lenore grinned, a brief upturning of her lips. “How many girlfriends do you have?”

He grinned back. “I like her, too,” he said.

Abruptly, Lenore’s smile vanished. A tiny shiver seemed to pass through her. “What did Harrison say to you last night? I mean about us.”

Kurtz looked at her, his muffin raised halfway to his mouth. “He said you couldn’t be happier. He said you were going to be married in June.”

“Well, he’s wrong.”

Kurtz blinked his eyes. He said nothing.

“We’re not going to be married in June. He was lying to you.” She smiled wryly. “It’s not his father this time. At least part of it is my mother, the way Harrison winces whenever he’s around her. He doesn’t act that way when it’s just me; I’ve got blonde hair; I dress nicely. He doesn’t have to think about the fact that I’m not eligible for D.A.R. membership. My mother, on the other hand, cannot pass for anything other than what she is. And she wouldn’t want to. Harrison doesn’t have to like her. Half the time *I* don’t like her. But he’s not allowed to be ashamed of her.” She shrugged and let her eyes wander out the window to the cold morning sky. “He’s a nice guy but a tiger can’t change its stripes and neither can a bigot.” Lenore shook her hair out and gave a sigh. “Maybe that’s a little too strong. I don’t know—but I know I’m not going to be marrying Harrison Thomas.” She shrugged. “So much for love. Mother doesn’t know yet. She’ll think I’m a fool.”

“I see,” Kurtz said. Lenore’s eyes were fixed on his face. It was beginning to rain outside; he noticed it with a part of his mind. A distant roll of thunder made the windows vibrate. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

She smiled sadly. “Are you?”

He sipped his coffee and thought about it for a long moment. “I don’t know,” he said.

“We’re here. First Amsterdam Savings and Loan.” Moran flipped down the sun visor with the New York City Police logo on it and pulled the car into a parking spot next to a hydrant. They got out of the car and took an elevator up to the top floor. The elevator opened on an atrium lobby with a vaulted ceiling made out of glass. A receptionist sat behind a small black desk, which was bare except for a white push button telephone and a computer screen. “Detective Barent,” Moran said, “and Detective Moran. We have an appointment to see Mr. Thomas.”

The receptionist looked as if she doubted it. She scanned the computer, frowning prettily and nibbling on her lower lip, then her face cleared. “Yes, I see. You’re right on time. Please wait just a second.” She picked up the phone and spoke into it, “Your nine o’clock appointment is here, sir.” She put down the phone, said to Barent, “Go right on in. First door on your left.”

Barent pushed open the door and they entered a corner office, at least twenty feet by twenty, with views of the East River on one side and downtown on the other. Oliver Thomas sat behind an executive sized desk made of dark oak. “Gentlemen,” he said. “Please sit down.”

The desk was too big to reach across and Oliver Thomas didn’t offer to shake hands. Oliver Thomas had gray, wavy hair and a smooth, pink face. His suit was gray with a thin blue pinstripe and his tie had a flowered pattern in pastel pink and green. He wore cufflinks in the sleeves of his white shirt, solid gold ovals with tiny diamonds in the center. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

“We’re here to discuss the incident last night involving your son.”

“Ah...” Oliver Thomas nodded politely. His eyes wandered around the corners of the room. He seemed bored. “What is there to discuss? Two thugs kidnapped him at gunpoint and then assaulted him. These things happen routinely in the City of New York. Luckily, his injuries are minor.”

Barent smiled. Harrison had awakened this morning. He had a headache but was otherwise recovering without complication. His mother had swept in during the night, wearing diamonds and a floor length mink, barking demands and making herself generally difficult. Lenore had yawned in her face and then ignored her. Harrison had slept through her visit and Mrs. Thomas had gone home, angry and frustrated. Harrison’s father could have had no way of knowing about the warning that his son had

been instructed to give him, but if Barent's suspicions were correct, then Oliver Thomas must have known what the attack implied without having to be told. But there he sat, as cold as ice. "Perhaps nobody informed you of the details," Barent said.

Thomas glanced at his Rolex and frowned very slightly. "Do you have any questions for me, Detective? If you don't, then I'm really quite busy."

"How long have you known Tony Korda?" Barent asked.

Thomas stared at him, an uncomprehending look on his face. "Excuse me?"

"I said: How long have you known Tony Korda?"

Oliver Thomas blinked twice, then looked down at his desk. A tiny dark line appeared between his brows. "Who is Tony Korda?" he asked.

"Tony Korda is a well known criminal. If you don't know him personally, you should know of him. Most people in New York have at least heard the name. You don't know him?"

"No."

"Think about it for a few minutes. Search your memory. You're absolutely sure?"

Oliver Thomas frowned. "I'm afraid I don't like your tone, Detective."

"I'm really sorry about that, Mr. Thomas. I wouldn't want you to get upset." Barent smiled thinly. "You're absolutely certain that you never heard of Tony Korda?"

"I already said so."

Barent sighed. "That's sad." He looked over at Moran. "Isn't that sad?"

Moran nodded, his face expressionless.

"Here's the way I figure it," Barent said. "You run a bank, not one of the biggest banks in the country but how big a bank do you need?" Barent shrugged. "He can't be simply stealing your money or you—as the man in charge of the money—would be screaming to high heaven. Besides, you steal money from somebody, you only get a chance to steal it once. And why kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? No. Korda already has plenty of money but what he doesn't have is a way to turn his money into *legitimate* money. I figure that the cash comes in and the cash goes out, and the I.R.S. never knows the difference." Barent slid the palms of his hands past each other and whistled between his teeth. "Clean as a whistle."

Oliver Thomas' pink face had grown redder as Barent talked. "That's slander," he said.

"It's only slander if it isn't true."

Oliver Thomas smiled. The smile went no further than the sides of his mouth. "It's only true if you can prove it."

Barent nodded. "The guy who beat up your son works for Tony Korda." This might not be true, Barent reflected, but he wasn't going to let Oliver Thomas know that. If Korda wasn't pulling his strings, then somebody else was. "You know what he said to him?"

Oliver Thomas said nothing.

"He said, 'Tell your father it will be him next.' Not too subtle, was it? Now why would Korda want to do that to you? Could it be that your relationship is not as cozy as it once was? Could it be that the sums of money that he is attempting to deposit are getting perhaps just a trifle too large for you to handle? And could it be that you are expressing this opinion to Tony Korda just a bit more forcefully than he wants to hear?" Barent shook his head sadly. "That's the problem dealing with a guy like Korda: once you start, there's no way to stop. He owns you."

"Nobody owns me," Oliver Thomas said flatly.

"No? When you were an ordinary rich banker, way back when, and these guys first approached you, you could have gone to the police and maybe got protection, but now it's too late. Are you

immune to a bullet in the back?"

Oliver Thomas breathed a long sigh. He put the fingers of both hands together in front of his face and nodded thoughtfully. "And why would I ever get involved in such a scheme in the first place? What could possibly be my motive?"

"That's the easiest question in the world. Rich people are rich because they have a fondness for money. You can't have too much money. Besides, Lenore tells me that business has been bad lately. Hey, no need to be ashamed. It's happening all over. Everybody made bad loans back in the roaring Nineties. Why should you be any different?"

Oliver Thomas stiffened. "I told my son not to get involved with that girl. She's not our kind. And she has no respect."

"Respect for what? The way she tells it, you're a simple anti-Semite."

Oliver Thomas shook his head in disgust. "I see no need to respond to that comment."

Barent grinned. He spread his hands in an open, expansive gesture. "Hey, look at it this way. You were right: I've got no proof. But I do have enough to interest the Feds. Could your books really stand up to an audit?" He shrugged. "Maybe they can, but could your business stand up to the publicity? People lose confidence in a bank that's under investigation. Your customers frankly don't give a shit about your problems. There are plenty of other banks out there. Cooperate and we can avoid all that."

Oliver Thomas grinned wryly and for the first time looked almost regretful. "As you've already pointed out, Detective, I'm not immune to a bullet in the back."

Barent nodded. "True." He waited but Oliver Thomas only smiled. After a minute the silence began to drag, and Barent shook his head. "I'm sorry we couldn't do business," he said. "Give me a call if you change your mind."







JOGGING WASN'T A LOT of fun at this time of year. After a mile or so, Kurtz' fingers and toes no longer felt the cold, but his chest burned and his ears felt numb, even under the hood of his sweatshirt. Still, he did it. If nothing else, it gave him time to think while he accomplished something useful.

He had finished with Moran nearly an hour before. It had been a quick interview. "This one," he had said. The fat face looked a little younger, a little thinner, staring sadly into the camera, but it was nevertheless unmistakable. The guy must have really liked that hat. The suit—even the tie—was the same.

"Jimmy Raines," Moran said. He reached inside his jacket, got out a pack of cigarettes, looked at Kurtz and then put them back. He reached into another pocket, took out a battered stick of gum, removed the wrapper and put the gum in his mouth. "Pure chewing satisfaction," he said.

Kurtz shrugged. "It's your office. I'm not stopping you."

"For a moment, you looked like my wife. The guilt was too much for me to bear." Moran looked down at the picture of Jimmy Raines and cracked a smile. "I'll have him picked up."

So now what?

Kurtz jogged along the sidewalk on Central Park South. You couldn't push the pace too much on hard pavement if you wanted to avoid shin splints, but it was a good street for jogging, long, wide and straight, but not too crowded. Not too empty either. In the spring and summer, Kurtz ran inside the Park, but in winter, particularly at this time of day, Central Park was almost deserted and you were just asking for trouble.

He had run three miles already, two more to go. He reached the eastern edge of the Park and headed uptown in the fading light to his apartment.

He passed no one that he recognized. He thought about that as he ran. Growing up in a small town, you knew everybody. The sense of community, of belonging, was inescapable. You didn't have to think about it. In New York City, there were a thousand times as many people, and none of them belonged to each other. The City was too big, too anonymous—eight million people all scurrying about like ants in a hill, immersed in their own concerns. You had to have friends to survive in a place like New York, people you cared about, or you'd go crazy. Kurtz had always thought of himself as a loner, but there were limits, and New York City was the loneliest place that he knew.

He had almost died last night. He had seen death many times during his career as a physician but it was always somebody else, usually a stranger, almost always sick and old—except, of course, for Sharon Lee. Let's not forget Sharon Lee. Last night was the closest he himself had ever come to it. When Jimmy Raines had pointed the gun at him, Kurtz had not seen his whole life flashing before his eyes. He had seen Kathy.

Barent and Moran had told him there would be no risk when they asked him to help them. And there shouldn't have been, not to Kurtz. He was a consultant, a very minor player in the game they were playing. Last night had been an aberration, a chance occurrence of the sort that could have happened to anybody, its relationship to the death of Sharon Lee hazy and fortuitous at best. How many random killings were there every year in New York. A thousand? More? He thought there were more. He didn't want to be one of them.

He was looking forward to getting home. He had nothing planned for tonight except dinner, a brandy, some nice music and a good book, try to relax and go to bed early. He needed it.

“Richard scares me sometimes,” Kathy said, and felt a rush of relief at having finally admitted it. “I don’t like that feeling.”

Dina looked at her strangely. “What do you mean?”

“Last night is a perfect example. He almost killed a man. Afterward, he talked about it as calmly as you could please. His only regret about the whole thing was that he missed.”

Dina curled her legs underneath her on the couch and nibbled on a piece of carrot dipped in Blue Cheese Dressing. “Richard could very easily have been killed himself. Harrison Thomas almost was. Would you rather he had been?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, then?”

Kathy shook her head helplessly. “I look at him sometimes and he looks like a stranger, like somebody I barely know and can’t understand. He’s unpredictable. He has a capacity for violence that frightens me.”

“Has he ever been violent with you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Has he ever harmed or threatened anyone you know?”

Kathy shook her head. “No. It’s not that.”

“Have you ever even seen this ‘capacity for violence’ that has you so upset?”

“Just once.” Kathy drew a deep breath. “We were on the way to a show. Richard hailed a cab. The cab pulled up next to us and just as Richard went to open the door, a man ran up and slid into the back seat.”

“Then what happened?”

“Richard got a strange look on his face, not quite a smile. He said to the man, ‘Excuse me, I believe this is our cab.’ The man looked at us and said, ‘I got here first, buddy. Get yourself another.’ Richard looked at the man. Then he looked at me. He seemed embarrassed. The cabbie said, ‘Come on, close the door. I ain’t got all day.’ Richard shrugged, reached in, grabbed the man by the collar and dragged him out.”

“Really?” Dina coughed on her carrot stick. “He did?”

“He held him up by the front of his jacket, gave him a shake that rattled his teeth and said, ‘You must have been mistaken.’ Then he put him down on the sidewalk, held the door open for me and got in.”

“What did the guy do then?”

“Nothing. His face was white as a ghost.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“The cabbie drove off. He didn’t say a word. Neither did Richard.”

Dina reached down, hesitated between another piece of carrot and a stick of celery, finally picked up the carrot and crunched it between her teeth. “It seems to me,” she said carefully, “that Richard is not the one who’s breaking the rules. In both of the cases that you mention, Richard only responded to provocation. While most people would perhaps have let the whole thing go, I don’t think Richard was inappropriate. I think the character got just what he deserved.”

“Who appointed Richard to give people what they deserve?”

Dina frowned at her. “Nobody wants to get involved. Nothing is anybody’s business. Isn’t that why society is falling apart? Well, Richard doesn’t mind getting involved.”

“No,” Kathy said. “He certainly doesn’t.”

“Richard Kurtz is not your average wimp, that’s for sure. Think about it,” Dina said. “Most women would like that.”

Kathy sipped her drink, a Black Russian. “Richard told me that he met somebody when he was down in Mexico.” She stared blankly at the tray full of vegetables. “He said it was nothing serious.”

Dina rolled her eyes. “Famous last words. Why did he tell you?”

“I asked him.”

Dina made a clucking noise with her tongue. “I always figured if you didn’t want to know the answer, then you shouldn’t ask the question.” Dina gave her a look of indulgent disapproval. “I told you to go along with him.”

“I had to work on my thesis.”

“Oh, sure.”

Dina was right, of course. She could have put the thesis off for a week. The real problem was that she wasn’t sure where she and Richard were going and even worse, she wasn’t at all sure where she wanted them to go. *God damn it*, she thought. Things were happening too fast. “It was Lenore,” she said.

“Lenore?” Dina pretended to shudder, then whistled between her teeth. “Tough competition. Where did Harrison fit in?”

“Harrison was temporarily out of the picture.”

“Don’t tell me: he realized that he’d been an idiot and rushed down to Mexico to win her back.”

A tiny smile crept across Kathy’s face. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Men,” Dina declared, “are absolute fools.”

We’re all fools, Kathy thought bitterly. Why did I ever get involved with a man like Richard Kurtz, anyway? Richard was fun to be with. He took her to the best shows and restaurants in town. He was the soul of consideration. When she discussed her work and her classes and her friends with Richard, he listened. He seemed interested. He responded appropriately. But she always had the feeling that somewhere deep inside, he was remote from the concerns that were most important to Kathy Roselli. Richard Kurtz was like a juggernaut, going along on his merry way, oblivious to the rest of humanity.

“Yeah,” Kathy said. “You said it.”

“What is this, for crying out loud: *The Father of the Bride*?”

Tears glinted at the corners of Denise’s eyes and she stamped her foot in helpless anger. “Daddy...”

“What? What did I say?” He threw his hands up and looked beseechingly at his wife. “Is it a mistake to think that thirty thousand bucks might be a little too much to spend on a party? Jesus Christ!”

Betty Barent looked back and forth between her husband and her daughter. “You go and get ready for Paul,” she told Denise. Then she smiled narrowly at her husband. “You and I will discuss things after dinner.”

“But Mother—”

Betty held up a finger. “Don’t worry about it. Go out and have a nice time. You hear what I’m saying?”

Denise looked at her father doubtfully, then shook her head and trudged upstairs.

“Don’t tell me,” Barent said. “You’re taking her side, aren’t you?”

Betty was ironing. She held up a shirt, an oxford with narrow blue and white stripes and a solid white collar. “You like this shirt?”

“It’s fine. Don’t change the subject.”

“Subject? What subject?” She took a spray bottle and moistened a pair of pants. “If you mean our daughter’s wedding, I already said we’ll talk about it after dinner, and that’s the last word I’m going to say on *that* subject.” She fixed him beneath an imperious gaze. “You understand?” Barent stared at her, his breath coming quicker, then he caught himself.

“Fine,” he said gruffly. “Just fine.”

“You always get like this when you’ve got a tough case. How many times do I have to tell you, don’t bring your work home from the office? It’s not good for the family. Frankly, I blame Harry Moran for all this. He’s been working with you long enough, he should be able to catch one little murderer by himself. Goodness knows, he’s had enough practice.”

Barent’s brow wrinkled. He stared at her. She ignored him. “I’m going to have a drink,” he announced.

“Good,” Betty said. “Make me one too. A scotch on the rocks.” She finished with the oxford shirt, picked up another. “On second thought,” she added. “Make mine a double.”

“So then she says, ‘This is Denise’s wedding and she’s going to have the sort of wedding that she wants. Just remember, after she’s married, she’s not going to be your little girl anymore. She’s going to be Mrs. Paul Janus. Denise Barent was stuck with you. Denise Janus won’t be. You’re smart, you’ll give her the sort of wedding she won’t have to resent—that is, if you want her to ever come home for the holidays and maybe bring the grandchildren along too.’”

Moran rolled his eyes and shuddered. “Oh, man, I can see it now. My little girl’s only seven but it’s inevitable.”

Barent rolled a cigar in the fingers of his right hand and stared down at it moodily while rubbing his temple with the left. “My God, what a headache I have. Mrs. Paul Janus...” He winced. Barent had suffered from headaches for as long as he could remember. He had asked a doctor about them once. The doctor had said they might be migraine but were more likely to be caused by tension. He had suggested aspirin and a different line of work.

“It’s going to be a Church wedding...” Barent added.

Moran looked at him and nodded sympathetically. Barent had grown up in a non-religious household. He had converted to Catholicism when he married Betty because it was important to her. Barent himself could not have cared less. But ever since Benjamin’s death, Barent had refused to step foot inside a Church. He had developed a conviction that God was not to be trusted.

Moran drove along silently while Barent stared out the window, shaking his head every once in a while, feeling sorry for himself.

Finally, Moran said, “This investigation has gotten all screwed up, you know?”

“Yeah,” Barent shook his head one last time and dragged his mind back into the present. “It’s definitely ass backwards. We should have made these calls the day after the murder. That’s what happens when you jump to conclusions.”

They pulled to a stop in front of a small enclave of four identical brownstones set in a cul-de-sac, each facing outward in a different direction. Presumably the houses had been constructed long ago with the intent that they would form their own little neighborhood; they had the same brick facing, the same verdigris on the roof, the same six stone steps leading up to the front porch. All four houses were surrounded by a red brick wall and arranged around a communal backyard. Old mercury vapor lamps on bronzed fixtures were attached to their sides, arching out over the street. It was only four P.M. but the sky was growing dark and the street lights were already on, throwing a faint blue light.

Sharon Lee had lived here for five years before her death. Moran pulled the car to a stop by a hydrant and they walked up the front steps. The lobby was tiny; there was a gray metal door, two mail slots in the wall and a staircase leading up to the second and third floors, both of which Sharon Lee had rented. The downstairs neighbor, according to the lease, was named Mario Gilbert. All the landlord had known about him was that he paid his rent on time.

Barent rang the doorbell. There was no answer. Moran looked at him and shrugged and Barent rang again.

“Just a moment,” a muffled voice said.

The door opened. A young man, slim, with soft brown eyes and light brown hair cut short along the sides and long in the back stood blinking at them. “Yes?” he said.

“Are you Mario Gilbert?”

“No. Mario is at rehearsals. Can I help you?”

Barent and Moran exchanged glances. “Who are you?” Barent asked.

The young man’s brows rose. “Well, I could ask you the same thing.” Then he shrugged. “I’m Ronald Evans, Mario’s roommate.”

“The landlord didn’t tell me about you,” Barent said.

Ronald Evans grinned. “That’s because I don’t pay rent.”

“Oh,” Barent said.

Ronald Evans folded his arms across his chest and tapped his foot while he waited. He seemed content to tap and wait all day.

“Have you lived here long?” Barent asked.

“Why,” asked Ronald Evans, “do you want to know?”

Barent pulled out his wallet and flashed his badge. “I’m Detective Barent. This is Detective Moran. We’re interested in finding out anything we can about Dr. Sharon Lee.”

“What took you so long? She’s been dead for three weeks.”

“We were working on the information that we already had,” Barent said.

“Huh.” Ronald Evans gave a little snort. “Sounds like a fuck up to me.”

“Look, can we come in and talk?” Barent asked.

“Sure, sugar pie,” Evans said. He stepped aside and swept his arm down from his shoulder, beckoning them inside. “Come right in.”

The living room was furnished like a Nineteenth Century salon, with antique, cherry wood stands and plush couches with deep cushions, a style that had always reminded Barent of a Nineteenth Century whorehouse. “Sit down,” Ronald Evans said. He looked at Moran and smiled like a bird that has its eye on a particularly luscious worm. He sat on a couch covered with a floral print and patted the seat. “Why don’t you sit by me, Sugar?”

Moran sat in one of the chairs, his face expressionless. “Could you tell us about Sharon Lee?” Barent asked.

“Well, she wasn’t the friendliest person on Earth, that’s for sure,” Ronald Evans said.

“How so?”

“She had the nerve to call *me* macho, just because I told her to keep her hands off my property. Can you believe that?” He blinked at them.

“Are you by any chance speaking of Mario Gilbert?”

“Yes.” Ronald Evans’ hands began to tremble. His lips drew down in a thin quivering line and he seemed for a moment to be on the verge of tears. Then a sardonic smile crept across his face and he

said in a normal tone of voice, "Though why he would be interested in a smelly old thing like her, I'm sure I don't know."

Moran stared at the ceiling, then the walls. He stifled a yawn behind a closed fist.

Barent plowed ahead. "Are you saying that Sharon Lee and Mario Gilbert were sexually involved?"

"Well, *involved* is probably too strong a word. Mario did seem intrigued, but when I reminded him that AIDS is most commonly transmitted through heterosexual sex, he thought better of the notion."

"I see." Barent rubbed at the bridge of his nose. His headache, which had receded for a little while, was returning with a vengeance. "So far as you know, was Sharon Lee involved with anybody at the time of her death?"

"You do like that word, don't you? *Involved*." He shrugged. "I couldn't tell you if she treated them all the same once the lights were out but I can tell you that she spent time with a lot of different men."

"Did you know any of these men?"

Evans shook his head. "No."

"Would you recognize any of them if you saw them again?"

"Maybe. A few days before she died, I saw her outside with somebody. He was big, with dark hair. I might recognize him."

"Did you ever hear fights or arguments coming from her apartment?"

"No." Ronald Evans shook his head decisively. "Never."

Barent looked once more around the apartment, then his eyes came back to Ronald Evans' face. "What is it that you do for a living?"

Ronald Evans' eyes fluttered. "I'm an actor."

Barent grunted. "I would never have guessed."





“SO WHERE ARE YOU GOING after radiology?” Nolan asked.

“Obstetrics,” Liebert said.

“Give me a clamp,” Nolan said. The scrub nurse handed him a clamp and he closed the jaws on a small bleeder. Franklin touched the electro-cautery to the clamp and the bleeder sizzled.

“I liked O.B.,” Nolan said. “I almost went into it.”

The patient was a fifty-seven year old with diverticulosis. They were removing the sigmoid colon. Aside from a few adhesions, which tended to bleed when they were lysed, everything was going smoothly. Kurtz held a retractor and let Nolan do the case. One thing about Nolan, he loved to talk. Kurtz himself didn’t say very much during a case. Talking broke his concentration, but Nolan’s hands moved with smooth assurance at almost the same speed as his mouth.

“Only problem was, I could never tell where the baby’s head was at. I’d stick my hand in there, call out ‘plus one, plus two’ as if I knew what I was talking about, but it was only a guess. Funny thing though, I was almost always right. Unless everybody was faking it, which I suppose is possible. Still, it didn’t seem too smart to go into O.B. if I couldn’t tell how far down the baby’s head was at. You know what I mean?”

“I guess so,” Liebert said.

“You guess so...” Nolan snorted. “You ever deliver a baby?”

“Not yet.”

“You will. Your first time, they’ll stick you in front of some nice lady who doesn’t speak English and is having her seventh kid. You won’t have to do anything but catch it when it pops out. Just make sure you don’t drop it.”

Liebert looked at him with wide eyes and gulped.

“Pretty nurses up there too. They like medical students. You don’t have a girlfriend, do you?”

“Not now,” Liebert said, his ears perking up.

“Tie,” Nolan said. The scrub nurse handed him a piece of suture and he tied it twice around a small artery. Franklin cut between the ties.

“Ask out Alice McMahon,” Franklin said. “Alice has made whole generations of medical students happy.”

Nolan guffawed. “Alice McMahon? A little old, isn’t she?”

“She’s experienced,” said Franklin. “Experience counts.”

“A little plump, too.”

Franklin gave him a hurt look.

“There’s a real cute one up there,” Nolan said, “I forget her name. Peggy something. Try her.”

“Ryan,” Franklin said. His voice was frigid. “Peggy Ryan. She’s married.”

“Yeah?” Nolan cut through a segment of omentum, picked up a scalpel and extended the incision further into the pelvis. “I heard she got divorced.”

Kurtz cleared his throat. Nolan looked at him quickly and seemed to get the message. “Anyway,” Nolan said. “You’ll like O.B.”

“I doubt it,” Liebert said gloomily. “O.B. is even grosser than surgery.”

The scrub nurse, Kurtz noted, seemed a little stiff. The last thing Nolan needed was to get himself reported for sexual harassment. Maybe after the case, he should have a little talk with Nolan. It



probably wouldn't do any good, though. He glanced at the clock. They should be out of here in an hour. Then he could finish up that list of names on the computer.

"Why are we doing this?" Moran asked.

Barent looked at him, stuck an unlit cigar in his mouth and chewed on it. "Stir the pot. See what comes to the top."

"But what's the point?"

"I don't know," Barent said. He removed the cigar, frowned at it and dropped it in the wastebasket. "I just know we're not getting anywhere fast. Frankly, I don't understand this case. I don't understand how things tie together. Too many things have happened that don't seem to have anything to do with each other."

"Maybe because they don't," Moran said. Barent morosely nodded.

"Excuse me, Mr. Korda," Moran said in a mincing voice. "We're policemen and we're investigating a murder that we think you might have had something to do with and other than that we don't have a clue. You mind helping us out here, maybe give us a confession and save us the trouble?" Moran shook his head. "Take it from me. We're wasting our time."

"Maybe we are," Barent said. "And maybe we aren't. And maybe he'll let something slip."

Moran snorted through his teeth.

"Okay, so probably he won't. So look at it this way: maybe it'll be fun."

Moran shrugged.

Tony Korda ate lunch most days at a place on the East Side called the Bangkok House, one of the city's best Thai restaurants. Barent himself was not a great fan of chili peppers, regarding people who ate food that was designed to hurt them as being slightly crazy. Tony Korda was reputed to love the stuff.

Korda was spooning a bowl of soup into his mouth as Barent and Moran walked up. Five men sitting at adjacent tables looked at them with open suspicion as they approached. Barent had never met Tony Korda, but he was easy to recognize. One side of his face was covered in pink scar tissue. The fingers of the hand that held the soup spoon lacked fingernails and were shorter than they should have been.

Barent smiled politely. "Mr. Korda?"

Korda looked up. "Cops," he said with disgust. His voice was thick and grating, as if a membrane covered his vocal cords. Korda shook his head. "Always cops. I'm eating. This can't wait until I'm finished with my lunch?"

"Sorry," Barent said. "We're in a hurry."

"Always in a hurry." Korda put down his spoon and looked at them. "You think you're tough guys, don't you? You come in here, disturb my lunch, you're not in a hurry. You just want to show me that you're tough guys." Korda picked up a snowy white napkin and patted his lips. "There are laws against police harassment. I got enough lawyers on the payroll, they tell me these things. What do you want?"

"Herman Delgado," Barent said. "Jaime Ruiz and Sharon Lee."

"I don't know any Sharon Lee," Korda said.

"How about the other two?"

"I know Ruiz. Delgado?" Korda shrugged.

"How about Oliver Thomas," Barent said.

Korda blinked at him. A thin smile spread across his face. "Who?"

“Oliver Thomas runs a bank. His son was assaulted the night before last by two men named Jimmy Raines and Charlie Flanagan. They told the son to tell Oliver Thomas that ‘he would be next.’ Does this mean anything to you?”

Korda stared at them. A waiter in a white jacket put a plate holding four small pastries and a bottle of Singha beer down in front of him and walked off without uttering a word. Korda’s eyes flicked to the pastries, back up to Barent’s face. “You like Thai food?” he asked.

“Not really,” Barent replied. Korda looked at Moran. “You?”

Moran shrugged.

“I was caught in a fire when I was just a kid,” Korda said. “My lungs and the inside of my mouth got burned. These things are called curry puffs. They’re supposed to be hot.” Korda smiled. “I can barely taste them. They make my lips tingle, but that’s about all.

“You want to try some?”

“No, thanks,” Barent said.

Korda grunted and began to eat.

“So you don’t know Oliver Thomas?” Barent asked.

“Never heard of him,” Korda said. “If I ever do hear of him, I’ll give you a call. Right?”

“Yeah,” Barent said. “That’s right.”

“You got any more questions?”

“Not at this time.”

“Then you mind letting me get back to my lunch?”

“Sure. Have a nice day.” Korda grunted.

Barent rose to his feet and Moran followed him out the door. “You enjoy that?” Moran asked.

Barent looked at him. “Shut up,” he said.

“That’s what I thought.”

The pick up order on Jimmy Raines had so far resulted in nothing. Raines’ last listed address housed an insurance agent and his family.

“Raines?” The insurance agent scratched his head. “I don’t know any Raines.

“Honey, come on out here?”

A plump woman wearing an apron and a harried expression came out of the kitchen. A four-year-old child was clinging to her leg and howling. “What was the name of the guy we rented the apartment from?”

“It was a year ago. Who remembers? It was some realtor.” The woman reached down, picked up the four-year-old and held him against her ample breast. She trudged back into the kitchen.

“Yeah, she’s right. Of course it was. Yeah, how could I be so stupid?” He hit himself in the forehead with the flat of his hand. “It wasn’t even a guy. It was a woman. Raines?” He shook his head. “Never heard of him.”

“Who was the realtor?” Moran asked.

“Let me see now...” The insurance agent walked over to a bureau in the living room and began to rummage through the drawers. “Here it is.” He held up a card, then handed it to Barent.

“Highland Estates Realty,” Barent read. “Joan Gray, Licensed Realtor.”

“That’s the one.”

Barent handed him back the card. “Thanks.”

Joan Gray wore a pink polyester pants suit over a white, frilly blouse. Her hair was short, blonde and curly. A sincere smile seemed pasted to her round, pink face. Her skin was flawlessly smooth. She reminded Barent of a younger Shelley Winters. “Why, yes,” she said. “I remember him very

well.” She smiled down at the picture of Jimmy Raines. “I rented him the apartment.” She opened a ledger book and flipped the pages. “Here. It was nearly three years ago. It was a two year lease. He didn’t renew it.”

“Do you have a forwarding address?”

“No, I’m afraid we don’t.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about him, anything that you remember?”

A quick frown briefly marred the smooth perfection of Joan Gray’s skin. “He was rather loud, and he wore a black hat. I remember that particularly, because it was summer and the hat didn’t fit the season.”

“Nothing else?”

“Sorry.” She shook her head. “No.”

The drive back to the station was silent. Barent was in a bad mood. He hated this part of the job, driving all over town to talk to people who rarely had anything useful to say. For awhile, after he had been promoted to Detective First Grade, he had let the younger men go out into the field and interview witnesses. He had found, however, that he needed to see people’s faces and listen to their voices to be effective. So much of the job was talking to people, trying to figure out when they were lying and when they were sincere. He couldn’t picture them in his mind if all he had to go on was somebody else’s dry summary.

“Put out an all points,” Barent finally said. “We’ve had nothing but bad luck and dead ends with this investigation. I’m tired of it. I want Jimmy Raines.”

Moran looked at him with his flat, gray eyes and nodded. “Raines is from Woodmere, on Long Island,” Barent said.

“I’ll give them a call,” Moran said. He shrugged. “Maybe he went home to lie low.”

Nice place, Barent thought. When he had been here the other night, he hadn’t really looked at the decor. It was open and airy, dark blue carpet on the floor, soft, orange vinyl chairs lined up in neat rows, a pastel abstract painting that was probably supposed to look cheery hanging on the wall. Piles of magazines sat on low tables between the chairs. A fat little man was reading a newspaper—*The Times*. He held it open, struggling to keep the edges from folding down out of sight. A young woman was turning the pages of *Vogue*, barely glancing at them. She seemed to have difficulty concentrating. She kept looking at her watch. A white formica counter set up beneath a window took up one corner of the room. Behind the counter, a thin woman with iron gray hair and a straight back looked up. The nametag pinned to her blouse said, *Rose Schapiro*. “Can I help you?” she asked.

Barent leaned forward. “I’m Detective Barent,” he said in a low voice. “I was wondering if Doctor Kurtz could spare me a few minutes of his time.”

Mrs. Schapiro’s brow creased. “We’re very busy,” she said. “Doctor Kurtz is already running late. Could Doctor Ornella help you?”

“I’m sorry, it’s Doctor Kurtz that I need to speak with. If he could, it won’t take long.”

“Wait a moment.” Mrs. Schapiro rose to her feet and vanished down the corridor. She came back in a few seconds and said, “Come with me.” She conducted him into Kurtz’ office. “He’ll be with you in a few minutes. Please sit down.”

“Thank you,” Barent said.

Mrs. Schapiro vanished. Barent sat down in a chair opposite the desk and waited. It was more than a few minutes, but finally Kurtz came in.

“Barent,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

Barent removed a manila folder from his briefcase. “This arrived yesterday afternoon from the insurance company. I can’t make heads or tails out of it. It’s the list of Sharon Lee’s malpractice claims.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t understand it. What is ‘failure to detect amniotic fluid embolus’ supposed to mean? And here’s another: ‘failure to monitor for the presence of placenta accreta.’ I figured you could help me with this. You got any thoughts regarding ‘placenta accreta?’”

Kurtz grimaced. “Sure. Let me see.”

Barent handed him the list. Kurtz scanned it rapidly, holding the sheaf of papers by the edge as if afraid he might soil his fingers, shaking his head and swearing to himself under his breath.

Barent ventured an opinion: “Doctor Lee seems to have gotten herself involved in a lot of difficult cases.”

“Are you kidding?” Kurtz snorted in disgust. “Medicine has risks. So does surgery. Having a baby is supposed to be a happy occasion but a lot of things can go wrong. An obstetrician in New York City pays over a hundred thousand a year for malpractice insurance, and this crap is the reason why.”

“A hundred thousand?” *That’s a lot of babies*, Barent thought.

“This first one,” Kurtz said, “amniotic fluid embolus. Sometimes during labor, some of the amniotic fluid—that’s the liquid the infant swims in while still in the womb—gets squeezed into the mother’s blood. It goes to her lungs. It can cause hypotension, difficulty breathing and even cardiac arrest. It can be fatal. But there’s no way to prevent it and no way to detect it until it happens, and it’s nobody’s fault. The patient was successfully resuscitated and she did just fine.

“This other one: placenta accreta. That’s when the placenta grows into the uterus. Sometimes they bleed during pregnancy, but just as often everything is completely normal until after the baby is out and then you have to do an emergency hysterectomy or they bleed to death. Again, there’s no way to prevent it and usually no way to detect it beforehand. Now this patient, it was her first kid. She wanted more kids and she’s pissed off but what she doesn’t understand—or doesn’t want to admit—is, first, Sharon Lee saved her life, and second, her beef is with God, not the medical profession.” Kurtz shook his head. “Or what’s just as likely is that everybody understands it just fine but her husband or her mother or her lawyer think they can gouge a few bucks out of the system. “The third one—that’s the one I was telling you about: the viral syndrome? Again, no way to prevent it. No way to detect it. The family doesn’t want to accept that, they sue.”

Kurtz shrugged and handed the folder back across the desk to Barent. Barent took it grudgingly and said, “Alright, thanks.” He had hoped there would be more in it. “We’ll see what we can do. Have you had any luck with that list of names we gave you?”

“I’ve finished. No luck at all. None of them have ever been treated at Easton.”

“Too bad,” Barent said. He gazed off into space for a moment, thinking. “Thanks again for your time,” he said. He tucked the file of malpractice claims back in his briefcase and rose to his feet. “We’ll get right on it, such as it is.”

The patient with the amniotic fluid embolus had survived without sequelae and made a complete recovery. She had had one other child a year later, and had moved to Texas when her husband’s business relocated. A notice of intent to sue had been filed with the court but the actual suit had never been brought.

The lady with placenta accreta was named Lily Schultz. She had also made an uneventful recovery after the emergency hysterectomy that saved her life. She and her husband had adopted a

second infant and moved to California. The lawsuit they had filed was still pending. Barent called the plaintiff's attorney, a man named Jonas Morley.

"Hey, I advised against it, but the family insisted. I had a choice of taking on the case or seeing it go elsewhere. I figure we'll settle for a nominal sum." Barent could almost hear Jonas Morley shake his head. "It's too bad about the murder. You lose a lot of sympathy for your client when something like that happens."

"Yeah," Barent said, "it must be tough to lose a case that way."

"You being funny?" Morley said.

"Not at all. What do the Schultzes do?"

"You mean their jobs?"

"Yes."

"They're both schoolteachers. She's First Grade. He does High School Chemistry."

"They're still in California?" Barent asked.

"Sure. Sun and fun. Why would they come back here?"

"No reason I know."

"You bet. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No," Barent said. "Thanks."

The third one looked more promising. The suit had been filed by a couple named Carmen and Emilio Gonzaga, who lived in a poor section of Brooklyn. The suit had fought its way through the courts, neither side willing to settle, and the Gonzagas had lost.

The infant, a boy, though barely able to move his arms and legs, had survived until after his second birthday. He had been brought into the Emergency Room at Long Island Jewish with a fractured skull, and had died. Child abuse charges had been filed against Emilio Gonzaga but were dismissed for lack of evidence.

Transcripts of the trial were requested and arrived the next day. Barent reviewed them quickly, hesitated, blinked, and looked again. A slow smile spread across his face.

"Something?" Moran asked.

"Take a look. The wife's testimony, where she states her full name." He passed the sheet of paper to Moran.

Moran whistled. "Carmen Rivera Gonzaga..."

Emilio Gonzaga worked as a laborer at a warehouse. Barent and Moran went out to see him the next day. The warehouse floor was a huge, enclosed space, with row upon row of metal shelving piled all the way up to the ceiling. The walls were corrugated aluminum. Men in hardhats, bales and bundles in their arms, scurried in and out of the building, while cranes lifted packages back and forth from the shelves. A tall man with a barrel belly came up to them. He carried a clipboard and wore a yellow hardhat tilted back on his head. "Can I help you folks?"

"Are you the foreman?"

"That's me."

"We're looking for a guy named Emilio Gonzaga. We understand that he works here."

The foreman gave them a doubtful look. "You police?"

"Yeah."

The foreman nodded. "You look like police. Gonzaga in trouble?"

"We just want to talk to him."

The foreman glanced down at his clipboard. "Come with me." They followed him to a far corner of the warehouse where a group of men ferried bales of foam insulation onto a flat truck. "Wait a

second. I'll get him."

The foreman walked over to a thin man wearing jeans and a tight green tee shirt. He had a lean face covered with old acne scars and a pack of cigarettes rolled up in one sleeve. As the foreman spoke to him, he looked over toward Barent and Moran and shrugged. Then he nodded and walked up to them and silently waited.

"Are you Emilio Gonzaga?" Barent asked.

"Si."

"You ever hear of a doctor named Sharon Lee?"

"Lee?" Gonzaga frowned and said softly. "What for you ask me that?"

"Please answer the question."

Gonzaga shrugged. "Sure I know her. I hate that bitch. She killed my son. You here because she's dead?"

Barent frowned at Moran. "How did you know she was dead?"

"You kidding? I read it in the newspapers. You think I can't read?"

"Did you happen to read how she died?"

"The papers say some nut job strangle her. That's good. She deserve it."

"Sharon Lee was strangled on the night of December Twenty-Second. Where were you that night?"

"December Twenty-Second? Who remembers?"

"Try," Barent said.

Gonzaga's face screwed up in thought. "I played cards with two friends. Then I go to bed."

"Until what time did you play cards?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe midnight. Maybe a little earlier."

"Who were the friends?"

"Roberto Santana. Tomas Vasquez."

"They work here?"

"Santana does. Tomas a friend from the neighborhood."

"Was your wife at home that night?"

Gonzaga looked annoyed. "Of course she at home. Where else my wife gonna be?"

"Do you know a man named Tony Korda?" Barent asked.

Gonzaga shook his head. "No."

"Jaime Ruiz?"

Gonzaga reached up slowly, unrolled the pack of cigarettes from his sleeve, tapped one out and lit it. Smoke dribbled out of his nose and spread around his face like fog. "No," he said. "I don't know no Jaime Ruiz."

"How about Herman Delgado?"

Gonzaga frowned. "No."

"Carlos Rivera?"

Gonzaga gave him a slow, suspicious look. "Carlos Rivera my wife's brother."

"Do you know where he is? We've been trying to find him."

"What for?"

"Please answer the question."

Gonzaga shook his head. "Carlos leave home maybe a year ago. He say he going to Florida. We not hear from him since."

“I see,” Barent said. He nodded and scribbled something in his notebook. “Now,” he said. “Where were you on the night of December Twenty-Eighth?”

Gonzaga stared at him. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t remember.”

“You remembered where you were on the Twenty-Second. Why can’t you remember where you were on the Twenty-Eighth?”

Gonzaga shrugged. “Some things you remember. Some things you don’t remember. It’s not a crime to not remember.”

Barent smiled at him gently. “That’s certainly true. Thank you for your time.” He turned to Moran. “Come on.”

As they walked off, Barent could see Gonzaga smoking his cigarette, his hands in his pockets, staring after them. “What do you think?” Barent asked.

“I think you’re both right,” Moran said. “It’s not a crime to not remember.”

“Have someone talk with Santana and Vasquez,” Barent said. “See if they confirm his story. Some things aren’t crimes.” He settled his glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose and smiled thinly. “Some things are.”







“HARRY, HOW YOU DOING?”

“Fine, Lieutenant. Just fine.” Moran shook hands and sat down. He grinned. “You look busy.”

“Yeah.” The other man glanced at the pile of paper sitting on his desk and gave Moran a crooked smile. “So what’s up?”

Ed Lipsky worked out of a precinct on the Lower East Side. Moran had briefly worked under him after graduating from the Academy but had soon moved uptown, where he had remained ever since. Lipsky was burly, not quite fat since a lot of his bulk was muscle, with a broad red face and a crooked nose. His hair, salt and pepper when Moran had known him, had since turned entirely white. “The record says you were the last one to bust Jimmy Raines.”

Lipsky nodded. “Sure. I remember Raines. A real dirt bag.”

“I was wondering if you might tell me a little bit about him: friends, habits, anything that might prove useful.”

Lipsky shrugged. “Raines...” He leaned back in his seat and folded his hands above his ample stomach. “He pays a lot of attention to his clothes, wears a suit and tie, thinks that makes him better than the other dirt bags.”

Moran nodded. “Go on.”

“He’s a crazy fucker, likes to think of himself as a sophisticated hit man. He uses twenty-two caliber softpoints. The bullet mushrooms, stays inside the target and rattles around. Innocent bystanders don’t get hurt.”

“Makes a big hole in the victim,” Moran observed.

“They’re supposed to.”

“I seem to recall a James Bond character like that.”

“Scaramanga. *The Man with the Golden Gun*.”

“You think Raines has seen it?”

Lipsky shrugged.

“Anything else?”

“Jimmy had a girlfriend named Linda Angel, a stripper at the Flamingo Club in Queens. Her real name is Sophie Glass but Linda Angel sounds better, you know what I mean?”

“Sure. Go on.”

Lipsky frowned, thinking about it. “His mother lives on the Island someplace.”

“Woodmere.”

“That’s right.”

“We’re already looking into it. Anything else?”

“No.” Lipsky shook his head. “That’s about it.”

“Alright, Lieutenant. Thanks.”

“Lipsky chuckled. “You catch Raines, you tell him hello for me.”

“We’ll do that.”

Jimmy Raines stood on the corner of Bank Street and Seventh Avenue and watched the traffic go by.

Jimmy Raines had been busy. Jimmy did indeed think of himself as better than the other dirt bags. Jimmy was a professional. He didn’t do it for the money, though the money was just fine, thank you.

He did it because he loved it. Jimmy had long ago figured something out about himself—he liked to hurt people. Even more, he liked to exert power over them, shock them out of their middle class complacency, show them the error of their ways. The real world, Jimmy figured, was composed of only two types of people: lambs and tigers. Jimmy was one of the tigers. The lambs, they got up in the morning, ate breakfast, went to work, got home in the evening, had dinner, maybe watched a little T.V. They thought they were safe. Oh, most of them had an intellectual knowledge that violent crime was a fact of everyday existence in New York City, but every one of them thought it couldn't happen to them, not if they stuck to well lit streets and avoided bad neighborhoods. They didn't realize that a jungle was lurking just outside their door. Jimmy got a real kick out of showing them they were wrong.

The other night, that guy Kurtz... Jimmy had been pretty shaken up by the way things had turned out. Kurtz was a lamb. The lambs were not supposed to grow teeth. Kurtz probably thought he was hot stuff, but he wasn't. Charlie had grown careless and Kurtz had gotten lucky. Professional pride—and a prudent reluctance to leave witnesses—impelled him to show Kurtz the nature of his mistake.

Jimmy had been following Kurtz for two full days, biding his time, planning his strategy. It wasn't enough to simply bump the guy off. You had to bump him off in a way that would make him realize just how stupid and insignificant and hopeless his position in life really was. He had to understand that he was a lamb and Jimmy Raines was a tiger.

Jennifer Levy came streaking out of her bedroom, pinning her hair back as she ran. "Gotta go," she said. "I'll be late." Kathy, who had never been a morning person, sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and the paper and stared at her, bemused and vaguely revolted by such a display of energy before eight A.M. Jennifer was teaching a class on 'Woodrow Wilson and the Origins of the Great War.' Jennifer was always in a hurry and always on the verge of being late. The door opened. The door slammed.

Kathy drew a slow, silent sigh. Blessed quiet. She finished her coffee and slowly ate a cheese omelet and some home fries and by the time she had finished, she felt more human. The amount of fat in a meal like this was ridiculous. Kathy knew it but every once in a while she indulged herself. Ever since the events of the other night, Kathy had felt skittish, sleeping poorly, waking up every couple of hours from bad dreams that she could not quite remember. She took the dishes over to the sink, rinsed them off and placed them in the dishwasher, then went into the bedroom to shower.

An hour later, dressed and alert, she opened the door.

A big man smiled at her. A gun pointed at her face. She stared at it, seeing nothing but the small black hole in the middle of the barrel. She started to say something—she hardly knew what.

"If you scream, I'll kill you," the man said. "Shut your mouth and go back inside."

She shut it.

"Very good," the man said. "We don't want any trouble, now do we?"

"Beautiful girl," Nolan said.

"Yeah." Kurtz nodded. Her name was Cary Schneider. She was twenty-seven, an aerobics instructor. She had first noticed the lump in her breast while examining herself in the shower. At first she had dismissed it. Twenty-seven was much too young. It couldn't be, not *her*, but the lump refused to go away and after a few months of feeling it, Cary Schneider made an appointment to see Kurtz and now here she was, about to undergo a mastectomy for breast cancer. Kurtz was glad she was finally asleep. She had seemed in a good mood, resigned to the surgery, already talking about the reconstruction that would follow. She had laughed and told a stupid joke in the holding area, something about a duck with one wing, while the anesthesia resident put the I.V. in and then, all of a sudden, she burst out crying. The men had looked at each other helplessly. Kurtz said, "I'm sorry,

Miss Schneider.” It was all he could think of to say. He thought about taking her hand or patting her on the shoulder but it seemed somehow inappropriate. Luckily, one of the nurses saw what was happening and bustled over. The nurse didn’t say anything aside from the usual platitudes, but maybe the fact that it was coming from a woman helped. Cary Schneider’s sobs turned to quiet sniffles and then they wheeled her inside and put her off to sleep.

Kurtz picked up the scalpel and made the incision and soon the beautiful, quivering breast was lying grotesquely alone in a bucket.

“The lesion here is small,” Kurtz said. “If you can leave the underlying musculature and not take the lymph nodes then the later reconstruction looks pretty good.”

Liebert nodded while he held the retractor.

The O.R. door opened. A nurse poked her head in. “Doctor Kurtz, there’s a phone call for you.”

“Could you please take a message?” Kurtz said. “I’m busy.”

“She says it’s important.”

She? Kurtz looked at the nurse, then frowned at the wound. The edges were dry, the flaps already sewn. “Okay, Steve,” he said to Nolan. “Let me go get it.”

Nolan nodded. “No problem. I’ll just finish closing.”

Kurtz stripped off his gown and gloves and then went out to the Nursing Station. One phone was off the hook, waiting for him.

He grabbed a cab outside the hospital and gave the cabbie the address. “And hurry it up,” he said.

The cabbie looked at him with bored eyes. “Sure, whatever you say.” The cab went infinitesimally faster. Kurtz stared out the window, seething, ticking off the streets in his mind as they crawled by.

“He hurt me,” she had whispered. “He *hurt* me.” Her voice had been almost incoherent, on the verge of hysteria.

“Call the police,” Kurtz said. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Fifteen minutes later, the cab pulled up in front of Kathy’s apartment. He paid the tab, ran up the stairs and knocked.

The door opened. A fat man stood on the other side, smiling, wearing a black suit and tie, holding a gun. “Come in,” the man said. He backed away, keeping the gun pointed at Kurtz’ face. “Come in slowly. Close the door.”

Standing by the couch, Kathy was quietly sobbing. Her face was puffy, a purple bruise beginning to form under her eye.

“Jimmy Raines,” Kurtz said.

The man frowned. “You know me,” he said. “That’s too bad.”

“So do the police. I’ve already identified you.”

Raines shrugged. “It means nothing if you’re not there to say it in Court.” Raines shook his head. “The other night,” he said, “you shouldn’t have done that. It wasn’t smart. We would have beat up Thomas, delivered the message, you would never have seen either of us again. But no, you had to get cute. You had to think you were a tiger, when all you really were, was a lamb.” Raines looked honestly regretful.

Kurtz backed away one step. “You always use that gun?” he asked. “Yeah. What of it?”

“Ruger twenty-two. I’m pretty good with a handgun.” Kurtz smiled thinly. He felt his heart beating, felt the air moving slowly in and out of his lungs. “Anybody ever tell you that you look stupid in that hat?”

Raines frowned. He blinked his eyes and looked momentarily hurt.

“Twenty-two caliber long rifle shells will go through an inch and a half of pine,” Kurtz said. “Softpoints, maybe an inch or a little less. Which do you use?”

Raines mouth twitched. “Softpoints. People aren’t pine.”

Kurtz shrugged. “Whatever, a moving target is hard to hit,” he said. “And you’ve got to hit two of us. How good are you?”

Raines sighed, shrugged and raised the gun. Kurtz jumped.

Kathy screamed and the gun jerked, just for an instant. Kurtz had not jumped toward Raines. Curling himself into a tight ball, he rolled beneath the kitchen table. He came up carrying it in front of him like a shield and charged toward Raines.

Raines fired. The bullets hit the table and mushroomed. Lead fragments and chips of wood flew in all directions. Kurtz grunted in pain and kept coming.

Screaming, Kathy picked up a lamp and hurled it, then she threw herself to the floor and huddled behind the couch. The lamp hit Raines in the shoulder and his aim momentarily wavered.

Kurtz slammed the table into Raines’ gut. Raines fell heavily onto his back and the gun went flying. Kurtz fell next to him, still clutching the table. Eyes glaring, lips pulled back in a snarl, Raines staggered up and jumped for the gun but Kurtz grabbed him by the ankle and Raines fell across his chest. Raines kicked out with both feet while Kurtz desperately held on to one leg. Kurtz groaned and felt his fingers begin to slip but managed to bring his other arm up, got hold of the bottom of Raines’ pants and pulled him back. Raines turned toward him and they grappled, rolling over and over until they crashed into the wall. Kurtz struck out with the heel of his hand, snapping Raines’ head to the side, but Kurtz’ right shoulder was numb and the blow lacked force. Raines brought his knee up into Kurtz’ abdomen and Kurtz felt his grip give way. Both men wobbled to their feet, Kurtz gasping, Raines’ eyes fixed on the gun lying on the other side of the room.

“Come on,” Kurtz said. “Try it.” Oh, sure, try it. Kurtz’ head spun. He put a cold smile on his face, raised his hands in a karate stance and willed them not to tremble. He tried to look mean. It must have worked. Raines stared, hesitated, said, “Shit” in a disgusted voice, then turned and ran out the door.

Kurtz breathed a long sigh in the sudden stillness. He blinked down at the front of his shirt. The bullets had shattered against the wooden table. The table was peppered with deep gouges and small holes where fragments of lead had gone through. One fragment had lodged in Kurtz’ right arm, another in his shoulder. The right side of his shirt was turning red.

Kathy was still sobbing, her face in her hands. Kurtz walked over to her and reached down to help her to her feet. She shrugged his hand away with a violent motion and looked up at him, her face twisted through the tears. “Don’t touch me.” Her voice was a hiss. “Just don’t touch me.”

Kurtz drew a deep breath, staring down at her. “Alright,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.” He stood there for a long moment, swaying. Then he felt dizzy suddenly and sat down on the couch.

Kathy’s sobs turned to strangled laughter and then back into sobs. Still crying, she picked up the phone.

Jim Farkas was the plastic surgeon on call that morning. He met them at the Emergency Room. “Jesus,” he said. “What happened to you?”

“A mosquito bit me,” Kurtz said. Farkas looked at him doubtfully. “It’s the middle of winter.”

“It must have been a roach.”

Farkas grunted. He snapped an x-ray into a view box and peered at it. “Looks like bullet fragments to me. Two of them.”

“Amazing,” Kurtz said. “Absolutely amazing what you can tell with those things.”

“Superficial,” Farkas said. He shrugged. “You’ll live.”

He said to Kathy, "Lie back. Hold still." She did as he asked. His fingers moved gently over her face. "These are just bruises," he said. "There's nothing for me to sew up. They should be gone in a few days." He shook his head. "I told you to drop him. He's bad news." Shaking his head and chuckling, Farkas walked off.

"The man's real funny, you know?" Kurtz said.

Three hours later, he was out of surgery and discharged from the Recovery Room, the bullet fragments removed from his arm and shoulder and sent to Pathology.

Barent met him up on the floor. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "Not bad," Kurtz said. "Not bad." He smiled. The room was swirling around him and he felt like throwing up but he was telling the truth. He sighed and felt himself sink back into the pillows, content for the moment just to be alive. But then he fuzzily remembered Kathy and all of a sudden his euphoria melted away.

Barent looked uncomfortable. He seemed to have trouble looking Kurtz in the face. "I'm sorry about this," he said. "I never intended for you to put yourself at risk."

"It had nothing to do with Sharon Lee or your investigation. It was just bad luck."

Barent made a clucking sound through his teeth and then frowned. "Maybe, but for the moment at least, your involvement with this case is ended. You've done everything you can, anyway."

"Really?" Kurtz felt a sensation that he had trouble identifying. It might have been relief but it might have been regret. "Just like that?"

Barent gave him a curious look. "What do you mean? I asked you to help. You helped. I'm grateful. What else do you want?"

Kurtz drew a deep breath. His head was still spinning from the anesthetic and it was hard to concentrate. "I thought I was a part of the investigation," he said.

"You're not paid to get shot at," Barent said.

"I'm getting shot at anyway." Kurtz shrugged, then sucked in air at the sudden pain. "Harrison mentioned my name," he said. "But how did Raines know about Kathy?"

"He was probably following you."

"But why do it like that? Why not just ambush me at my place? Why involve her?"

"Who knows what he was planning? Probably he would have raped her, robbed the apartment, then killed you both—tried to make it look like a random event."

"Great. That's just great. Just another day's work in the City of New York."

Barent shrugged. "Sad but true. Keep your eyes open, if you want, but don't be obvious about it. Call me if you need me. I'll be in touch if we learn anything."





SANTANA AND VASQUEZ confirmed Gonzaga's story. They had been together playing poker until close to midnight. Carmen Gonzaga claimed to have been sleeping. She had no idea when her husband had come to bed.

"Sharon Lee was killed sometime between three o'clock and five o'clock in the morning," Barent said. "He has no alibi."

"Sure," Moran pointed out. "But we have no evidence."

Barent grunted. "Find Jimmy Raines. He's evidence."

Linda Angel—or Sophie Glass—was married to a construction worker named Archie Borden and lived in a working class neighborhood in Queens. She had a crying infant in a stroller and a harried expression on her face. She said she had not seen Jimmy Raines in more than three years. Barent believed her.

Raines' mother was a small, round woman with curly gray hair and wrinkles around the eyes. She looked at Barent sadly. "Is Jimmy in trouble again?" she asked. Barent had flashed his badge as soon as she opened the door but hadn't said a word.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"It's always the same thing. Jimmy's always in trouble."

"Have you seen Jimmy lately?"

"No."

"Has he called?"

"Officer, the last time I saw Jimmy was three years ago. He was being carted off to prison. I told him then that I didn't want anything to do with him, ever again."

She looked sincere. Sad, but sincere. "Does that sound heartless to you?" she asked. "Do I sound like an unnatural mother?" She shook her head. "I wonder about that sometimes. But all of us had had it up to here with Jimmy"—she made a throat slitting gesture with the forefinger of her right hand—"I did my best with him but nothing worked. He was always in trouble. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I should have raised him different. I don't know." She raised her arms and let them fall helplessly to her side.

"You'll let us know if he contacts you?"

She shrugged. "He won't."

Apparently, he didn't. Barent heard nothing from Mrs. Raines and a surreptitious watch on the neighborhood turned out to be entirely fruitless.

But two days later, they got a break.

Vincent Graham was tall and thin, with graying hair and a lean face. He wore tailored blue suits that fit him with understated elegance and he carried a black leather briefcase. Nobody figured him for a drug dealer. The staff of the Ritz-Carlton in Chicago were properly appalled, therefore, when Vincent Graham was arrested in the lobby with a briefcase full of cocaine.

Graham smiled a gentle smile at the plainclothesmen and sadly shook his head. He held his hands out for the cuffs and went along quietly. His lawyer met him at the station house and they immediately proceeded to deal.

Vincent Graham named as many names as he could think of, dates, times, places. He had a remarkable memory. One of the names he dealt was Jimmy Raines, who turned out to be living in a

neighborhood of quiet apartments near the Lake.

When the police turned up at his door, Jimmy Raines looked through the peephole, said, "Just a minute," in a bored voice, settled his black fedora on his head, grabbed his gun and a packed suitcase from the kitchen table as he walked by, opened the window of a side bedroom and calmly climbed down the fire escape. At the bottom, he looked around. Nobody. He smiled then, and walked away, brushing some dust from his jacket as he went. At the mouth of the alley, a low voice said, "Freeze," and the cold barrel of a pistol pressed suddenly against his head. He froze.

Two days later, Jimmy Raines was back in New York.

He looked, Barent thought, like a stocky undertaker: black pants, white dress shirt, round sloping shoulders. The police had done something with the jacket, fedora and tie. "Harrison Thomas?" Jimmy Raines said, and shook his head. "Richard Kurtz? Never heard of them. You've got the wrong guy."

"Really?" Barent pasted a doubtful expression on his face. "That's too bad. We wouldn't want to send an innocent man to jail."

"Jail?" Raines looked pained. "What are you talking about? I've been living in Chicago for the past year."

"Chicago and New York are about an hour and a half apart by plane. You can live anywhere you want, but we have reliable witnesses who say you were in New York on January 17th and 20th."

"It wasn't me," Raines said.

Barent ignored this. "And that scab on your side looks a lot like a bullet wound."

"No way," Raines said. "I fell down and scraped myself."

"On what?"

"On the edge of a table."

"Sure." Barent shook his head sadly. "And then of course there's the gun with your fingerprints on it, but maybe you lost the gun on the subway and somebody who looked just like you happened to find it. Like I said, we wouldn't want to send an innocent man to jail."

"Hey, man," Raines said. "Give me a break here, would you?"

"Sure we'll give you a break—if you give us a break."

"I want a lawyer," Raines stated.

"A lawyer?" Barent folded his hands across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "You can have a lawyer any time you want one. A lawyer's not going to keep you out of jail." That was not necessarily true, Barent reflected. In this city, at this time, nothing about the legal process was certain. Raines could look the jury in the eye and deny everything—he undoubtedly would deny everything—and they might even believe him. You never knew. But it didn't seem likely.

"Look man, I don't *know* anything." Raines swiped a hand through his hair and suddenly looked like he meant it.

"No?" Barent said. "Tell me all about it."

"Charlie took the job. Charlie Flanagan. All we were supposed to do was beat up the kid and his girl and tell them to warn the old man not to fuck around. That's all I know. I was just along for the ride. I don't know who hired us. There wasn't any need for me to know."

"You don't know?"

"No. I swear it."

"And how about Richard Kurtz and Kathy Roselli? Anybody hire you to kill them?"

"Kill?" Raines held his hands out to the side. "What do you mean, kill? I wasn't going to kill anybody. I just wanted to give them a little warning, maybe convince them to keep their mouths shut."



He looked sincere. No doubt he had had a lot of practice. "Well, Jimmy, that's too bad for you," Barent said. "Because your little warning didn't work. Now, let's be realistic here." Barent leaned back, stretched, put a thin smile on his face. "I want Tony Korda, and I want Jaime Ruiz, and if you can't give them to me, then I've got no reason at all to cut a murdering piece of shit like you any sort of a break whatsoever."

Raines hung his head. "I want a lawyer," he said again.

"Yeah, we'll get you a lawyer. And good luck to him. You're going back to the Pen, Jimmy. You're going back for a good long time." Saying it made Barent feel a little better. He stared at Jimmy Raines' hang dog face and realized morosely that Raines wasn't lying to him about Ruiz and Korda. "Shit," he muttered to himself. Another dead end.

"How's the shoulder?" Ornella asked.

"Better," Kurtz said. "I'll be back in the O.R. tomorrow."

"That's good," Ornella said, and frowned down at a copy of the *New England Journal of Medicine* from April of 1978. "How's Nugent?" he asked.

"About the same." About the same didn't mean exactly the same. If anything, Nugent was worse, a little weaker, a little thinner, blood counts dwindling lower. "We're still waiting for nursing home placement," Kurtz said.

"At this rate, he'll be dead before he can get there," Ornella said. Kurtz nodded. He might be; and it wouldn't be the first time that a patient had died in the hospital while waiting to leave it. "How's your young lady?" Ornella asked.

"Fine," Kurtz said.

There must have been something in his tone because Ornella grinned and said, "Trouble in Paradise? Don't worry, she'll get over it. And if she doesn't, there are plenty of fish in the sea."

Kurtz didn't feel like discussing it. He hadn't seen Kathy since the assault. He had called her twice. Her voice had been cold. She had been reluctant to talk, but he had persuaded her to get together tomorrow evening.

Ornella looked around the lobby of the office suite and sighed. Mrs. Schapiro had already gone home and the place was empty except for the two of them. Kurtz hadn't seen his partner much lately. Ornella was scheduled to officially retire on March 15th, but he had been coming into the office much less frequently in the past couple of months. "I like the changes you've made," he said. "The old place looks good." The old place looked like a new place, which was the way Kurtz wanted it. During the past year, he had replaced the fading carpet, painted the walls and purchased the art, the white formica desks and the brightly colored vinyl chairs.

"Can I help you with that?" Kurtz asked.

Ornella smiled wanly. "No, thanks." He had brought in a couple of big cardboard boxes and was cleaning out his desk. Apparently he had never done so in all the years he had worked here. He did it slowly, looking at each piece of paper as he went, weighing it in his fingers, trying to decide whether or not to discard this particular piece of his past or to save it. He had already gone through the Nineties, the Eighties and the Seventies. So far, more pages had gone into the boxes than into the garbage.

"Look at this," Ornella said, and held it under Kurtz' nose. It was a ticket stub for a Rangers game from 1963. "I remember that game. Bobby Hull and the Blackhawks." He shrugged. "The Rangers lost." He hesitated, then shrugged, and carefully deposited the ticket stub in the trash.

"You sure you don't want it?" Kurtz asked. "You might need it."

“Hmph.” Ornella grunted and continued slowly to skim through the fossilized layers. “You got any interest in a *Life* from 1957?” He held it out to Kurtz. Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner smiled at him from the cover.

“Not me.” Kurtz shook his head. “Maybe you could donate it to a museum.”

Ornella gave him a sour look and dropped the magazine in the garbage. He turned back to the desk, rummaged slowly through the papers. He was almost down to the bottom of the first drawer. He had been at it for nearly an hour already. “Wow,” Ornella said. “Talk about memories.”

He held a faded white piece of paper out to Kurtz. It had embossed lettering on it:

*Benefit Dinner and Dance to Celebrate the Opening of the Hampshire Building*

*7:30 P.M., June 24, 1959*

*R.S.V.P.*

“I went with Lily. It was quite a night.” Lily, Kurtz remembered, was Ornella’s wife. She had died of cancer nearly ten years before. Ornella’s eyes grew misty as he stared at the invitation. He carefully placed it in one of the cardboard boxes.

“I met her when I was an intern. She was a nursing student.” Ornella shook his head and wistfully smiled. “I used to sneak her into the dorm. All of us used to sneak our girlfriends into the dorm.”

“What dorm?” Kurtz asked.

“The old Intern’s Dormitory. Back then, an intern was an *intern*. We all lived here. Spent the whole year hardly budging from the Medical Center. You’d finish a night on call, then work all the next day and drag yourself back to the old dorm, ready to collapse.” Ornella breathed a sigh and shook his head. “Man.”

Kurtz thought about his own internship and shuddered. “Where was this dorm?”

“Right here. They tore it down to put up the Hampshire Building. Jesus, we all hated the place. We used to sleep in scrubs in case we had to run in. The phone would go off, we’d jump out of bed, run down the stairs and into the tunnel and across the street to the hospital. Sometimes three, four times a night.”

Kurtz blinked. “Tunnel?” he said.

“Yeah. It was nice of them. You shouldn’t freeze your butt off if you got called in and it happened to be the middle of winter. Thanks a lot. They put the walkways up over the street when they built this place.”

“Whatever happened to this tunnel?”

Ornella shrugged. “Beats me.”

“Tunnel?” Wellesley said. “I never heard of it.”

“It may not exist any longer. Supposedly it used to connect an Intern’s Dormitory to the Medical Center. This was before the Hampshire Building.”

“I never heard of it,” Wellesley repeated.

Barent tapped his pen on his notebook. “Who might have the blueprints?”

Wellesley picked up his phone. “Maybe Engineering.”

A half hour later, Barent and Wellesley were in the office of the Chief Engineer, a man named Suzuki, who looked Asian but spoke English without an accent. “There was a whole series of tunnels back then,” Suzuki said. “The main hospital was much smaller than it is today. There were separate buildings for Orthopedics, Eye Surgery and Neurosurgery, and of course, the Intern’s Dormitory. They were all connected underground. See here?” The blueprints spread out over the table were yellowed and crumbling around the edges, but they were still legible.

“What happened to these tunnels?” Barent asked.

“Some of them were incorporated into the basement of the present building. Others were boarded up. The last one still in use was the one leading to the dormitory, where the Hampshire Building is now.”

“Any of them still accessible?” Barent asked.

Suzuki frowned. “Maybe,” he said.

Barent smiled at Wellesley. “Let’s go see.”

It was easy to see why the police had missed the tunnel entrance when they searched the place after Sharon Lee’s murder. It looked like a ventilation grate, tucked away in a far corner of the deepest layer of the sub-basement. A Yale lock held it tightly to the floor in the corner of a storage room filled with antique pieces of medical equipment. Barent recognized an iron lung and two bullet shaped devices that were probably obsolete EKG monitors. A ghoulish contraption that looked like an electric chair sat in a corner. “What’s that thing for?” he asked.

Robinson frowned at it, his jowls quivering. “I think they used it for electroconvulsive therapy.”

Barent shivered and Robinson gave him a peevish look. Robinson had insisted on coming along but was evidently hoping that the search proved a dead end. From Robinson’s point of view, nothing to do with this case was going to help the bottom line and he just wanted it to all be over with and disappear.

Suzuki held the blueprint up to the dim light. “This is definitely it,” he said. They stared at each other. Barent wordlessly gestured to Suzuki, who stepped forward with a set of keys. The second key seemed to fit the lock but would not turn the bolt. The fifth key, however, slid right in and the lock clicked open. Harry Moran and Arnie Figueroa put on gloves, grasped the heavy steel frame and lifted. The grate resisted for a moment, then rose upward and slid to the side.

“Bingo,” Barent said.





“SO OKAY,” BARENT SAID, “It was a dead end. So sue me.”

Moran seemed to be having difficulty repressing a smile. The grating had concealed a set of concrete steps, which led down to a molding wooden door. The door swung open at a touch. On the other side of the door, a long, gloomy tunnel, walls and floor constructed of unpainted concrete, curved away to their left.

Suzuki held a lantern up and squinted at the blueprints. “This leads under the playground, toward the Administration Building,” he said.

Barent looked at Moran, who shrugged.

Robinson glanced at his watch and frowned.

“Let’s see,” Barent said. The tunnel was large enough for two people to walk together. The air smelled moldy and damp. After a few hundred feet, the tunnel branched.

“Which way?” Barent asked.

Suzuki shook his head. “Beats me.”

“Forget it,” Barent said. “Let’s get a team down here. They’ll know what to look for.”

Within an hour, the tunnels had been thoroughly searched. As Suzuki had told them, they crossed the entire grounds of the Medical Center in a connecting web. The branch that had once led across the street to the old Intern’s Dorm had long since been filled in. In one isolated branch, huddled against the wall, they found a dusty old blanket, four empty bottles of Grolsch beer and an antique, desiccated condom (Later, when informed of the condom, Edward Ornella at first frowned, then shrugged and slowly smiled.). And that was all. Nothing to indicate that Bill Mose, Herman Delgado or anybody else had been down here in the past 30 years.

Barent believed in the virtues of serendipity, in luck both good and bad. Barent believed that if you scratched at a problem long enough, if you turned over enough rocks, then sooner or later the bugs would scurry out into the light and expose themselves. You had to be persistent. You had to keep digging.

When bewildered by a case, Barent always returned to the victim. The victim, after all, was the focus. The victim, whether she knew it or not, contained the key to every crime. Barent had interviewed many survivors of attempted murder. He had always been struck by the fact that the victims were almost never surprised by the attack; they understood it, and in a strange way, almost accepted it. You had to know the victim.

Barent did not understand Sharon Lee. She seemed to have lived her life almost without touching other people. Even her best friends hardly knew her. Evelyn Hobbs, Joyce Davenport, Jennifer Parks...he had called them as Kurtz had suggested. They had no clue. Evelyn Hobbs was a buyer for an importing firm and had spent most of the past six months in Paris and Hong Kong. Jennifer Parks claimed to have seen Sharon Lee no more than three times in the past year. Perhaps the fact that they were both doctors explained it. Jennifer Parks had a schedule that would have exhausted most men, with office hours for eight to ten hours each day, a husband and two children to take care of. Joyce Davenport had gotten married and moved to Seattle over a year ago. She had nothing to offer.

Alice McMahan, Peggy Ryan, Rita Mendez...forget it. Nolan, Stills, Franklin, Farkas, Werth...Barent had interviewed over fifty members of the hospital staff during the course of this investigation. Almost all of them seemed like perfectly nice people, which of course meant nothing in

itself since murderers quite often appeared to be nice people except for the fact that now and then they killed somebody. If any one of them had possessed a motive to kill Sharon Lee, Barent had been unable to discover it.

Barent sat in the cool darkness of his office and thought about Sharon Lee.

Two weeks ago, shortly after the robbery that may or may not have been committed by Herman Delgado, Barent had gone to Sharon Lee's apartment.

He had of course been there shortly following the murder, but at that time the place had been mobbed with uniformed policemen and technicians from the crime lab. It had been hard to think. Now it was quiet. Now he could stand in the center of the apartment and try to get a feel for the essence of the dead woman.

A stack of cartons stood in the corner, half filled with clothing already removed by her sister from the dresser drawers. The artwork was "modern" but indistinct. It looked quite a bit like the stuff hanging in Kurtz' office, pastel, pretty and boring (not that Barent considered himself an expert on art, his old pal Ernie Gottlieb notwithstanding). The place was neat. A book of Erte prints and another book of photographs by Annie Liebovitz sat out on the coffee table. A baby grand piano stood in one corner. Barent hit middle C and winced. The piano needed to be tuned.

Sharon Lee had left no scrapbooks, no photo albums, no mementos hanging on the walls, no little trophies brought back from trips to Greece or Puerto Rico or Spain. A small stack of opened mail lay on the kitchen table, all advertisements and bills. Impersonal, that was the impression: neat, clean, sterile...except for one thing, one small touch of humanity: a framed photograph sat under a lamp on a table next to the couch: a picture of Sharon Lee and her sister, arms around each other by the sea, laughing.

Barent nodded to himself, rose to his feet and grabbed the keys to his car.

An hour later, he pulled the car into the driveway of the Lee household and parked. The same plump maid answered the door. "Is Mrs. Hirschfeld at home?" Barent asked. He held out his badge.

The maid's eyes flicked to the badge, then up to Barent's face. "Please come in," she said.

Barent waited in the foyer, peering up as he had before at the Vasarelli painting above the second story landing. He heard a clatter of heels on the tile floor and turned. Sheila Hirschfeld stood there. "Detective...?"

"Barent," he said.

"Yes, of course," she said quickly. "I hadn't expected to see you again." She bit her lip and flushed, evidently realizing how this sounded.

"I felt that we needed to talk."

She stared at him. "Oh? What about?"

"Can we sit down, Mrs. Hirschfeld?"

Barent looked at her with a grave expression on his face. After a moment, she looked away. "Yes, of course," she said again. "Come with me."

She led him back to the same garden room they had sat in before. This time, there was no tea. She sat on the edge of a cushioned hassock, clasped her knees tightly together and looked at him without speaking. Barent took the chair across from her.

"How is your mother?" he asked.

"She's fine."

"Is she at home?"

"Yes, but she's resting." Barent nodded.

"That's good," he said. "It's better if we speak alone."

She stared at him. "Why do you say that?" she asked. Her voice was little louder than a whisper.

"I felt that you would be more candid with me if we were alone." Barent looked at her and lifted one eyebrow.

She seemed about to say something but the words would not come out. She cleared her throat. Barent waited.

"What do you mean?" she finally asked. Amazing, Barent thought, how they always asked that.

"Detective Moran and I both had a strong feeling that you knew more than you were telling us."

Her lips thinned. She was offended. They always got offended, especially if they were lying. "I can't imagine what you're talking about."

Barent shook his head and allowed his lips to curl ever so slightly. "When Detective Moran and I were here last, you seemed reluctant to speak, particularly when the subject of your sister's romantic involvements came up."

She stared at him. Slowly, one hand rose, the fingers coming to rest ever so gently on her throat.

"The fact is," Barent said, "that we have acquired evidence strongly suggesting that someone other than Bill Mose may have murdered your sister."

She swallowed, her eyes still fixed on Barent's face.

"You said that you spoke to your sister often, I think you said at least once a week."

"That's right," Sheila said, and gave a tiny nod of her head.

"It's been stated by a number of witnesses that your sister was involved with someone at the time of her death. Yet no one has been able to tell us who that person might have been, and no one has stepped forward. Can you tell me, Mrs. Hirschfeld?"

"No." Barent could barely hear her.

"You can't tell? Or you won't tell?"

Sheila shook her head and gave a nervous little laugh. Her posture was hunched and defensive, the expression on her face, faintly disdainful. "When I thought that you had arrested the man who killed her, I saw no point in dragging Sharon's good name through the mud. This changes things." She frowned, staring out the window at the line of shrubs by the edge of the woods, and looked back at Barent. "I can't tell you. I don't know his name. All I know is that he's married."

"I see." Barent nodded slowly. "Can you tell me anything else about him. Did she describe him in any way?"

Sheila hesitated. "You had to know my sister, Lieutenant. She... had a thing about men. She collected them. My sister was very good looking, even beautiful. She was intelligent and dedicated to her work. But somehow, she had a lifelong struggle with her own self-esteem. She needed constant affirmation of her attractiveness and worth. I think the fact that this last one was married only added to the appeal for her. It takes a real woman, after all, to steal a man away from someone else."

"She never mentioned a name? She never described him?"

"No." Sheila shook her head. "Never." She added, "I disapproved. I told her so. After that, she was reluctant to talk and frankly, I didn't want to hear about it."

"Did she mention where she met him? Or what he did?"

"She did talk about meeting him secretly. I had the impression that the people she worked with knew him and would recognize them together. I assumed he was another doctor, but I don't know that for certain."

Her face was downcast, and Barent felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't pleasant having to drag people back through things that they would rather forget. "Thank you, Mrs. Hirschfeld," he said.

She nodded her head, staring out the window at the frozen ground. "If you think of anything else that might help us, please give me a call."

She shrugged. "Of course."

A bank of high, rolling clouds obscured the full moon outside. It looked like it might rain. They could dimly see a barge floating past on the East River. A searchlight funneled upward from somewhere on the Brooklyn shore.

Kathy sat slumped on the couch in Kurtz' living room. She seemed to have difficulty looking him in the eye. An open bottle of champagne sat on the coffee table. Kathy fingered her glass and every once in a while took a tiny sip. She touched the bruises on her face with the tip of a finger and grimaced. "Why aren't you angry with me?" she asked.

"Angry?" Kurtz blinked at her. "Why should I be angry?"

She gave him a dull, guarded look. "I betrayed you. I lured you into coming to my apartment and you were almost killed."

This, of course, was true; but Kurtz had long ago learned when to slug it out and when to roll with the punches. By now, considering that they were both alive and relatively unhurt, Jimmy Raines and everything to do with him was water under the bridge. At least, he hoped so. "What else could you do?" he said. "You had no choice."

She set her lips into a mulish line. "I could have refused."

"And what then? He had already hit you." Kurtz shook his head. "You had no choice," he repeated. "There is no way that you could have refused."

"I was so *scared!*" she said, and suddenly she was crying.

He took the glass from her and set it on the table. "Come on," he said. "Don't do that." Gently, he took her in his arms and she clung to him, sobbing. After a while, her sobs grew quiet and after a few final snuffles, they ceased.

Her face still buried against his chest, she said, "I can't see you anymore."

Just like that. *I can't see you anymore.* He opened his mouth and then closed it. "Oh," he finally said.

She pulled away from him and huddled in the corner of the couch, looking miserable. "Maybe it won't be forever," she said. "Maybe just for a while. We're very different sorts of people, you and I. You're so certain about things." She shook her head, looking forlorn. "I need some time to think."

"I'm certain about things..." Kurtz sighed. Absently, he noted that it had begun to rain. "I wish I were," he said, "but I'm not certain of anything. Anything at all."

She blinked at him, then looked away.

"You're blaming me for what happened. Aren't you? That's not fair."

"Maybe it's not," she said sadly. "But it's the way that I feel."

He stared at her, frustrated and helpless. She meant it. He could see that. It was *his* fault some cold-blooded bastard had paid to have Harrison Thomas assaulted. It was *his* fault that a lunatic assassin had decided to hunt them both down.

And was it also his fault that drug addiction and poverty and ignorance and hate led people to kill each other on the street? And Sharon Lee, was that his fault, too? Maybe it was, he thought. Maybe if he had never met Sharon, maybe if he had never broken up with her, her sad life would have turned out differently. Maybe if Sharon Lee had never been born, then she would never have been killed. Yeah, it was her mother's fault. Her mother's fault all the way.

"I don't accept that," Kurtz said.

"I know you don't. That's why I can't see you anymore."







THE NEXT MORNING, A Ford minivan rolled up across the street from the Hampshire Building and parked in an empty space by a hydrant, where it stayed for the next twelve hours. At three o'clock, a foot patrolman walked by, wrote out a parking ticket and tucked it under the wiper on the front windshield. Then he walked off. At five o'clock, people began to stream out of the building. By seven, the place was deserted, with all the lights off and the front doors locked. At eight, the van's engine started up and it pulled away from the curb.

Easton, like most hospitals, published a staff directory, with colorful, brightly smiling pictures of every physician associated with the institution. Barent and Moran had taken the directory down to Bank Street, hoping that it might jog the memory of Mario Gilbert or Ronald Evans. "Why, gentlemen," Ronald Evans had said with a bright smile, "how nice to see you again."

"Can we come in?" Barent asked.

"But of course." Ronald Evans fluttered his lashes at Moran. "Will you sit next to me this time, Sugar?"

Moran gave Ronald Evans a brief, meaningless smile as they entered the apartment. A thin young man with deep set green eyes and black curling hair sat in a chair in the living room, listening to something classical on the stereo. He gave the detectives a questioning look and rose to his feet. "Mario," Ronald Evans said, "these are the policemen that I told you about. Detective Barent and Detective Moran."

Mario Gilbert glanced warily from one of them to another but held out a hand to shake. His grip was firm. "Nice to meet you," he said. "What's up?"

"Mr. Evans has told you about our previous visit?"

"Of course. You're investigating Sharon Lee's murder."

"Yes. We were particularly interested in knowing who her friends were."

"Friends?" Mario Gilbert narrowed his eyes. "I assume you mean boyfriends."

"Boyfriends, girlfriends." Barent shrugged. "Anyone she might have spent time with."

"Isn't the big one luscious?" Ronald Evans blinked at Moran and licked his lips. Moran ignored him. Mario Gilbert frowned.

"I mean, did you ever see such muscles in your life? Yum!"

Mario gave Ronald a sour look. "Ronald likes to talk dirty but he's really a housewife at heart. Pay him no mind."

"Oh, you," Ronald said with a sly grin.

"We really didn't have much to do with Sharon," Mario said doubtfully.

"Mr. Evans said that you and Sharon Lee were quite friendly. He said that she displayed a certain...interest in you."

Mario looked at Ronald and frowned. Ronald smiled up into space. "Sharon was an acquaintance," Mario said firmly. "Nothing more."

"I see," Barent said. Ronald continued to smile, looking quite satisfied with himself. Barent gave a little shrug. "It doesn't matter." He held the directory out to Mario. "Would you do us the favor of looking through this book? It's a hospital directory for Easton Medical Center. We would like to know if you recognize any of the people in it."

Mario kept his hands at his sides. "Do we need a lawyer?" he asked.

“You might be witnesses,” Barent said. “I don’t consider you to be suspects. Please; I’d appreciate your help.”

Mario and Ronald looked at each other, exchanging glances that Barent could not interpret. Finally, Mario nodded. “Let me see it.” He weighed the book in his hand, shrugged his shoulders minutely and sat down on the couch. Ronald sat next to him and they proceeded to flip through the pages. They paused a few times, once over a picture of Sharon Lee, smiling brightly for the camera. But that was all. When they reached the end, Mario closed the book on his lap and shook his head, looking up at Barent with what appeared to be genuine regret. “I’m sorry,” he said. “A few of them look familiar. But I don’t think so.”

There were over a dozen who looked “familiar.” None of these were people who Barent had previously interviewed. Barent sighed inwardly, thanked them both and left. He assigned a team to investigate all the men whose pictures had made Mario and Ronald hesitate. He didn’t expect much to come of it, but it was worth a try and he would have been remiss in not following through.

Sharon Lee’s mysterious lover had most likely been a doctor, according to her sister. Ronald Evans had already told them that he had been a big man with dark hair.

Robinson had been reluctant to authorize the surveillance, worrying about adverse publicity. “Something like this could do us tremendous harm. Patients don’t like to think that one of their doctors might be a murderer. You’ll do it quietly?”

“Surveillance isn’t much use if people know you’re doing it,” Barent said. “Of course we’ll do it quietly.”

Robinson had morosely agreed.

Inside the van, a cop named Ferruci turned to his partner, whose name was King, and said, “I hate stakeouts. I always gotta pee.”

“Me too,” King said. “I wish they’d given us one of the new ones. They’ve got toilets.”

They drove across town to the Precinct House, parked in the lot outside and brought their videotape in to be stored for the night. The next morning, a similar van rolled up to the front of the Hampshire Building and repeated the process.

Each morning, the crime lab reviewed yesterday’s tape, cataloguing the face of each person who entered the Hampshire Building, looking for clues. It was a tedious procedure. In all, over 700 people had walked through the doors during the first day. The police fully expected most of these to be unrecognizable, people with no record of criminal activity. They hoped to spot at least a few that were known to the police, a few who might forge a link between Easton Medical Center and Jaime Ruiz or Tony Korda.

On the third morning, Barent was going over the negative report of the previous day’s tapes, when a knock sounded on his office door. “Come in,” he said. The door opened and Ted Weiss stepped inside.

“Morning, Ted.”

“How’s it going, Lew?” Weiss asked.

“Not bad.”

“You satisfied yet?”

“No,” Barent said.

Weiss took a cigar out of his jacket pocket. He scratched a kitchen match across Barent’s desk, held it up to the tip of the cigar and puffed until the cigar glowed like a coal. “What have you got? Anything?”

“Take a look.” Barent tossed a manila file folder across the desk to Weiss.

Weiss flipped through the file, stopping now and then to examine a piece of paper more closely, occasionally shaking his head. Finally, he looked up. "Not much," he said.

"No," Barent agreed.

"Mostly speculation and wishful thinking."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I would." Weiss puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. Barent lit a cigarette of his own, blew smoke toward the ceiling and waited.

"The papers are starting to sniff," Weiss said. "I got a call from John Costas yesterday morning wanting to know what the delay was in indicting Mose."

"Is he the only one?"

"So far."

"I know Costas," Barent said. "Leave Costas to me."

Weiss continued to puff, slow coils of smoke issuing from his mouth and drifting to the corners of the room. "You haven't convinced me," he stated. "But you have raised a whisper of a doubt." He held up a hand in front of his face, the thumb and forefinger almost touching. "A whisper," he repeated. "The merest whisper."

Barent puffed on his cigarette. He tapped his pencil eraser on the desk. He leaned back and studied the cracks in the ceiling.

Weiss grinned. "How is Mr. Mose?"

"Kurtz tells me he's still recovering. He won't be able to appear in court for"—Barent looked at his watch and narrowed his eyes—"at least another two weeks."

"I don't think I can stall for another two weeks," Weiss said. "Not without coming clean. I think you better come up with more than you've got in one week or Mose is going to have to make a sudden, miraculous recovery.

"And talk to Costas."

"Hello, John?"

"Who is this?" The voice on the phone registered open suspicion. "Barent?"

"Yep."

"You don't call me, Barent," Costas stated. "I call you. I ferret out the news. You do your best not to tell me anything. A call like this is a perversion of the natural order of events. What is going on here?"

"I just had a little visit from Ted Weiss."

There was sudden silence on the other end of the line.

"Ted is worried," Barent said. "He thinks you're losing your touch."

"He thinks...?"

"Ted thinks you've lost your ability to figure out when you've got a good story."

Barent could almost hear Costas thinking over the phone. "Alright, what gives?" Costas asked, his voice suddenly serious.

"I've got a deal for you," Barent said. "You've been getting curious about the Sharon Lee story."

"True. Go on."

"Actually, I was pulling your leg. Ted doesn't really think you're losing your touch. Ted admires you. 'That Costas,' he said to me, 'a real nose for news.'"

"Don't make me gag."

"Alright, I'll give it to you simply. We have evidence suggesting that Bill Mose is not the murderer. We'd like to keep it quiet just a little bit longer."

“That’s what you want, huh?” Costas said. “Well, what I want is the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism. Now that you’ve confirmed my suspicions, why shouldn’t I report it?”

“So far, you’re the only one who’s asking questions. If you stop asking them for a few more days, I’ll give you an exclusive when the story breaks.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.”

“Then I’ll take it,” Costas said immediately. “Eat your heart out, Connie Chung.”

“Three more days,” Liebert said. “Thank God!”

Nolan sadly shook his head. “It’s a pity seeing a young man make such a mess out of his life. Isn’t it, Jack?”

Franklin grunted.

“No,” Nolan said. “I mean it. Radiology? How can you do it to yourself? After a few years radiologists start to glow in the dark and then they die from cancer. And their kids all have genetic mutations.”

“At least they have kids,” Liebert said. “Surgeons aren’t home enough to get their wives pregnant.”

“Touché,” Nolan said. “Touché.”

Liebert smiled smugly.

Kurtz took Stan Nugent’s chart out of the rack and quickly reviewed it, wishing that Nolan and Liebert would shut up. After his talk with Kathy the other night, he had been in a totally foul mood, a mood that the intervening time had only made worse.

The chart was not good. Nugent’s hematocrit had fallen to 17 as the chemotherapy wiped out his bone marrow. Yesterday, the nursing home placement had finally come through and Nugent was scheduled to leave tomorrow morning, but nursing homes did not accept unstable patients. “Do you know what the term ‘hematocrit’ means, Doctor?” he asked Liebert.

“The hematocrit is the percentage of the blood that’s composed of red blood cells.”

“That’s correct; and what’s a normal hematocrit?”

“40 to 45 in an adult male. 35 to 40 for women.”

“Good,” Kurtz said. “And what do you think we should do for Mr. Nugent?”

“He needs blood,” Liebert said.

“So?”

“So we have to keep him. He’s not stable enough to leave.”

“We don’t have to keep him.” Kurtz turned to Nolan. “Give him three units of packed cells,” he said. “Get his crit up to at least 35, then send him out.”

Kathy was wrong. It wasn’t that he was so certain about things, but life was full of decisions. You had to make them. There was no point in mooning over them from here to eternity and there was no point in regretting them, either. You made the best decisions you could with the information available and you tried to learn from your mistakes.

Liebert’s face clouded over but he said nothing. Kurtz smiled at him. “You look doubtful,” he said.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Liebert complained.

“To who?”

“To the nursing home.”

“The nursing home is not your patient. Nugent is your patient and Nugent wants more than anything else in the world to get out of here. Nugent is going to die. He knows that, whether he’s willing to

admit it or not. He would rather die somewhere other than the hospital and we're going to help him do it."

Lenore had bundled Harrison up and taken him home a few days before. Kurtz hadn't had a chance to speak to her again after that one morning in the cafeteria, and that was just as well. He thought too much of his relationship with Kathy to risk it.

What a jerk.

"But if he's going to die anyway," Liebert said, "then we're wasting the blood."

"You know what D.N.R. means?"

"Of course: Do Not Resuscitate."

"Is Nugent D.N.R.?"

"No, he's not; but he's terminal. He should be D.N.R."

"Maybe he should. But as long as he's conscious and in his right mind, the only one who can declare him D.N.R. is himself. And until he's D.N.R., we're obligated to do everything possible to treat his condition, whether it's a waste of medical resources or not.

"And don't worry about the nursing home. They'll follow his crit, and when it drops low enough, they'll send him back here. But if Nugent is lucky, he'll be dead before that happens."

He had thought about Lenore a lot lately but Lenore had her own problems and Kurtz didn't want to add to them. He had a feeling that her relationship with Harrison was not quite as dead as she thought it was. She and Harrison had been involved for a long time. She had hovered over his sickbed like a guardian angel, hardly ever leaving his side. Maybe in a few days he'd give Lenore a call, after he had calmed down. Maybe.

They followed Kurtz into the room. Nugent was lying curled on his side in the bed, his limbs shriveled, his skin waxen. His bald head gleamed in the light and he looked at the little group with a thin, feral smile. "Tomorrow, I'm getting out of here," he said in an eager whisper.

"Yes, Mr. Nugent," Kurtz said.

"It can't come too soon for me." Nugent's watery eyes wandered around the little room. "I can't stand this place," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Nugent. I understand your feelings."

"Good riddance," Nugent whispered.

"Congratulations, Mr. Nugent," Kurtz said. "And good luck."





BARENT WIPED A SCATTER of ashes off the front of his shirt, sipped at his coffee and breathed a sigh. “Denise is busy picking out patterns,” he said. “Silver patterns, china patterns, linen patterns. Everything’s got a pattern. And all the bath towels and the napkins are supposed to be monogrammed. You have monogrammed bath towels and napkins?”

“We usually use paper napkins,” Moran said.

“We’ve got linen napkins someplace. Betty brings them out maybe twice a year on the holidays. They’re not monogrammed. Denise Janus will have monogrammed linen napkins.”

“Is Betty happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Barent said morosely.

“Well, then.”

“Fathers are definitely superfluous in these things. Husbands too. Paul seems just as bewildered as me.”

“That’s probably the point. The women exclude the men from all these rituals and that’s supposed to bring the Father-in-Law and the Son-in-Law—who probably up to now couldn’t stand each other—closer together.”

“I still can’t stand him,” Barent said.

“You’ll get over it.”

Barent frowned down at his cigarette. “I hate sitting around and waiting.”

“Me too.”

Barent had had a little conversation with the priest who would perform the ceremony, Father Michael Ianello. Father Michael was a mild mannered man with a weak chin and thinning hair. He looked like a pushover. He wasn’t. Barent had let Father Michael know that he didn’t like priests, he didn’t like churches and he had no use for a God who allowed bad things to happen to good people. Father Michael had simply shrugged, “If you want to talk about it, we can talk,” he said. “But if all you want to do is bitch, then I really couldn’t care less.”

For a moment, Barent was floored. “What do you mean, you couldn’t care less? You’re supposed to save souls, aren’t you?”

“I mean I couldn’t care less. One thing I realized a long time ago: you can’t save souls who don’t want to be saved. I’ve got no interest in butting my head against a brick wall. You want to go to Hell, that’s your business.”

Actually, Barent rather admired Father Michael.

He drew in another long sigh and tried to turn his mind to the job. “Anything turn up on Sharon Lee’s credit card records?”

“She went to San Diego in October for a conference on fetal monitoring. She had a single room. Could she have met somebody?” Moran shrugged. “Sure. Plenty of doctors go to conferences. Plenty of people go to San Diego.”

“Nothing local?”

“She ate out a lot, and from the prices it looks like she sometimes paid for somebody else, but it was never more than twice at the same restaurant. I went to the three most recent. Nobody remembered her.”

“The surveillance better come up with something.”



A knock sounded from the door. "Yes?" Barent called out loudly.

A uniformed policeman stuck his head in. "Phone call for you, Lew."

"Who is it?"

"Guy says his name is Oliver Thomas."

Kurtz smiled warily upward at the corner of the hallway where the wall met the ceiling. Even though he knew it was there, he couldn't see the miniature lens that the surveillance team had installed. There were similar lenses in all the corners of all the floors of the Building. Kurtz opened the door to his office suite, went inside and said to Rose Schapiro, "Who's first?"

Mrs. Schapiro looked at him with a cheery smile on her face. "Mr. Callahan," she said. "He's here for his sigmoidoscopy."

Kurtz audibly groaned. Mrs. Schapiro smiled at him brightly. "Miss Grunfeld brought him back to the endoscopy room."

"Thanks," he said, and walked in. Callahan was sitting on the table, dressed only in a thin cotton gown opened down the back. His hairy legs dangled over the edge of the table.

"How are you today, Mr. Callahan?"

"Not so good, Doc," Callahan said. "I still got that constipation." "Did you follow the instructions Miss Grunfeld gave you?"

Callahan nodded proudly. "Nothing to eat after noon yesterday except clear liquids. A Fleet's enema this morning." Callahan shook his head in amazement. "That Fleet's cleaned me out good. I feel like a new man."

"Well, turn over on your side and let's take a look."

The sigmoidoscopy appeared to be entirely normal; Callahan's rectum and lower colon were pink and shiny, but Callahan moaned and grunted pitifully throughout the procedure and refused to stay still, his toes curling and his heels kicking at the examining table every time Kurtz advanced the scope. "Almost done now, Mr. Callahan," Kurtz said. "Please try not to move."

"You're killing me, Doc," Callahan groaned. "Jesus, Doc, you're killing me."

"It's just cramps, Mr. Callahan. I have to pump air in to expand the bowel, otherwise I can't get a good view. Now try to keep still and it will be over soon."

"I never had cramps like this. This is like a weasel tearing at my insides."

"Uh-hmmm..." The fiberoptic scope worked its way up Callahan's bowels like a roto-rooter reaming out a pipe, while Kurtz squeezed the air bladder with one hand and peered through the lens, dreaming wistfully about weasels and gerbils. Finally, the scope was in all the way to the hub. "I'm coming out now, Mr. Callahan," Kurtz said. "Try to relax."

"Good," Callahan groaned. "Good."

A few minutes later, Callahan was sitting up on the table, wheezing, his face covered with a sheen of sweat. "Are you okay?" Kurtz asked.

Callahan looked at him doubtfully. "I think so. You sure you didn't rupture me?"

"I'm sure."

Callahan nodded grimly and compressed his lips. "Well, what's the word?" he asked. "You find anything?"

"No. It's a normal exam. Everything checks out fine."

Callahan heaved a deep breath. "Alright, then," he said. "What's the next step?"

"What next step?" Kurtz blinked at him. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"But Doc, what am I gonna do about this constipation?"

"See me next January," Kurtz said. "We'll do another sigmoidoscopy."

“It’s been going on for a little over four years,” Oliver Thomas said. “A man approached me. He was well dressed. His voice was cultured. He seemed to be a gentleman. His name was Gordon Stone. He knew all about my financial difficulties. He offered me a way out and I accepted. At first it was only Stone; after awhile it was another man also, a man named Roberto Alvarez. One of them would deliver a bag full of money. I deposited it into an account. A few weeks later, I transferred the money out to another account in the Cayman Islands. What happened to it after that, I have no idea.” Oliver Thomas shrugged.

“Always these two men?” Barent asked.

“Yes.”

“Never anybody else?”

“No.”

“In whose names were the accounts?”

“Gordon Stone”—Thomas seemed to hesitate—“and Raymond Santiago.”

“Not Roberto Alvarez?”

“No. All Alvarez did was deliver the money.”

“How many accounts are we talking about?” Barent asked.

“Here or in the Caymans?”

“Both.”

“Here, there were two; one for Stone and one for Santiago. There are five different accounts in the Cayman Islands, three in Stone’s name, two for Santiago. I never made a deposit into the same account more than twice in a row.”

“This Gordon Stone, was he white?”

Oliver Thomas frowned at him. “Of course.”

“And what did you think when guys like Alvarez came into the picture?”

“I protested.”

“Got you real far, didn’t it?”

Oliver Thomas shrugged.

Barent nodded thoughtfully. “That’s the trouble dealing with people of inferior ethnic backgrounds; they can get you mixed up in things that are downright sleazy.”

“I’m afraid I don’t like your tone, Barent.” Thomas looked down at his desk in bleak disgust. “I know I made a mistake. I should never have gotten involved with these people, but I was on the verge of bankruptcy.” He laughed softly. “I was born rich. I’ve always been rich. I don’t know how to be poor and I didn’t want to have to learn.”

“Any of these people ever mention Tony Korda?” Barent asked.

“Korda?” Thomas blinked at him. “You brought him up before, didn’t you?” Thomas shook his head. “No. Never.”

“How about Jaime Ruiz?”

“No.”

Barent frowned and looked at Moran, who shrugged silently. “So, why are you telling us?”

Oliver Thomas stared off into the far corners of his office. He took a long time before answering. Finally, he shook his head. “I’m in too deep. I don’t know how to get out.”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you got involved.”

“You’re right.” Oliver Thomas shrugged. “Can you help me?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You’ve committed federal crimes, crimes over which I have no jurisdiction. I’m a cop, not an F.B.I. agent.”

Thomas sadly nodded. He opened the middle drawer of his desk and pulled out a thin, black notebook. "Here is a listing of the people involved, the dates and the amounts of all the transfers." He tossed the book across the desk to Barent. "Take it. Do anything with it that you want."

Barent picked it up gingerly, weighing it in his palm. Then he tucked it under his arm. "Give me a few days," he said. "We'll see what I can do."

"Richard?"

The voice was familiar but for an instant he couldn't place it. Then he realized who it was and his heart gave a thump. "Lenore," he said.

"I would have called you sooner but I hadn't heard. I was in Boston, at an exhibition. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he said. "How did you find out?"

She laughed softly. "Doctors don't get shot at every day, even in this town. It was in the newspaper."

"Oh," he said. "I guess it was."

"And Kathy? How is she?"

For a moment, the words stuck in his throat, then he said, "She's fine."

"That's good. The paper said she was beaten."

"Some bruises. They'll heal in a few days." Lenore's voice was deep and smooth, like molasses. He noted it absently. "Kathy and I are not seeing each other at the moment," he said.

Lenore said nothing. He could imagine her on the other end of the phone line, frowning while she mulled this over.

"I'm glad you called," he said. "I've been thinking about you." He swallowed, the words suddenly sticking in his throat. "Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

Her voice seemed to hesitate for a brief instant. "I can't," she said. "I'm having dinner with my parents."

"Then how about Friday?"

"Friday sounds good," she said.

Day after day, the Ford minivan pulled up across from the Hampshire Building in the morning and left in the evening after all the staff and patients had gone. Every morning, the lab developed the film gathered from the day before and sent it upstairs to be reviewed by their resident expert and his team. On the fifth morning, Arnie Figueroa suddenly stopped the tape he had been watching, re-wound it and watched it again. Then he picked up the phone. "Lew?" he said. "I think you'd better come down here."

Ten minutes later, Barent and Moran were sitting next to the monitor screen, watching the tape. Barent watched it through twice, then he rubbed his hands together and gleefully smiled. "That the one?" he said to Figueroa. He pointed to a face on the screen.

"That's the one."

Barent nodded, still smiling. He turned to Moran. "Remember him?"

"Sure," Moran said. "The maitre'd at the Vanity Club, Ruiz' receptionist."

Figueroa frowned. "He is?"

"Yeah," Barent said. "Isn't that why you called us?"

"No." Figueroa shook his head. "I called you because that's Carlos Rivera."

Barent stared at the screen. "Well, hallelujah," he finally said. "Which office has he gone into?"

"Number twenty-three." Barent looked at Moran, who was flipping the pages of the hospital directory. Moran found number twenty-three, nodded and looked up. "Longo," he said.





ONCE A MONTH, JAIME Ruiz came for dinner at Tony Korda's mansion in the Fieldston section of the Bronx, more often than that if circumstances seemed to warrant it. Tonight was routine.

Korda was a man who tried to have no illusions about other people or himself, particularly himself. He had been a wild kid, he knew that, with a real chip on his shoulder, but that was years in the past. Korda did not regard himself as a cruel man, not anymore. When he was very young, he had acted out of rage, then out of necessity. Now...now, he enjoyed himself.

Ruiz picked up his soup spoon, dipped the spoon in the bowl and raised it to his lips. Korda smiled. Six months ago, Ruiz had not known what a soup spoon was. Now, he wouldn't have dreamed of using anything else. It was amazing, Korda thought, how often those who lived by breaking the major rules of society insisted on aping the little ones.

To Korda, it was all a game. He had long since passed the point where he needed the money. Now, he did what he did to amuse Tony Korda.

Korda was an intelligent man. While his college career had long ago been aborted, he was nevertheless widely read. *In the long run, we are all dead.* Sartre got that one right.

"How has the take been going on the betting parlors?" Korda asked in his grating voice.

Ruiz quickly swallowed. "Good," he said. "Up fourteen percent."

"Any problems?"

Ruiz' lips thinned. His nostrils flared. "The connection to the Caymans is coming unglued."

"The banker still antsy?"

"Yes," Ruiz said shortly.

Korda sighed to himself. With Ruiz it was all personal. *Machismo*, that's what it was. Face. Ruiz believed in imposing his own brand of discipline on the world. Korda believed in doing as little as necessary to achieve his objectives. In the long run, extraneous moves had a tendency to weaken one's position. "Has he paid back your original investment?"

Ruiz hesitated. "Yes."

"Then let him go. We don't need him."

"He's been useful. He can be more useful," Ruiz said.

"I don't agree with you."

A butler brought in the next course, a salad. Both men picked up their salad forks. The butler left.

"He's an investment that has already paid off and now is going sour. Take your profit and put it somewhere else."

Ruiz stared at him, his breathing rapid. "It's a mistake," Korda said mildly, "to let other people know what you're thinking."

Ruiz hesitated. "Maybe you're right," he said. He grinned wryly then and took a deep breath. "Flanagan and Raines, they mess up pretty bad. The police know."

"Exactly," Korda said. "Forget about Oliver Thomas. There are plenty of other sharks in the sea."

Two days later, a member of the surveillance team named Cesar Herrera made positive identification of a man named Hector Cruz going into Doctor Philip Longo's office. The day after, there were two more, both young, male and Hispanic. All were known associates of Jaime Ruiz. None were listed as patients in the computer system of Easton Medical Center.

"Tell us about Longo," Barent said.

Kurtz rubbed a hand across his forehead and winced. "He's a nice guy," Kurtz said. Then he amended, "He *seems* like a nice guy. I know him pretty well. Bill Werth and I go fishing with him. We went out to Montauk last summer and chartered a bluefish boat. Then in the fall, we went up to the Beaverkill for trout."

"Go on."

"His practice is tremendous. He employs two physical therapists of his own. He works hard. He has a reputation for being better than most in the O.R. He doesn't yell at the nurses, which puts him one up on a lot of surgeons, believe me." Kurtz grinned weakly. "He's a normal human being."

"Strange way of putting it," Barent commented. He blew smoke at the ceiling, then said: "These therapists, you know them?"

Kurtz shook his head. "No. I've never met them."

"Isn't that strange?"

"Not at all. A lot of people work here. I don't know most of them."

"What are their names?"

"I couldn't tell you."

Barent blew smoke at Moran. "Find out from Wellesley." Moran nodded.

"How about his secretary?"

"He has two of them, both full time. Most of the surgeons' secretaries cover for each other when their own boss is in the O.R., but not his. With the therapists always there, they've got plenty of work to do, even when Longo isn't around."

"Do you know their names?"

Kurtz shook his head. "Sorry."

Barent glanced at Moran, who nodded again. "How is he with money?"

"What do you mean?"

"Bad investments? Any debts? Does he like to gamble?"

Kurtz frowned. "He goes to Atlantic City now and then, and he's going to Las Vegas next month with Farkas—he's a plastic surgeon—and some of the other guys. I never heard of him being a compulsive gambler, if that's what you mean."

"What else?" Barent asked.

Kurtz shrugged. "What else...?" He stared off into space, thinking about it. You thought you knew a guy, and then something like this happens. What was relevant? "He collects antiques, or his wife does. His wife is on the Board of Settlement House. Longo does a lot of charity work."

Barent glanced at Moran. "Sounds like a fine, up-standing citizen."

Kurtz spread his hands to the side. "I always thought so."

"Whatever is going on has got to involve money," Barent said, "and you can bet it's some sort of a scam."

"Blackmail?" Moran said. "Fraud?"

"Big time physician, runs his own physical therapy..." Barent smiled cynically. "My wife threw her back out a few years ago. Let me tell you, they bill plenty for physical therapy and insurance covers nearly all of it. I would bet on insurance." Barent turned to Kurtz. "You ever been in Longo's office?"

"Sure. It's like any other office." He thought about it. "A little bigger than most. He has a treatment room for the P.T."

Barent's pencil went tap-tap-tap on his notebook. "Tell me about his wife."

"She's his second wife. Her name is Sylvia. They've been married for about five years."

“What’s she like?”

“I don’t know her too well.” He thought about the New Year’s Eve party and gave a tiny shudder. “She’s got a reputation for getting what she wants. Settlement House is the best funded charity around here.”

“I don’t know much about Settlement House,” Barent said.

“They run a homeless shelter, collect food and second hand clothing for poor families, sometimes help people get jobs.”

“What happened to the first wife?”

“Divorce.” Kurtz grinned fleetingly. “Surgeons get divorced a lot. Women think it’s glamorous, being married to a surgeon. They find out pretty quick that they spend most of their time by themselves.”

“How long did the first marriage last?”

“I’m not sure. I think about ten years.”

“Any kids?”

“Two.”

“Alimony?”

“I have no idea.” Kurtz shrugged. “Probably.”

Barent leaned forward, the tips of his fingers pressed together under his chin. “Think about it,” he said. “Maybe something else will occur to you. We’ll talk again.”

“Wait a minute,” Kurtz said. “What does all this have to do with Sharon Lee?”

“Damned if I know,” Barent said. “Maybe nothing.”

“So what are you going to do about Oliver Thomas?” Moran asked.

“I’m going to alert the F.B.I.,” Barent said. “What else would I do?”

“Why haven’t you done it yet?”

Barent blew a smoke ring up to the ceiling and watched it spread out. “No hurry,” he said. “No hurry at all.”

“Sure,” Moran said. Then he grinned. “Anything new on the wedding plans?”

Barent blew another smoke ring and gave Moran a woebegone look. “They’ve finally decided on a menu,” he said. “First, the open bar and hors d’oeuvres while the stragglers wander in, then we all move to the buffet table. After the buffet, the sit down dinner will feature shrimp cocktails followed by a salad followed by a choice of London broil and baked potato or saffron rice and Hawaiian chicken. Filet of sole with asparagus will be offered for the diet conscious. Music and dancing between the courses, naturally. Dessert will be the usual Viennese table, with, of course, the cake.”

Moran grunted in sympathy.

Truthfully, Barent hadn’t fully decided yet what to do about Oliver Thomas. The list that Thomas had given them was intriguing. Gordon Stone, Roberto Alvarez and Raymond Santiago were presumably false names. Neither the police nor F.B.I. files had any record of them. Gordon Stone—whoever he was—made deposits in the three to four hundred thousand dollar range. Raymond Santiago put in more like fifty to a hundred thousand at a time. Big operator and small operator. Stone’s deposits were regular, always on the third Monday of every month. Santiago put money in on no discernible schedule but rarely missed more than a few weeks at a time.

Barent had been operating all along on the supposition that Tony Korda was the elusive mastermind behind this whole affair, the spider at the center of the web. Unfortunately, he had been able to gather no evidence to prove it.

He had one person in custody at the moment who might—despite his earlier denials—be able to give him some answers. Jimmy Raines was awaiting trial for kidnapping, forcible restraint, felony manslaughter and attempted murder.

“Tell me about Tony Korda,” Barent said.

Raines looked at him with his flat, dead eyes. “Go to Hell.”

Barent smiled. “Jimmy, you’re facing enough time to last you the rest of your life. You’re sure you don’t want to think about making a deal?”

“A deal?” Raines looked around the little room as if searching for a place to spit. “You’re a cheapskate, Barent. I’m not interested.”

Barent leaned back, allowed a smug, happy look to wander across his face. “Well, maybe you’re right,” he said. “A little word to the prosecutor about cooperation with the police—what’s that worth? A lousy five years? Ten?”

Raines snorted through his teeth. “Not good enough.”

“No?” Barent loved the look on Raines’ face, desperate and desperately trying not to show it. Raines’ face was thinner. His skin, once as smooth as a baby’s, now hung off his cheeks in sagging jowls. “We could probably go a little higher. If you really know what you’re talking about, make a significant contribution toward the elimination of organized crime in the City of New York, there could even be a place for Jimmy Raines in the Witness Protection Program.”

“Witness Protection is federal,” Raines said.

“I’ve got friends.”

Raines gave a small, bitter laugh. “Sounds good,” he said. “Only problem is, I’ve got nothing to sell. Was Korda involved? I’ve got no idea. I free lance. Sometimes people approached me. I never knew who they worked for; it was better that way. Sometimes Charlie Flanagan asked me to help him out on some of his action. Sometimes I say ‘yes.’ Sometimes I say ‘no.’ If I say yes, then an envelope full of cash appears under my door.”

“And what if you get caught?”

Raines laughed again. “Then I’m on my own.”

Barent was not surprised. Keeping your mouth shut was the number one rule in the criminal code of survival. You get caught, you’re on your own. You talk, someone, somewhere, sticks a knife in you. It may be years down the road and a thousand miles away but it was as inevitable as the changing of the seasons. “I bet you really enjoy swinging in the breeze,” Barent said.

Raines shrugged. “It was the best deal in town. Believe me, they all paid well.”

Barent sighed and rose slowly to his feet. “Sorry we couldn’t do business, Jimmy.”

“Charlie told me this last job was sort of weird,” Raines said. He said it in an even, offhand tone. “He got a call. He never saw the face. Whoever it was mentioned people Charlie knew, jobs he had done in the past, enough so it had to be on the level. Charlie said the guy had a strange voice,” Raines said. “A real deep voice, like that guy in the movies, I forget his name, the one who played Darth Vader.”

Barent’s ears pricked up. “James Earl Jones?”

“Yeah.” Raines nodded. “Him. Charlie said he would recognize that voice.”

“Charlie’s dead,” Barent said. Raines shrugged. “Yeah.”

A voice...Barent thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. A voice without a face to match it wouldn’t get too far with the D.A. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he said. “Don’t count on anything. A voice isn’t much.”



The next afternoon, the report arrived regarding the physical therapists and the secretaries. The therapists were named Donald Lake and Evelyn Morris. The secretaries were Janet Crowley and Kimberly Jones. There was no history of criminal activity listed for any of them in any police or government file.

“Look at this,” Barent said.

Moran looked at the file. Prior to the current staff, Longo had employed a number of different nurses. “Jean Evans...Margaret Donaldson... Louise Klein. So?”

Barent shrugged. “These were all young women. Young women tend to be transient. They get married; they get pregnant; their husband moves; a better job comes along. A high turnover is pretty common. But about five years ago, suddenly Longo had no more turnover. That suggest anything to you?”

“The ones he’s got now are in on the scam,” Moran said.

Barent nodded. “I would bet on it.”

“Think we’ve got enough for a warrant?”

Barent gave him a look that said Moran should have known better. “No way,” he said. “So the Doctor sees patients—big deal. We have nothing to tie him to Sharon Lee. We have no evidence that any crime at all has been committed.”

“Why do you need a warrant?” Kurtz asked. “Robinson gave you permission to go in.”

Barent hissed disdainfully through his teeth. “Robinson gave me permission to enter the building but the offices are leased to the physicians. I can’t go into the office without a warrant or Longo’s specific permission. At this stage, I’m not about to ask. If Longo’s got anything in there, all he has to do is say ‘No.’ He knows we’re on to him; he destroys the evidence and we’re left with nothing.” He shook his head. “It’s not enough. We need more.”

“Where do we get it?” Kurtz asked.

Barent looked at him and scratched behind his ear. “I don’t know.”





KURTZ HAD BRIEFLY CONSIDERED *Lutece*, or maybe *La Caravelle*, but you couldn't get a reservation at any of the top French restaurants on such short notice, not for a Friday night. Anyway, the place down in Cancun had been French, which might actually have been a good association to make but which, he came to the reluctant conclusion, seemed just a little too contrived. Indian, he decided—foreign enough to be exotic but familiar enough to seem comfortable, at least to a New Yorker.

The place was called *Shangri La*. It occupied the penthouse of an older building off Fifty-Ninth Street. The floor was tiled in squares of pink and black marble and copies of temple sculptures adorned the walls. A man dressed in white robes sat in one corner on a raised dais and played the sitar. The waiters wore turbans and red jackets with gold epaulets on the shoulders.

Kurtz had requested a table by the window. There wasn't really that much of a view, but at night the dirt and the potholes became invisible, and any street corner of the city became something to see, full of flashing headlights, brightly lit windows and the constant, swirling motion of people wandering by below.

"Very nice," Lenore said.

"I think so."

A waiter brought over a basket of crispy *papadums*, spooned mint and tamarind chutneys onto two small plates and handed them both menus.

Kurtz watched her while she studied it. It was hard not to. She was wearing a light blue silk blouse that showed just enough décolletage to be enticing without being crass, a matching skirt and a string of pearls around her neck. Her golden hair was arranged in short bangs over her forehead and then fell loosely down her shoulders and back.

"Shall we each order what we want, or shall we share?" Lenore asked.

"Why don't we each order what we want and then share?"

She grinned. "Sounds good to me."

Kathy would have wanted to come to a consensus regarding each dish. The thought occurred to Kurtz fleetingly, then he dismissed it.

They gave their order. The waiter wrote it down impassively, gave a little bow and departed. A few seconds later, a girl who appeared to be no older than fifteen brought them two oversized bottles of Golden Eagle beer, popped them open and poured half of each bottle into two frozen steins.

"Cheers," Kurtz said, and took a sip. Tiny crystals of ice had already formed on top of the beer.

Lenore was looking intently into her glass. "I've never seen that before," she said. "Do they keep the glasses in the freezer?"

"I guess they do."

"I like it."

Lenore, Kurtz figured, was the sort who took things as they came. What she didn't like, she ignored. Maybe living with a mother who was just a tad unpredictable (to put it charitably), had something to do with it. Then again, intrusive, manipulating parents just as often produced children who were hostile, rigid and full of preconceived notions into which every new experience had to neatly fit. More often, in fact.

The waiter wheeled over a cart and placed a platter of golden fried vegetable *pakor*as and four meat *samosa*—triangular pastries filled with spiced ground lamb—down on the table. “One of the few advantages to living in a city like this is the fact that you can find any sort of food to eat any time you want it. I love this stuff,” Lenore said.

“The food was pretty simple where I grew up. Mostly meat and potatoes.”

“A deprived childhood, without a doubt.”

“Oh, I don’t know. People weren’t shooting at me in West Virginia.”

Lenore’s face immediately fell. “Oh, Richard, I’m sorry. I forgot.”

He grinned faintly. “It’s alright. It only hurts when I move.”

“I guess you better not move,” she said, and grinned back.

They finished the appetizer and within a few moments the waiter wheeled over the main course: a platter of rice with peas and chopped onions, flavored with cardamom and fennel seeds, *chicken tandoor*, shrimp in a coconut curry and *saag paneer*, a dish of buttery creamed spinach with cubes of homemade cheese.

Lenore rubbed her hands together. “Oh, boy,” she said.

A dozen different spices were blended into each dish and they were all tingling hot. They ate for a little while without speaking, putting out the fire with spoonfuls of *raita*, a yogurt sauce with cucumber and dill, and gulps of the ice cold beer. Finally, Kurtz sighed and pushed away his plate. “Great stuff,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” Lenore agreed. She stifled a lady-like burp behind a fist. “But it’s not really Indian, though. Most Indians are Hindus and Hindus don’t eat meat. They call it *Northern* Indian but it’s Pakistani, mostly. Pakistan is a Muslim country and a lot of Americans, particularly New Yorkers, aren’t too fond of Muslims these days, not after the Ayatollah, Saddam Hussein and September 11th.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She shrugged, looked down at the cars passing by on the street and sighed. Then she said, “I understand that they caught the man who shot you. He’s the same one who beat up Harrison.”

“Yes. He was living in Chicago.”

“I’m glad.”

“So am I.”

“So,” she said delicately, “is Harrison. He told me.”

She was still looking down at the street. The expression on her face was guarded. “You still see Harrison?” Kurtz asked.

“I still talk to Harrison. On the phone, mostly.” She looked him in the eye and grinned wryly. “He says he would like to remain friends. I don’t know how realistic that is but I feel obligated to give it a shot. I’m not too happy about the way things turned out.”

“I see,” Kurtz said, a non-committal comment, but one that seemed suddenly wiser to express than the sentiment (the very sincere sentiment) that things between Lenore and Harrison had most certainly happened for the best. It must have been fate.

Lenore grinned wider. “Yeah,” she said.

For dessert, they had small ovals of sweetened cheese with slivers of pistachio, sprinkled with rose water, and tiny cups of thick coffee flavored with cinnamon and mace.

“Would you like a brandy?” Kurtz asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Not after the beer.”

Kurtz glanced at his watch and said, “It’s a little early to call it an evening. How about a movie?”

“I don’t think I’m in the mood for a movie,” she said. She squinted one eye at him and looked for an instant like she was mulling something over. Then she grinned at him with one side of her face, gave a tiny shrug and said, “How about your place?”

The bar on East Houston was busier at night. There were three dancers now, two blondes and a brunette, and they swung their hips like they meant it. The stage behind the bar was lit with strobe lights that changed color every few seconds, red to magenta to blue and back again. Barent winced. The music was something by the Pointer Sisters, not exactly Barent’s cup of tea. He had looked at the flickering lights for no more than a few seconds and already he could feel a headache coming on.

He wandered to the back of the bar where it was a little quieter and found Croft sitting in a booth with two women, drinking *Roederer Cristal*. Croft wore a brown leather jacket and a paisley tie. On the table sat a tan fedora with a leopard skin band around the rim. One of the women was black, with creamy smooth skin and long, curling black hair. The other was blonde, with blue eyes and full, red lips. They both wore tight, low cut dresses and they both sat very close to Croft.

“Barent,” Croft said. “Didn’t expect to see you here so late. Sit down. This is Heather”—he smiled at the top of the blonde’s head—“and this is Chantal.

“Ladies, this is Officer Barent, of the New York City *Police Department*.”

Heather and Chantal both cast Barent doubtful glances. Neither of them said a word.

“Heather. Chantal.” Barent tipped his hat and slid into the seat opposite Croft.

“Drink, Barent?” Croft asked.

Barent shook his head. “I’m on duty.”

“Damn,” Croft said. “I’ll have to watch my mouth.” Heather was looking at Barent warily. Chantal snuggled up to Croft’s arm and smiled as if she hadn’t a care.

“I need some information,” Barent said.

Croft looked miffed. “What am I, a library? Can’t a man enjoy a quiet evening after work with his lady friends?”

Barent smiled at Heather. He craned his head forward and said, “Boo.” Heather blinked and looked startled.

“Now look what you done,” Croft said. “You scared her.” He patted Heather on top of her head. “Daddy won’t let the big bad *policeman* hurt his little girl.” Heather looked up at Barent uncertainly.

“Tony Korda and Jaime Ruiz,” Barent said.

Croft winced. “Not in front of the children.”

“Then take a hike, girls,” Barent said pleasantly.

Both women looked at Croft. He nodded and they rose from the table without a word and walked over to the bar. Croft stared after them.

“New merchandise?” Barent asked.

Croft shrugged. “Korda and Ruiz not my business. I told you what you wanted to know. Why you bothering me now?”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“It was all I had,” Croft said. He shook his head, chugged back his glass of champagne and poured another. “Look, Barent, there ain’t nothing new in this. Kids, they play their little kid games, like cops and robbers. But in the ghetto, they be serious games. You know how many kids in the ghetto die before they grow up? One quarter get shot or stabbed or stomped on or O.D. And what you think happens to the rest? Not one in ten gets out of there unless he got people he can count on, someone to watch his back. So kids, they need protection, they form a gang, and after awhile they ain’t kids no more and then what? Kid games not enough. They want to play grown up games. But they don’t know

how. So if they not too dumb, they look for a bigger gang to take them in, show them the ropes. That's the way it is with Ruiz and Korda, or so they say on the street. Me?" Croft shrugged. "I don't mess with things that don't concern me."

Barent shrugged. "I've heard the story before; this city is filled with rejects from the criminal major leagues."

Croft nodded sagely. "That exactly what it is. Ruiz, he a little rough around the edges, maybe not too smart but smart enough to know it. He need a little polish, a little shine. Korda, he give him some jobs, shine him up real good. Ruiz handle them, Korda give him some bigger ones. Pretty soon, Ruiz and his boys playing in the big leagues, they a part of the team."

"Unless they decide to form a team of their own."

"It happens." Croft poured another glass of champagne. "You sure you won't have some?"

"No, thanks." The thought, actually, made him feel ill. Even from across the room, the music made his skull vibrate and the flickering lights were inescapable. Barent's head was beginning to seriously pound.

Croft pursed his lips and swirled his champagne. "You know that fella wrote *The Godfather*? Mario Puzo? After he wrote *The Godfather*, he wrote another book called *Fools Die*. You think Ruiz know how to read?"

Barent peered at Croft doubtfully. "When did you get so literary?"

"Not much to do in prison. Place had a good library."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Lenore stepped toward him, still with that same faint grin on her face, put her arms up over his shoulders and kissed him. It was a very nice kiss, an expert kiss. She used her teeth delicately, nibbling on his lower lip. Lenore wasn't going anywhere, wasn't planning on doing anything else with the rest of the evening except stand there and let her lips rove over his, her tongue peeping out enticingly every once in a while to tease his. He put his arms around her back and she reached up to run her fingers through his hair, all the while keeping their lips glued together.

Kurtz felt dizzy. He felt like maybe neither of them were getting enough air. He remembered reading somewhere that hawks sometimes died while mating. They flew as high as they could, joined together, folded their wings and plunged toward the earth at two hundred miles an hour. Only when they were finished did they uncouple and fly off. If they didn't finish in time, they died. Kurtz felt like he might die right here from lack of oxygen. He felt like Cary Grant in that old Hitchcock movie, kissing Ingrid Bergman, the one where he was a secret agent and she was reluctantly infiltrating the gang of bad guys. The censors at the time didn't allow a kiss that lasted more than a few seconds, so they had to vary the kiss, mixing it up with little sighs and whispers of conversation, so that they could claim it wasn't really *one* kiss, it was a series of kisses that went on almost forever, and which wound up being far more erotic than one single kiss could possibly be—and that was a pretty good way to feel, even if (especially if) little red lights were dancing before your eyes and you seriously thought that you might blissfully slide into unconsciousness.

"I can't breathe," Kurtz whispered.

She went right on kissing him and he went right on kissing her back. It was amazing. Not since high school had a kiss (or rather a kissing *experience*) been so satisfying, and that was only because kissing was at that time as far as he had ever gotten and he could barely imagine anything better. The thought occurred to him that maybe he should start to vary the action, slide a hand up under her skirt, maybe let the tips of his fingers wander over her breast but nope, if this was as good as it seemed,

and it seemed pretty amazingly good, then Richard Kurtz was going to let things happen as they happened and be blissfully content to go along for the ride.

As it happened, after what seemed to be about five hours but was actually somewhat less, Lenore broke off, leaned back, looked up into Kurtz' eyes and said, "Undress me."

Despite what trashy novels always said about it, Kurtz had never found undressing a woman to be the phenomenal experience it was cracked up to be, mostly because women's clothes were a lot more complicated than men's clothes, and unless you really knew what you were doing, you always wound up fumbling for zippers and buttons and clasps that you either couldn't quite reach or that wouldn't quite come undone. It probably would have been more romantic to simply rip the clothes off a woman, let her know you really wanted her and couldn't wait a single second longer, but most women, whatever they might say about the virtues of unrestrained passion and romance, tended to get a trifle upset when their no doubt expensive blouses and skirts and lingerie got ruined (Kurtz could remember one smart young lady in college who always wore a one piece jump suit with a single long zipper in the front when she was in the mood. A man could peel a woman out of a garment like that as easily and romantically as you please without having to fumble around like a jerk.).

But hey, what the hell? If Lenore wanted it, Lenore got it, especially here and especially tonight. She stood there with her eyes half closed while Kurtz gently, oh so slowly, opened the buttons on her blouse, pausing after each one to kiss the golden skin that the button had concealed, and by the time he had opened the last one and slid the blouse down over her shoulders, her breathing was rapid and she audibly sighed. She was wearing a low cut, lace edged bra, so sheer it was transparent. She kissed him again, hard, and he unclasped the bra, paused for a moment to look at her and then slid her skirt and bikini panties to the floor and then she was gloriously naked.

She smiled wickedly and looked suddenly thoughtful. "There's something very sensual and erotic about standing here undressed with a man who still has all his clothes on," she said.

"I never realized that. Should I keep them on?"

She frowned slightly. "I don't think so." She reached up and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, then hesitated and stepped back with an impish grin. "No," she said. "You do it. I want to watch." His clothes were off in maybe a thousandth of a second, or maybe a millionth. She squinted at him as if assaying what she had found and then nodded in approval and stepped forward and then his arms were full of squirming, gasping Lenore.

Ten seconds later, they tumbled into bed, giggling.

Lenore wasn't loud enough to wake the neighbors but she made a gratifying amount of noise, which Kurtz thought was very considerate of a woman, letting a man know how much she was into it. It certainly puffed up the old ego. Once, when Kurtz slowed down, thinking he might be hurting her, she groaned out, "No. Keep going," which was just fine with Kurtz.

And then it was over, at least for the moment, and they lay there panting, arms and legs twined together and Kurtz thought with a sleepy glow that he had rarely been so content in his life. Somehow, Kurtz had slipped down on the bed and Lenore was clutching his head to her breasts. One perfect, pink nipple was bobbing next to his eye. He kissed it and she gave a tiny purr.

"I'm not usually this aggressive," Lenore said in a low voice. She yawned. "I want you to know that."

"No problem," Kurtz said, and kissed the nipple again. It was beginning to pucker. "Believe me."

"Kathy might come back to you. I wanted to stake my claim." She gave him a wicked, sleepy grin. "I like that," she said. "Don't stop. And try the other one."

Which also was just fine with Kurtz.







BARENT WOKE UP WITH his headache intact. He briefly considered calling in sick but glumly rejected the idea, dragged himself out of bed and drove to the office, his temples throbbing. Once there, he poured himself a cup of coffee, swallowed two aspirin, picked up the phone and slowly dialed Kurtz' office. Mrs. Schapiro answered and asked him to hold. After a few moments, Kurtz picked up. "Barent," he said, "What's happening?"

Barent winced. The sound of Kurtz' voice was like a knife slicing through his brain. "I was wondering if anything else might have occurred to you," he said. "About Longo."

Kurtz hesitated. "No," he said. "Sorry."

"Too bad," Barent said morosely, "I was hoping it might have."

"Sorry," Kurtz said again, then, "Are you alright?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't sound too good. Is anything wrong?"

"Just a headache," Barent said. "I get headaches. I asked a doctor about it once, he said maybe it was migraines. You know anything about migraines?"

"Not too much. Do you take ergotrate?"

"No. Should I?"

"I think you should see a neurologist. They know more about headaches than I do."

Barent grunted. "I was in a bar last night, talking to a guy who had given me some information. They had these colored strobe lights. I don't know why anybody thinks it's sexy, seeing women dancing around in strobe lights. They don't look sexy to me; they look like aliens from outer space."

"Colored lights?" Kurtz said.

"Strobe lights. Red, purple and blue. Jesus, my head is killing me."

"Lights..." Kurtz said. His voice was distant.

"Yeah," Barent said, "lights. What about them?"

"Son of a bitch," Kurtz whispered. "Lights..."

"Hello, again," Barent said.

"Just can't stay away, can you?" Ronald Evans simpered. "Did you bring that luscious hunk with you?"

"No," Barent said, "the hunk is back at the office."

"What a shame. Well, what can I do for you?"

"Is Mario home?"

"No. He's at work."

"Maybe you can help." Barent reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a series of black and white photographs. "Do you recognize any of these men?"

Ronald looked at him doubtfully. "Again?" he said. He took the photos and shuffled through them. When he came to the fifth one he stared for a moment, his brow wrinkling, then nodded briefly. "For sure," Ronald said. He tapped the picture with a fingernail. "This one."

Barent realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly. "Finally," he murmured, "we're in business."

"It was the lights," Barent said. "Mercury vapor bulbs cast a blue light. Red hair looks dark brown under mercury vapor lights. That was smart of you," Barent said to Kurtz. "Real smart."

Barent's headache had disappeared. "You got any more of that brandy?" he asked.

They sat in Kurtz' apartment. Kurtz leaned forward and re-filled Barent's snifter. "I'm glad it worked out," he said shortly.

"We made some black and white prints from the pictures in the hospital directory. Without the red hair confusing the issue, they recognized him right away."

"Great," Kurtz said morosely. Longo. Kurtz still had trouble with the idea. Longo? "I don't get it," he said, and shook his head. "He's a successful surgeon. He doesn't need the money."

"You don't know what he needs," Barent said.

"I guess not. I guess I don't know him at all."

"Doc, listen to me, there's no such thing as your average murderer. I've known cold blooded killers as sweet and mild mannered as choir boys, guys who go to church every Sunday, guys who donate a tenth of their income to charity. I'm telling you, you just can't tell."

You just can't tell...Kurtz had wanted to find Sharon Lee's murderer but he had somehow assumed it would turn out to be somebody he didn't know, or at least somebody he didn't like. Not Longo. "So what now?"

"Good question," Barent said. "In the past two days there have been three more. Longo's running a regular little assembly line. We know these guys are members of Ruiz' organization. We don't know how Rivera got involved with Longo and we don't know how Longo got involved with Ruiz. And we don't know how Tony Korda fits into the picture—if he fits into the picture at all. You know anything about insurance fraud?"

"No," Kurtz said, "not at all."

"Most of it is workman's comp or phony accidents. Minor car crashes are very popular. The way it works, they take out a policy on a vehicle, maybe medical policies also on the driver and passengers, then the guy runs into another car that may or may not also be insured but is full of passengers. This car is also in on the deal and they get half a dozen claims for fictitious injuries on each crack up. Another variation, the guy will stop short at a light and get himself rear-ended. The guy who hit him was set up but it doesn't matter—his insurance has to pay. You don't do it on a highway, you do it on a nice street with a lot of traffic lights where you can't go fast enough to cause serious damage. The injuries are mostly orthopedic or neurologic: lower back pain, chronic headaches, whiplash, the sort of stuff that's difficult to disprove and is likely to need repeat treatment over a long period of time.

"It's quite a racket."

"It sounds like it," Kurtz said. "And how do you figure Sharon Lee ties in to all this?"

Barent swirled his brandy and squinted into the glass. "Maybe she doesn't. We don't know that he killed her, just that they were involved." Barent took a cigar out of his pocket, looked doubtfully at Kurtz, shrugged and put away the cigar. "But now we should have enough to get a warrant."

They jimmed the lock on Longo's office suite and went in the next night. Kurtz was not with them. He had wanted to come but Barent had refused. "You're a consultant, not a cop. You wouldn't want me hanging around in the O.R. and I don't want you hanging around here. So forget about it."

Kurtz hadn't liked it but he wasn't given a choice.

Longo's suite was much larger than Kurtz'. There were three examining rooms. A fourth room was filled with weights, parallel bars, wheelchairs, walkers, canes and vinyl-covered treatment tables. The equipment in the cabinets ran to heavy-duty scissors, rolls of plaster and ace bandages, rather than syringes and vials of medication. Longo's private office was filled with a weird assortment of exotic stuff gathered from around the world: three coconuts carved into faces, one smiling, one

frowning, one crying, a set of Zulu shields, a zebra skin rug on the floor, a Chinese tea table with a relief sculpture of two opposing armies set beneath a glass cover. To Barent, most of it looked like junk.

The filing cabinets were closed but not locked. Patient records, neatly typed, filled most of the drawers. There were hundreds of them. He looked under “R” but found nothing for Rivera.

“Here.” A cop named Vargas whispered it to him. Sitting on the secretary’s desk was a black appointment book. “Okay,” Barent said, and rubbed his hands together. He flipped through it briefly. On the dates that the suspects had been seen entering Longo’s office, appointments were listed for Eduardo Santana, Raymond Cisneros, Guillermo Cordova and Paul Vilas. The filing cabinets contained records corresponding to these names and Barent quickly photographed the pages.

“Oh, boy,” Moran whispered. “Look at this.” He held a sheaf of paper in his hand that he had pulled out of Longo’s desk. They appeared to be white typing paper. He held them out to Barent. “Be careful,” Moran said. “Don’t burn your fingers.”

Barent read the first one and whistled. He read, “*When you put it into me I came immediately and then I must have come another four times before you finished. I’ve never had a cock as large as yours before and I want it all the time.*” The letter—if it was a letter—was unsigned. “Are they all like this?”

“All except the last one,” Moran said. “Take a look.”

Barent flipped through the sheaf to the last page. He stared at it. It read: *I know what you’re doing. I won’t let you get away with it.*

Barent felt a ferocious grin spread across his face. The tips of his fingers almost tingled. “Put everything back neatly,” he said. “Except these. These are evidence.”

“He’ll miss them,” Moran said. “He’ll know someone was in here.”

“Were they on the top of the stack?”

“No. They were in the middle.”

“Good. Chances are he doesn’t read them every day. With a little luck, he won’t notice that they’re gone, at least for a while. And if he does,”—Barent shrugged—“so what? There’s not a thing he can do about it.”

They put a tail on Carlos Rivera and the men who had called themselves Raymond Cisneros, Guillermo Cordova and Paul Vilas. Within a few days, all four of these men were observed entering the local branch offices of various insurance companies.

One day later, Barent and Moran drove up to a State Farm Insurance office in Queens. The manager was a lanky, thin man with a brush moustache and no hair at all on the top of his head. His name was Joe Weinbaum.

State Farm, it turned out, had no record of Carlos Rivera, but they did have a policy on Eduardo Santana. “He was in an accident about three months ago,” Weinbaum said. “He suffered a dislocation of the sixth cervical vertebrae. It says here he has continuing weakness and pain down both arms and is currently unemployable. The medical bills are”—he frowned—“quite extensive.”

“Who’s the physician?”

“Philip Longo.”

Barent smiled at Moran, who sat back with his hands folded across his chest, seeming to pay the conversation no attention whatsoever.

“What’s this all about?” Weinbaum asked.

“Eduardo Santana’s real name is Carlos Rivera. He’s employed at a nightclub in Harlem. We’ve seen him there. He does not appear to be disabled.”

“How much have you paid out?”

“Two thousand for auto repairs,” Weinbaum said. “Over five in assorted medical bills.” Weinbaum looked vaguely sick.

“Any of that for physical therapy?”

“Most of it. He’s still going and we’re still paying.”

Barent scratched the side of his nose. He said, “We came across this information in connection with another case, the details of which I’m not free to discuss. When our investigation is completed—which should be within a few weeks—we’ll release all the information and then you can pursue charges.”

When they got back to the office, Barent settled himself behind the desk and leaned back, his hands behind his head. Moran poured a cup of coffee. Barent felt good. Things were finally coming into focus. Sharon Lee and Longo had been having an affair. She had found out about his illegal activities and tried to get him to stop. Most likely, he had killed her for it, or had her killed.

“What’s next?” Moran asked.

“Talk to Longo.” Moran nodded.

A knock came on the door. A plainclothesman stuck his head inside. “Man here wants to see you, Lew. Name’s Oliver Thomas.”

Barent and Moran looked at each other. Moran shrugged. “Show him in,” Barent said.

A few seconds later, Oliver Thomas was sitting across the desk from Barent. He seemed uncomfortable. He fidgeted in his seat. Probably worried that he’ll get his suit dirty. Barent smiled. “What can I do for you, Mr. Thomas?”

Oliver Thomas looked at Moran. “Can we speak alone?” Moran put down his coffee and left without a word.

Thomas followed Moran closely with his eyes. When the door had closed, he seemed to relax. “I got a call from Gordon Stone,” he said. Thomas grinned with one side of his face. “I can hardly believe it. He says his organization will be ending its business association with First Amsterdam Savings and Loan. He actually sounded sorry, like he thought I might be upset and he was breaking it to me easy.”

“Congratulations,” Barent said. “That’s what you wanted.”

“Yes...” Oliver Thomas breathed the word as if a tremendous weight had been removed from his shoulders. “It’s incredible. I would never have expected it.” He smiled widely. “I would like to have my notebook back.”

“Really...” Barent let a doubtful look cross his face. “How is your son, by the way?”

“He’s doing fine.”

“And Lenore?”

Oliver Thomas shrugged. “I try to pay the relationship as little attention as possible.”

Barent smiled. “Well, Oliver,” he said, “that doesn’t surprise me. But your little request does. By your own admission, you’ve been involved for a number of years in crimes that include tax evasion, money laundering and racketeering. Under the RICO statutes, the feds could confiscate your entire organization. Do you really expect me to just hand the evidence back to you and forget about it? Why should I do that?”

“Evidence?” Oliver Thomas blinked at him. “What evidence? You have a notebook with the names of people who don’t exist, listing transactions that never took place. Without my testimony, you have no evidence at all. Considering that I am no longer in any danger, I’m not about to give it.”

“You might not have a choice.”

Oliver Thomas was looking just a trifle annoyed. He fidgeted in his seat and leaned forward. "I suppose you could launch a formal investigation. You could subpoena me. I assure you, you would find nothing, and the law does not require me to testify against myself."

"But still, I do have a notebook in your handwriting. How would you explain that?"

"I'm writing a novel." Thomas waved his hands impatiently. "Those are my notes regarding the plot."

"A novel." Barent shook his head in amazement. "I've always admired creative people." He tapped his pencil against the desk while he thought about it. Oliver Thomas was a bigoted, supercilious windbag, but he was probably right. Without Gordon Stone and Raymond Santiago, the notebook alone would not be enough to convict anybody of anything.

"You may be correct," Barent said, "but I think I'm going to hold on to it for a little while longer."

Oliver Thomas opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

"Yes?" Barent said.

"You'll regret this," Oliver Thomas said.

"Get lost, Ollie." Barent stifled a belch behind his fist. Then he smiled. "And on your way out, would you ask Officer Moran to step back in here? We were about to have a cup of tea before you interrupted us."

Intellectuals only kill their own. It wasn't quite true, Kurtz reflected. They also killed whomever they regarded as a traitor to their class. That, he suspected, was at least a part of the problem with Kathy. Kurtz was intelligent, but he was not an intellectual, not by Kathy's rigorous standards, at least. She had still not called.

Lenore's comment the other night, the one about staking her claim...a lot of men might have resented a comment like that. Not Kurtz.

Kathy didn't trust people who were "certain" about things. Certainty, to Kathy, was the sign of a superficial intellect. Kurtz, on the other hand, had been trained to make decisions. A necrotic gallbladder was not amenable to philosophical persuasion. Kurtz respected people who knew their own mind; he felt comfortable with them. He also respected honesty, which had been one of the things that had attracted him to Kathy in the first place and was also one of the things he liked about Lenore. He supposed he might have felt differently about Lenore's comment if he had felt differently about Lenore, but he didn't. Lenore Brinkman was a woman he enthusiastically wanted to see again, anywhere, anytime. The next time would have to wait at least a few days, however, since Lenore had taken the shuttle down to Washington to consult on the artwork for an ad campaign. In a way, though, maybe that was just as well. Kurtz needed a little time to think. The fact was, he still felt bad about Kathy. He felt bad about the way it had ended (if it had ended). A woman was supposed to stand by her man and Kathy hadn't exactly stood four square and firm by him. But then, if we're being honest, it was pretty obvious that Kathy never had seen Kurtz as "her" man.

Whatever, she had still not called, and after last night he didn't much care...which made him feel guilty. He felt like he was supposed to care.

The next day was hard. The Sharon Lee case was finally breaking and he was only a spectator. That grated on him. He knew the feeling was illogical but he wanted to be there for the kill. He wanted to look Longo in the eye while the police confronted him and see his face crumple and ask him why he did it.

He passed Longo once in the hallways. Longo looked distracted. He had lost weight. Kurtz wondered what was going through his mind. Nothing good, he hoped.

Benson had passed away two nights before. He went quietly in his sleep, his wife at his side. She seemed grateful for the little that Kurtz had been able to do for him.

Nugent had left for the nursing home. Nugent had not been grateful at all. He seemed to think that his continued existence was a disappointment to his physicians and he took a spiteful pleasure in the fact. "Good riddance," he whispered. "Good riddance." And he smiled, his stark, white face glowing with malevolent glee.





“GENTLEMEN.” LONGO’S eyes flicked back and forth between their faces. “Come in.” Did his smile falter just a trifle? Barent couldn’t be sure.

Elegant, Barent thought. Weird but elegant. A large papier-mache sculpture painted in orange and purple sat in the living room. It looked like a cartoon character, with bulbous eyes, a Pinocchio nose and a tiny hat on its head. An abstract wire mobile hung from the ceiling. The windows gave a panoramic view of Downtown, with the Empire State Building framed in the middle.

Longo shifted his feet. He cleared his throat. “What can I do for you?”

“Can we sit down somewhere?” Barent asked.

“Yes, of course,” Longo said. “Come this way.”

They followed him across a tiled floor into a den with thick blue carpet. An oak coffee table sat in front of a brown leather couch. Book cases lined one wall. The other three walls were covered with shelves holding an assortment of small items; knives made of ebony, obsidian and bronze, ivory figurines, feathered masks, jade incense bowls, Chinese maidens carved out of some sort of lavender stone, small boxes from Russia and China painted in black lacquer, coral encrusted candelabras retrieved from sunken wrecks, old gold and silver coins, a pewter teacup with an engraved signature of Paul Revere on its side.

“Don’t touch the boxes,” Longo said, “the lacquer contains urushiol, the active ingredient in poison ivy. It can give you a bad rash.”

“Poison ivy?”

“They used to paint valuables with the stuff, in China. It prevented thievery.”

“I’ll bet.” It sounded like a good idea, actually. Maybe the Department should start recommending it.

Whatever, Longo seemed a bit more confident here in his inner sanctum, among his private treasures. He smiled brightly—though the smile seemed strained—and crossed his legs. “Please sit down,” he said.

Moran slumped into a corner of the couch and fixed his expressionless gaze on Longo’s face. Barent also sat. Longo glanced once at Moran and frowned minutely. He shifted in his seat and looked at Barent. “Tell me about Jaime Ruiz,” Barent said.

Longo blinked. After a long moment, he said, “Jaime Ruiz? I don’t think I know anyone by that name.”

“No? How about Tony Korda, you know anyone by that name?”

Longo shook his head immediately and said, “No.”

“Then how about Eduardo Santana? Raymond Cisneros? Paul Vilas? Shall I go on?”

Longo’s face grew pale and his eyes wandered around the shelves lining the room. Probably kissing it all goodbye. Barent allowed a slight note of sympathy to enter his voice. “Tell me about it. How did you get involved with these people?”

“What people?” Longo whispered.

Barent frowned. “Don’t be a dope. We’ve had you under surveillance for two weeks. We’ve seen every person who entered your office. One way or another, it’s over.”

Longo pulled in a long, deep breath and seemed about to say something. He closed his eyes. For almost a minute, he sat there without moving. Moran gave Barent a tiny grin and Barent nodded. Then



Longo blinked his eyes and looked at Barent. "I gamble," he said. "Did you know that?"

"We knew it," Barent said. "I guess you don't win much."

"I'm pretty good. I win a lot." Longo shrugged.

"But not as much as you lose." Longo shook his head. "No."

"Is that all?"

"No. If it was only the gambling, I might have been able to handle it. I've been gambling for years. Like you said, I always lost a little more than I won but I never got into a hole I couldn't get out of—until my divorce. Annette took almost everything. Do you know the laws regarding child support in this State? Plus alimony?" Longo slumped down in his seat and a pained expression crossed his face.

"The more I got behind, the more I gambled, and the more I gambled, the more I got behind.

"And Sylvia..." Longo laughed softly. "Sylvia has expensive tastes."

"So then you met Ruiz."

"It was at the Showboat. We were playing blackjack."

"He beat you," Barent stated.

"Oh, yeah."

"And now he owns you."

"I know it and he knows it but you'll never prove it. Everything was done through intermediaries. Vilas is the one who set it all up. I collect nothing on the patients they send me. Ruiz gets every penny. I'm trapped, but it's better than being dead."

"I understand," Barent said. "You're in a tough spot." Then he smiled. "So what made you kill Sharon Lee?"

The blood drained from Longo's face. "What?" he whispered.

"You heard me, you bastard," Barent said. His voice was no longer sympathetic.

"Sharon..." Longo shook his head. He licked his lips. "You don't know what you're talking about. I never killed Sharon Lee. I never killed anyone. Sharon and I..."

"Were having an affair," Barent stated.

"Yes." Longo barely nodded.

"And she found out about your little dealings with Ruiz and threatened to expose you. So you decided to kill her."

"That's crazy," Longo said. "Absolutely crazy. I would never have harmed a hair on Sharon's head. I—" He stopped abruptly.

"Go on," Barent said mildly. "Tell us how much you loved her." Longo swallowed. He frowned at the carpet.

"I thought so," Barent said. He smiled widely, put his hands in his pockets and stretched. "Speaking of hair," he said, "you got a zebra skin rug in your office. The two of you do it very often on that rug?"

Longo's face grew red. "I don't believe you have any legitimate reason to ask that."

"Really?" Barent's grin grew wider. "We found what appeared to be horse hair on her clothing. Zebra hair and horse hair look a lot alike."

Longo shrugged.

Barent waited a moment, then said, "And how about this?" He smiled down at a piece of white paper and handed it to Longo. Written on the paper were the words: *You won't get away with it. I won't let you.*

Longo visibly winced. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

“Where do you think? From the desk in your office. We’ve seen all the little messages she sent you.”

“Sharon got a big kick out of these.” Longo paused and grimaced in embarrassment. “The thought that she was doing it under the noses of her co-workers really turned her on. She used the computer terminal up on O.B. and sent them through the hospital mail. This one arrived just like all the others. When I first received it, I thought exactly the same thing you did, that Sharon had found out. But why send me a thing like this? We saw each other all the time. Why not confront me with it directly? Once I calmed down, I decided to take the bull by the horns. I showed it to her. She knew nothing about it.”

Barent looked at him. “Then who sent it to you?”

Longo shrugged. “Somebody else.”

“Somebody else,” Barent said. Pretty lame story. Lame enough to be true? Barent looked over at Moran, who shrugged minutely. “Good old somebody else. Tell me, just out of curiosity, what were you doing on the night Sharon Lee was killed?”

“Sylvia and I went to a benefit dinner for Settlement House.”

“And after the dinner? What did you and the lovely Mrs. Longo do then?”

“We came home and went to sleep. We were together the entire night.”

“Convenient,” Barent said. “Did Mrs. Longo know anything about you and Sharon Lee?”

“No.” Longo shook his head emphatically. “Never.”

“So even though she might have had a motive to kill your girlfriend, she didn’t know it.”

“No.”

Longo looked pretty shaken up. Good. He deserved it. He also looked sincere, which didn’t mean a thing in itself because people who made a habit of telling lies usually got pretty good at faking it. Still...

“We’re going to take you into custody,” Barent said. “The charge is insurance fraud, which actually I couldn’t care less about; but I want to be able to find you if it turns out that you haven’t been telling me the truth.” He stared into space, thinking. “Then we’ll call Robinson,” he said to Moran. “I have an idea.”

It was nearly midnight. Except for the light shining through the glass door of the Personnel Office, the Administrative Floor of the hospital was dark.

Kurtz had been thinking of going to bed when the call from Barent had come. “Meet me in the Personnel Office at Easton. You might find it enlightening.”

“Personnel? What are you talking about?”

“Harry and I are doing a little research. You don’t have to bother if you don’t want to but I thought you might be interested.”

“I’ll be there,” Kurtz said.

He pushed open the door and entered. A long counter contained an open section in the middle. Behind the counter, parallel rows of stacks crammed full of file folders rose almost up to the ceiling. Nobody was in sight from the front of the room but Kurtz could hear voices coming from behind the stacks. He walked through. Barent and Moran were sitting at a long table with piles of folders strewn across the top. A small man with rumpled clothes and an annoyed expression on his face stood at the head of the table.

Barent looked up at Kurtz. “Sit down,” he said. He glanced at the little man. “This is Jerry Simon, the Chief of Personnel. Robinson asked him to help us out.”

“This is most irregular,” Jerry Simon complained. “I see no reason why it couldn’t have waited until the morning.”

Barent ignored him. "Take a look at these," Barent said. He handed Kurtz a small pile of folders. "Tell me what you think."

Barent looked pleased. He had a happy smile on his face. Moran, though he rarely looked anything but impassive, was smiling as well. Kurtz weighed the pile doubtfully in his hand. "What's this all about?"

"Take a look."

At this hour of the night, Kurtz was not exactly in the mood for games, but the expression on Barent's face made him pause. He shrugged.

When he opened the third folder, he blinked, then looked up sharply at Barent. Barent's smile grew wider. "Jesus," Kurtz whispered.

"Let's go," Barent said.

Five minutes later they walked through the open doors of the Obstetrics Suite. Barent and Moran were in front, Kurtz right behind them. "I figured you deserved to be here but stay out of our way," Barent had said. That was fine with Kurtz.

It seemed to be quiet for a change. The delivery room doors were all dark. Nobody was screaming. A group of five nurses sat together in the central work area, sipping coffee and talking. They all looked up as Barent approached. Barent fixed his eyes on one of them, a pretty woman with dark hair. "Hello, Mrs. Ryan," he said softly.

She frowned. "Detective Barent..."

"Yes," Barent said. He paused for a moment, smiled, then said, "I'd like you to come down to the Station House with me."

"Why?" she asked in a small voice.

Barent glanced at the other nurses, who were staring wide-eyed at his face. "I think you know why," he said.

One hand came up and lightly rested on her throat. She blinked. "I didn't do it."

"Sure you did," he said.





“COULD YOU STATE YOUR full name, please?”

Peggy Ryan looked at Ted Weiss with wide, frightened eyes and said, “Margaret Donaldson Ryan.”

“Mrs. Ryan, for the tape, I would like you to also state that you have been informed of your Miranda-Escobedo rights and that you have agreed to give this testimony of your own free will.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes, what?”

She said obediently, “I have been informed of my rights and I have agreed to give this testimony of my own free will.”

Ted Weiss smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Ryan.”

Weiss was enjoying this, Barent thought. He was in his element, a hawk circling for the kill.

“Now, Mrs. Ryan, could you please tell us where you were on the night of December Twenty-Second?”

“Why do you want to know that?” Peggy Ryan’s lawyer asked. His name was Abner Cole and he seemed out of his depth. Probably did mostly tax work, maybe divorce. Barent silently nodded, morosely satisfied with this idea. Yeah, divorce.

“Sharon Lee was murdered on the night of December Twenty-Second,” Ted Weiss said.

“Murder? Who said anything about murder?”

“This is a murder investigation, Counselor,” Weiss said patiently. Cole shrugged his shoulders and sniffed, expressing his contempt for the proceedings.

“I don’t know where I was on that night,” Peggy Ryan said. “It was a month ago.”

“The work schedule on the Obstetrics Floor says that you were working the four to midnight shift.”

Peggy Ryan wrinkled her brow, as if trying hard to remember. “Then I guess I must have been. I don’t recall.”

“As I said, December Twenty-Second was the night that Dr. Sharon Lee was murdered. Does that refresh your memory?”

“You’re harassing her,” Abner Cole said.

Weiss looked at him with a wooden expression. “We’re not in a courtroom. She can refuse to answer any time she wants to.”

Cole shrugged. Peggy Ryan looked confused. “Not really,” she said. “And yet, the next morning, you were observed to be crying. That’s a pretty strong reaction.”

“A person that I worked with every day was dead. I don’t think my reaction was unusual.”

“Do you know Dr. Philip Longo?”

“What’s the significance of that question?” Abner Cole asked.

“It will become clear in just a moment, Counselor.”

Peggy Ryan looked at her lawyer uncertainly. “He’s right,” Cole said. “You don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t want to.”

She still looked uncertain, but she said, “I used to work for him.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I felt that it was time for a change.”

“I understand that you got married shortly after you left Dr. Longo’s employ. Is that correct?”

“I was married about two years later.”

“And now you’re recently divorced.”

“That’s correct.”

“What was the basis for the divorce?”

She looked away, a tense expression on her face. “He was cheating on me. I wouldn’t tolerate that.”

“I see.” Weiss nodded. “Prior to leaving his employ, were you having an affair with Philip Longo?”

“No,” she said immediately.

“Really? Dr. Longo tells us that you were.”

Her lips compressed into a thin line and she sat back into her chair, her shoulders tight and hunched.

“He says that your affair with him began shortly before his divorce. He says that you were rather...demanding. You wanted him to spend all of his time with you. If he had a late case in the Operating Room or wanted to go fishing with the boys, you threw a tantrum. He didn’t like that. He dropped you for Sylvia Shannon, whom he eventually married.”

She stared at him, saying nothing. “So you left.”

“That bitch,” Peggy Ryan said in a clipped voice.

“Perhaps you’ll be happy to know that she’s divorcing him also.” She only looked at him, breathing hard.

“What did you do on the night of December Twenty-Second, after you left work?”

“I don’t remember.”

“She’s already answered that question,” Abner Cole said.

Weiss looked at Cole and shrugged. “I understand that you share an apartment with a woman named Abby Sloane,” he said.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do you think Miss Sloane would remember whether or not you came home that night?”

“You’ll have to ask her.”

“We will,” Ted Weiss said. He pulled a sheet of paper out of his briefcase. The paper said, *You won’t get away with this. I won’t let you.* “Have you ever seen this before, Mrs. Ryan?” Weiss asked.

She barely glanced at it, then looked away. “No.”

“After it’s been used for a little while, the drum on a laser printer begins to develop a pattern of tiny scratches, which leave a corresponding pattern of toner on the paper. This”—Weiss shook the piece of paper, which made a rustling sound—“was printed on the laser printer on the Obstetrics Suite.”

Peggy Ryan shrugged. She stifled a yawn behind her open palm. Weiss grinned. “So then there’s no way your fingerprints could be on this piece of paper; isn’t that so?”

She looked at him and didn’t answer.

“It’s laser printer paper,” Weiss said gently. “It’s smoother than ordinary typing paper so that it can slide into the printer more easily. Paper like this holds fingerprints quite well, much better than most paper.”

Her breath came faster. Abner Cole looked as if he might say something; then he looked away and shrugged.

“No possible way your fingerprints could be on this piece of paper?” Weiss asked.

“I think I’ve had enough of this,” Peggy Ryan said. Abner Cole looked relieved.

Ted Weiss looked at Barent. It was the signal Barent had been waiting for. He took a small, cardboard box out of his pocket. “Would you open the box, please, Mrs. Ryan?”

She did so and looked down uncertainly, then drew in her breath.

Sitting in the box was a gold ring with an inscribed ‘D’ and a small diamond on a black obsidian face.

“Do you recognize that ring, Mrs. Ryan?” Barent asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so.”

“No? The other nurses on Obstetrics tell me that you often wore a ring that looked just like this one, on a chain around your neck. They tell me that the ring belonged to your father.”

“So?”

“As you probably know, a psychiatric patient named Bill Mose has been accused of Sharon Lee’s murder. Mr. Mose is a schizophrenic. He likes to swallow things. He had swallowed that ring. Have you any idea where he might have gotten it, Mrs. Ryan?”

Peggy Ryan looked at him for a long moment. “I hated her,” she said softly.

“As your attorney,” Abner Cole said, “I advise you to stop.”

She looked at him, uncertain. Barent nodded encouragingly. Weiss sat back, an interested, almost sympathetic expression on his face.

Finally, she shook her head, shrugged and looked down at the floor, a brooding expression on her face. “I saw what she was doing,” she said in a small voice. “He met her sometimes on the O.B. floor. I saw them together. Oh, they were careful. I doubt that anybody else noticed what was going on, but I knew him. I saw the way he looked at her. I recognized the signs. And she looked so smug, so satisfied with her dirty little affair.”

Weiss smiled gently. He gave an encouraging little nod. Abner Cole sighed, shook his head and looked away.

“He had other women before me, I know that, but what we had together was special. He loved me. Maybe now he’s telling you a different story—men do these things. They’re always trying to rationalize their stupidity. Then she came along.”

“Sharon Lee?” Weiss asked.

Peggy Ryan looked at him as if he were an idiot. “Of course not. Sylvia Shannon.” She shook her head sadly. “We were going through a rough time right then. His divorce was almost final but the money situation looked terrible and his wife was giving him hell. He was under a lot of tension and I”—she gave a bitter little laugh—“I was probably not as understanding as I should have been. Maybe he was coming to associate me with his problems, though I assure you, his relationship with his wife had gone sour long before I entered the picture. Still, I was with him when he was going through the bad times and maybe he wanted somebody who wouldn’t remind him of them. Then he met her.” She shrugged. “I couldn’t take it. I quit. I saw him every once in a while after that but I don’t think he saw me. I tried to keep out of his way. It would have been too painful. And then recently he began taking up with Sharon Lee.” She shook her head. “Everybody hated Sharon Lee. She was an arrogant, obnoxious bitch.”

Barent had heard somewhere that women doctors often had a difficult time of it with women nurses. It seemed there was a lot of resentment on both sides. Then again, from everything he had heard about her, Sharon Lee probably had been an arrogant, obnoxious bitch.

“One night, I was working the graveyard shift and she had a case, a D and C for a missed abortion. I guess he had a case too because I saw them near the elevators afterward, going up to the

call rooms, giving each other little glances like love struck rabbits, and I knew then that I had to do something to stop it. I sent him that message. I don't even know why. I suppose I wasn't thinking very carefully but I knew better than to confront her. She would have just laughed at me, the woman scorned, the sore loser. I guess I thought maybe he would pay attention."

She shook her head. One slow tear began to trickle from the corner of her eye. "But they didn't stop, and I couldn't let it go on. I just couldn't. I wouldn't. But I needed help. There was no way that I could...do it by myself. I knew a man who I thought would help me. His name is Emilio Gonzaga. I was the nurse on duty the day his little boy was born with a congenital abnormality. He went crazy. He threatened to tear the place apart and then later, I heard that he tried to sue her. It wasn't hard to find him."

"How much did you pay him?"

"He didn't ask much. He wanted to do it. He really despised her. Almost as much as I did."

"Was he the only one involved?"

"No. He brought along two other men." She frowned slightly. "Carlos Rivera...I'm not certain of the other one, Delgado something."

Weiss glanced at Barent. "Herman Delgado?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Go on."

"I waited until she had a patient in labor at night. I was pretty sure she would be stuck until late and I called Gonzaga. I almost turned out to be wrong. The patient delivered faster than I expected and Sharon left. She was probably halfway home when an emergency case arrived, a teenage girl who needed a stat C-section. So we beeped her and she had to come back. I had called Gonzaga before the late shift started and he came in with his friends. The security guards are supposed to stop people who don't have legitimate business but I had given him my I.D. card to copy. He put pictures of himself and the others on the phony cards, just in case the guards were looking, but they probably weren't. It's never too hard to get past them."

Weiss glanced at Barent again. "So I've been told."

"They waited for me in the basement, in one of the old storerooms. Nobody goes down there at night. It was perfect."

Weiss nodded. "Go on."

"After the C-section was over, I went and got them." Peggy Ryan shook her head and gave a little shudder. "I was frightened, but they were waiting for me, just like they were supposed to. We went upstairs and they stayed behind for a few minutes while I went onto the attendings' wing to make certain it was empty." She shrugged. "It almost always was. We didn't have a key to Sharon's room, either. I suppose they would have broken in if they had to but the connecting room door was open." She stopped and gave a little smile.

"Yes?" Weiss prompted.

"They killed her."

"How?"

"They strangled her."

"Did you see it? Were you there?"

"No. I waited in the connecting call room."

"Why did you go with them? Couldn't they have done it without you?"

Peggy Ryan hesitated. "I wanted to see it. I wanted to see her face." She gave a tiny laugh. "But at the last second, I left. I couldn't bring myself to watch."



“How did you know which room she would be in?”

“The room she was in and the one it connected with were reserved for obstetrics.”

Weiss nodded. “Then what?”

“Then we left. On the way out, we ran into Bill Mose, the psych patient. He was stumbling down the hall, babbling to himself. Gonzaga and Delgado wanted to kill him but I had a better idea. I recognized him. I had seen him when they took the psych patients out to the playground. I knew he was completely out of his mind. He didn’t know where he was or who he was or who we were. He was hallucinating. There was no way at all that he could have remembered us or been any sort of a credible witness. We took him back to the call room and Delgado held him still while Gonzaga and Rivera lifted up Sharon’s body and scratched his arm with her fingernails, enough to draw blood.” She shrugged. “I found a kitchen knife in one of the call rooms. We gave it to him and put him on an elevator.

“I didn’t notice until I got home that the chain had broken and my father’s ring was missing. I couldn’t be certain of where it had happened but it was already morning. I didn’t know what else to do and so I came in to work.” She shook her head and smiled awkwardly. “I was terrified that it might have fallen while we were up in the call room. That’s why I was crying when you saw me; I hadn’t had much sleep and I was pretty strung out. I was afraid you were coming to arrest me, but when nobody mentioned the ring, I figured it would never show up.”

“So that’s it,” Weiss said.

She shrugged. “I hated her. I would do it all over again, even if I knew I was going to be caught. I want you to realize that.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ryan,” Ted Weiss said. He glanced at Abner Cole, who was staring at the floor with a sour expression on his face. “We appreciate your candor.”

“Well, I would,” she said sincerely. “I really would. I wouldn’t want you to think that I did it for trivial reasons. What she did was wrong, stealing another woman’s husband. She deserved to die for that and I’m not sorry about it one bit.”





“PEGGY DONALDSON.” EDWARD Ornella shook his head sadly and took a bite out of a turkey sandwich. He had brought his lunch into the office and was eating it between patients. “Little Peggy Donaldson. I remember her very well. It was an awful tragedy.”

“What was?” Kurtz asked.

“You didn’t know?” Ornella frowned into space. “I guess you wouldn’t know. Peggy’s mother played around. She left her husband for another man. Peggy must have been eight, maybe nine years old when it happened. Frank Donaldson was a real nice guy. He was pretty broken up about it. He shot himself.”

Kurtz stared at him. “That’s terrible. What happened to Peggy?”

“I’m not sure. I think she was raised by an aunt.”

Peggy Ryan had been well liked. The people she worked with were all stunned by what had happened. Kurtz, who had never known Peggy Ryan, was willing to feel sorry for a little girl abandoned and then tragically orphaned but was not inclined to waste much sympathy on the killer she had grown into. Mostly, he was glad that it was over. Longo would probably lose his license. He might even go to jail, but in the end he was a weakling, not a murderer. Kurtz felt a little better about that. Order had been restored to the world. Here’s to order, Kurtz thought, and sipped his Coke.

Barent was not as pleased. Barent and Moran had dropped in on Kurtz’ apartment the evening before to tell him how it had gone. Barent sat with his shoulders slumped and barely looked at the glass of brandy that Kurtz had placed in front of him. “What’s bothering you?” Kurtz asked.

“I sort of hoped that this case would go a little higher than it has,” Barent said morosely.

“Ah,” Kurtz said. So that was it; the big ones were swimming away. “Maybe it will yet. You still don’t know who killed Herman Delgado. And you don’t know what Gonzaga and Rivera will have to say.”

“True,” Barent said, but he sounded unconvinced.

That afternoon, Barent and Moran drove out to the warehouse where Emilio Gonzaga worked. The foreman gave them a blank look when he saw them walk up. “Gonzaga again?”

“Yes.”

“He’s still at the same place.”

“Thanks.”

Maybe Gonzaga had heard something. Maybe he saw it in Barent’s face. Gonzaga was hoisting a bale in both hands when Barent approached. He froze, then without a word he dropped the bale and started to run. “Hey,” Barent yelled. “Come back here!”

Gonzaga ignored him. Arms pumping, head down, he ran all out toward the entrance on the other side of the stacks. Suddenly, Moran stepped out from behind a pile of shelving. Gonzaga tried to swerve but he stumbled on the dusty floor. Moran spun once. His left foot connected with Gonzaga’s abdomen and Gonzaga collapsed, gasping. “You have the right to remain silent,” Moran said. He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt and snapped them around Gonzaga’s wrists. “If you choose to give up that right, then anything you say may be used against you. You have the right to an attorney...”

“I thought you said Shotakan didn’t use kicks,” Barent said as he sauntered up to them.

Moran smiled. Gonzaga looked back and forth between the two policemen. A drop of blood trickled from the corner of his lip. “Shotokan encourages the practitioner to express his latent

creativity.”

Gonzaga glared at them. “I tell you nothing,” he said. “Nothing!”

“Who asked?” Barent said.

“Hey, man, you can’t come in here,” Carlos Rivera said.

The little man wore dirty denim jeans and a worn out olive colored parka that leaked stuffing from a small hole below the front pocket. He looked up blearily. “Why the fuck not?” he slurred.

“Cause we got a dress code. Nobody comes in here dressed like that. You want to come in here, you got to wear clean clothes, get a shave, look nice.”

“Shit...” He peered up at Rivera uncertainly. “It’s cold out there,” he whined.

Rivera shrugged. “Tough.”

“Say,” the little man said. “Don’t I know you?”

“Not a chance,” Rivera said.

“Sure. I know you.” The little man squinted, then nodded his head firmly. “You’re Carlos Rivera.”

Rivera’s nostrils flared. A tense expression crossed his face. “Get out of here,” he said.

“Sure.” The little man bobbed his head. “Carlos Rivera.”

“Out.” Rivera reached out and attempted to grab the little man by the collar but he backed away.

“Hey, Carlos, you need any help.” Two enormous bouncers wearing suits and ties approached from the rear of the club.

“No,” Rivera said.

“Jeez,” the little man said, and smiled. “How long you been working here, Carlos?”

“Get out!”

The little man shook his head, reached into his jacket, pulled out a badge with one hand and a gun with the other and said, “You’re under arrest.”

Rivera stopped abruptly. He stared at the little man. The little man smiled widely and said, “You have the right to remain silent...”

Gonzaga, as he had promised, stayed in his cell, glared at them sullenly from under hooded eyes, set his lips and refused to talk. Carlos Rivera also shook his head and said absolutely nothing. Barent was not surprised. “These guys talk, somebody will break their skulls with a baseball bat as soon as they hit prison. Forget it.”

“Peggy Ryan’s testimony ought to do it,” Moran said. Barent hardly heard him. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

“What’s on your mind?”

Barent’s eyes flicked to Moran, then away. He shrugged. “Ruiz,” Moran said, “and Korda.”

“That’s right: Ruiz and Korda.” Moran looked at him questioningly and Barent shrugged. “When all is said and done, the case is solved but we’ve hit a dead end. We’ll never find out what happened to Herman Delgado and we’ve got no way to connect Ruiz or Korda to any of it. At least, no way that will hold up in court.” Barent shook his head sadly.

For the next two days, Barent moped around the house. He seemed distracted. Betty tried more than once to talk to him but he barely heard her and finally she gave up and let him stew. The Priest, Father Michael, visited once to discuss the wedding plans. He pointedly avoided Barent. Barent barely noticed. Barent was thinking. For two days he sat in his chair in front of the television, staring at the list of deposits that Oliver Thomas had given him. By the end of the second day, he came to a conclusion. He copied the list on the Xerox machine at the office, put the copy in an envelope and dropped it in the mail. Then he waited.

Three days later, at two o'clock in the morning, Jaime Ruiz and his bodyguards left the Vanity Social Club. Jaime felt good; all of his plans were going well. He was rich. His head spun with fine cognac and the best cocaine. The night was cold, clear and still, and he breathed in the crisp air like it was another line of coke. He shook his head slowly as he considered where he had come from and where the future was taking him and he thought, *No, I don't feel good. I feel wonderful!* It was a thought that Jaime cherished and had grown used to. He laughed a little and rubbed at his nose. The tip was numb.

One of his men went to get the car. A minute later, the limousine came around the corner and pulled up to a stop. The doors opened. Jaime Ruiz barely had time to register the single man in the front seat and the two others in the back before their weapons opened fire. Gouts of orange flame pierced the air. Jaime felt something thud against his chest and then, his legs suddenly weak, he slumped to the ground. He tried to gather his feet underneath himself and rose fitfully to his knees but another bullet hit him in the back and he fell. The car doors closed and the limousine pulled away from the curb. Jaime Ruiz blinked his eyes once at the stars twinkling so high overhead, shuddered once and then lay still.

The shooting took place in another precinct and so Barent did not get the call. He first received the news from a third page story in The Times. He noticed the heading, read it carefully through twice, nodded silently to himself and closed the paper.

That afternoon, Moran said to him, "You hear about Ruiz?"

Barent smiled into his cup of coffee. "Uh-huh."

"What do you think?"

"You know that list of deposits that Oliver Thomas gave us?" Barent allowed a small, grim smile to creep across his face. "I wonder about that list, the amounts that Ruiz put in. You think those are the amounts that Ruiz told Korda?"

Moran looked at him.

"The insurance scam, the nightclub...who knows what else Ruiz was into? A guy like Korda, he expects his take. He doesn't get it, he won't be pleased."

"How would he know?"

Barent nodded his head. He stared at the smoke rising from his cigarette, then he shrugged. "These things have a way of getting out," he said.

Moran stared at him for a long time, while Barent sipped his coffee and blew smoke rings at the ceiling, then he slowly smiled. "What about Gordon Stone?" Moran asked. "What about Korda?"

Barent shrugged again. "Patience, Harry," he said. "We're only human."

Peggy Donaldson had been seven years old. She had awakened at night, hearing noises coming from somewhere in the apartment. "Daddy?" she whispered. There was no answer. Sleepily, she got out of bed and toddled down the hall. The sounds were coming from her parent's bedroom, rhythmic gasps, whistling moans. She pushed open the door. Her mother was on her hands and knees in the dark. The sounds were coming from her. She was naked. A man Peggy didn't recognize knelt on the bed behind her, moving back and forth. He was naked too. "Mommy?" she asked uncertainly.

Her mother's eyes snapped open. She saw Peggy and began to laugh. "Come here," she said.

The man behind her stopped moving and slowly smiled...

Abner Cole had posted her bond and now Peggy Ryan was back home after a long two days in jail. Peggy's roommate had moved out in her absence, evidently unwilling to share an apartment with a murderess. It was almost midnight. Peggy Ryan sat at the kitchen table and filled a glass full of vodka and drank all of it in a single gulp. Then she took a Valium out of a pillbox, put it in her mouth,

chewed it and swallowed. There had been twenty Valiums in the pillbox; this was the last. She emptied the final shot of vodka into the glass and slowly sipped until it was finished, then she rose to her feet, slid open the door leading to the balcony and walked slowly over to the edge. Her entire body was numb. She barely felt the cold. She closed her eyes, deliberately relaxed her legs and slumped forward, over the railing. She felt as if she were drifting as the ground rushed toward her and she almost giggled. What she did was wrong, Peggy Ryan thought fuzzily. She wondered, in the instant before she hit, exactly who it was that she meant.

He sat on the couch in his living room, sipping brandy, and watched the river flow by. It rippled in the moonlight. "In a Sentimental Mood," Ellington and Coltrane, was playing on the stereo—a very sad piece. Sharon Lee, Peggy Ryan, Jaime Ruiz...they were all dead. Kurtz was alive, reason enough to feel good about things, considering the alternative.

He stared at the phone, brooding, and at that instant, it began to ring. Kurtz smiled wryly and picked it up.

"Richard?" It was Kathy. She sounded hesitant.

For a moment, he could barely speak. "Yes," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." He could hear her swallow. Her voice wavered for an instant, then she said in a rush, "I know it's been a long time but I've been thinking. I've been thinking that perhaps I was too hasty. I miss you.

"Could we get together, please, maybe on the weekend?"

"I see." There was silence for a long moment. "I've been thinking about you, too." He paused, the words suddenly sticking in his throat. He opened his mouth and then closed it. He stared at the phone. He shook his head slowly and said, "I'm sorry, Kathy, but I've come to think that your misgivings were justified. Remember when you said we were different sorts of people? Well, I think you were right."

"Oh..." She sounded surprised. He waited a long ten seconds, then he sighed and gave a little shrug. "Goodbye, Kathy," he said. He hung up the phone so softly that it barely clicked.

Just like that.

Lenore had been home for at least two days. He picked up the phone again and dialed it. Her deep, husky voice answered. "Yes?"

"Lenore? Hi. It's Richard Kurtz."

"Well, hello." The slightest tinge of amusement colored her tone. "I was beginning to wonder if you were going to call."

"I'm sorry," Kurtz said. "I really am. I had some things I had to work out first. Would you like to have dinner with me, maybe tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow? Let me see...tomorrow is Thursday. Yes, I think tomorrow would be just fine."

"Pick you up at seven?"

"Seven is perfect."

"Is there anyplace special you'd like to go?"

"Not really. Why don't you meet me at my apartment and we'll play it by ear?"

"Okay, I'll be there at seven."

"Great," she said. "I'll see you then."

He leaned back into his couch, sipped his brandy and watched the river drift by. The stars twinkled overhead; the city lights reflected on the water; the moon was full. Nice view, Kurtz thought. The stereo faded into silence.

He glanced at his watch, finished the brandy and rose to his feet. He had a tough case scheduled for the morning, a gallstone stuck in the ampulla of Vater, where the common bile duct and the pancreatic duct join together before entering the duodenum. The stone had caused obstruction and scarring of both ducts. The indicated procedure was to take everything apart and sew the pancreas and the remains of the bile duct directly to the duodenum. It was a tough case, Kurtz thought, an interesting case.

He could hardly wait.

—The End—

• • • •

We hope you enjoyed *Surgical Risk*.

THE SERIES CONTINUES with *The Anatomy Lesson*, in which surgeon Richard Kurtz and police detective Lew Barent are determined to solve the brutal murder of Rod Mahoney, a respected Professor of Anatomy at Staunton College of Medicine.

[Click Here To Get, The Anatomy Lesson Now!](#)

• • • •

KEEP READING FOR THE next book in Fractured

• • • •

[JUMP TO THE TABLE OF Contents](#)

• • • •

ROBERT I. KATZ— COLUMBIA College; Northwestern Medical School; Professor of Clinical Anesthesiology and Vice-Chairman for Administration at Stony Brook University; Clinical Professor of Anesthesiology, University of Florida and Chief, Anesthesiology Service, North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System; author of 15 novels including the Kurtz and Barent mystery series, the Chronicles of the Second Interstellar Empire of Mankind plus author of the non-fiction Make Money, Don't Lose Money: The Defensive Investor on Thriving and Surviving Through Bull and Bear Markets.

For updates regarding new releases, author appearances and general information about Robert's books and stories, please sign up for his newsletter/email list at [www.robertikatz.com/join](http://www.robertikatz.com/join).





# AUDREY J. COLE: INSPIRED BY MURDER

---

INSPIRED BY MURDER

BY AUDREY J. COLE

**Author's Rating:**

• • • •

**Language: \* Sexuality: \* Violence: \*\*\***

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, each book in this collection has been rated by the author for language, sexuality and violence, so that you as a reader can make an informed choice.

Our collection includes books that span the intensity range.

**Language Intensity:**

- \* - No or mild profanity, if any
- \*\* - Stronger profanity, with up to 5 uses of the f-word
- \*\*\* - Strong language

**Sexuality Intensity:**

- \* - Sexual reference or no sexuality
- \*\* - Sexual reference which might include some details.
- \*\*\* - Intense, descriptive sexual scenes

**Violence Intensity**

- \* - Violence, but no gory details.
- \*\* - Mild violence, fairly detailed with some blood
- \*\*\* - Detailed violence

Inspired by murder Copyright © 2018 Audrey J. Cole

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, transmitted, or distributed in printed or electronic form without the written permission of the author.



He's a master of the human mind. But can he get away with murder?

Dr. Eric Leroy hungers for literary fame. Exhausted after years of listening to his rich clients wallowing in their worries, the psychiatrist intends to pursue his true passion of writing murder mysteries. And with his most obnoxious patient in mind, he crafts a killer plot to write exactly what he knows...



Eric's blood pressure felt like it had doubled by the time he pulled into the parking lot of his psychiatry practice. He sped into his reserved parking spot before slamming on the brakes. His brake pedal pulsated under his foot from the activation of his anti-lock braking system atop the black ice. He swore as his six-month-old BMW slid into the metal sign post marked *RESERVED*. The one day a year Seattle had black ice he had to be late for work.

He got out and walked on literal thin ice to the main entrance of his office. His body tensed from the cold. Seeing his name, *Eric Leroy, M.D.*, etched across the glass depressed him lately. He knew it should be enough. It should be something to be proud of, but he wasn't. He was bored with psychiatry. What he cared about was murder. He wanted to be a writer. A good writer. A great writer. A gifted writer. One who wrote bestsellers and won Pulitzers.

He felt a rush of heat when he opened the door. *Crikey*. Patricia Watts, his eight o'clock appointment, was already seated in his newly-remodeled waiting room. He wasn't sure why this surprised him when it was after eight fifteen.

She tossed aside her magazine when he came through the door. From the look on her face, you'd think she'd been treading water instead of parking her ass in a comfy chair and catching up on celebrity gossip while she waited for him.

"Morning." Eric heard the voice of his twenty-two-year-old secretary. "Working on your novel again this morning?"

He turned to see her, bright-eyed as usual, waiting eagerly for his response. Telling her about his book was a mistake. She half-smiled at him from behind her desk while she chomped vigorously on a large piece of gum.

"Just a lot of traffic today," he said.

"Novel?" asked his eight o'clock, as though she were part of the conversation.

He pretended like he hadn't heard the question. Begrudgingly, Eric marched toward his office but turned back before he reached the door.

"Come on back, Patricia," he said in a professional tone, trying to rebuild the boundary in their relationship.

He closed the door behind her as she threw down her purse and plopped herself into one of his leather chairs as if she'd been on her feet for hours. The seat cushion let out a *whoosh* as it deflated. Eric took a seat in his chair across from her and tried his best to look interested in whatever she might have to say. He reached for his notebook and pen.

"How about you tell me how things have been going this last week." He tried to not stare at her cankle crease that became visible below her pant seam after she sat down.

"Well, I wish you hadn't been late because I have quite a lot I want to talk about."

*So talk about it*, he thought. "Right. Let's get started."

He leaned back in his chair and pretended to be engaged as Patricia rattled on about her latest woes. Judging solely by her looks, she was a hard woman to figure out. Her straight gray bob, cut to a blunt line above her jaw, suggested she was uptight. The lack of attention she gave to her figure, however, suggested something else.

For the last six months, he'd been listening to Patricia bitch about pretty much everyone she encountered. Her problems were always someone else's fault. As he'd had the pleasure of getting to know her, he'd observed Patricia was overindulged and completely absorbed with herself. At fifty-

two, he surmised her personality bore no hope of improvement. At least, none that he could offer her. If it weren't at the cost of sounding too dramatic, he'd say listening to her had become beyond exhausting.

Eric doodled on his notebook as she talked. If he could only tell her the truth in less than clinical terms: *you're a whiner. You're a big, fat whiner.* Maybe then she'd be forced to look inward. But saying something to that effect would most likely lead to the loss of his practice. So, he allowed her to continue bitching about the newest pain in her ass, while he allowed his mind to drift back to his book. Where it belonged.

His mind also began to psychoanalyze itself after losing interest in the hopeless, self-obsessed Patricia. His mother was Australian and his father came from a long line of American patriarchs. They both had a love for the arts. Why he had decided to become a doctor he did not know. He realized now that he needed to create.

He was aware that Patricia had moved the focus of her bitching toward her husband. *Poor bastard.* Eric had been married once. She was nothing like Patricia. She was beautiful. Patricia was still complaining when he looked down at his wiry hand, startled by what he had drawn.

He had doodled Patricia lying in a puddle of her own blood with a dismembered arm laying off to the side. A ferocious beast looked ready to devour her, its jaw open wide, exposing ginormous fangs.

*Interesting.* Must've been his overactive subconscious.

Shockingly, Patricia said something intriguing enough to make him look up.

"I think this all started when I saw my brother die."

"How did he die?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"He was murdered."

Eric snapped forward in his chair. "Go on." He focused on Patricia for the first time that morning.

"I try not think about it."

"Do you think you can tell me what happened?"

He thought she would benefit from talking about it, especially after she brought it up. He also hoped it would be something he could use in his novel.

"I was twelve and he was eight. Charlie was his name." She paused, and he could see she was starting to tear up.

He handed her a box of tissues from the table beside him.

"Take your time," he said, hoping she'd get on with it.

She dabbed her eyes and seemed to compose herself. "It was a hot summer night. July. I had left my bedroom window open for a breeze. My mother's boyfriend was in a drunken rage."

*Oh, drat. A domestic affair.* But maybe he could use it. He listened closely as she continued.

"I closed the window so the noise wouldn't travel around the neighborhood. He was beating my mother, I could hear it all the way down the hall. I knew better than to interfere. But not Charlie."

She stopped to dab her eyes again.

"He finished with my mother but still needed someone to beat on. I heard his heavy footsteps come down the hall. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop him. He flung open my bedroom door and I braced myself for what was coming. He stumbled into my room and, at first, all I saw behind him was the poker stick. I didn't see Charlie until after he swung the poker into the back of my mother's boyfriend's head. But the blow didn't even faze him. He ripped the poker stick out of Charlie's hands before he took another swing..."

He waited in silence. After a minute, she went on.



“I’ll never forget the look on Charlie’s face after he died.” Tears now freely ran down her face, and she made no effort to wipe them away.

Eric found it hard to feel sorry for her. He only felt for poor little Charlie. He wished it had been Patricia the boyfriend had killed. Charlie sounded nice.

When their time was up and she had collected herself, he offered his condolences and gave her his standard, *Well, I think you’ve got a lot to think about* response before pushing her out the door. He liked that last bit about the look on Charlie’s face. He pictured Charlie, his soft brown eyes staring into nothingness and his hair matted with blood. *That* he could use in his book. At least their session hadn’t been a complete waste.

• • • •

ERIC WAS EAGER TO GET home that evening and work on his book. Patricia’s story had inspired him. He let himself into his small, modern apartment, poured a glass of wine, and sat down to write. He sat by his floor-to-ceiling window, enjoying the company of the city lights. The evening skyline was a mix of modern skyscrapers and smaller, historic buildings.

He could’ve easily bought a house in the suburbs with more space and a yard. But that felt like it was for someone with a wife, kids, and a dog. Not that he would’ve minded a dog.

So here he was, over forty, living in a small apartment, with his only heir to the world being his psychiatry practice full of self-obsessed, albeit well-paying clients. But that would all change when he published his bestseller.

The words flowed easily that night. But when he reread the pages, he knew it wasn’t the edge he needed. The scenario wasn’t quite right for his book. His writing felt more tangible and had improved after hearing Patricia’s account. But he needed something more.

He shut down his laptop and had a terrifying thought. What if he died tomorrow, before he had written and published his brilliant novel? Before he accomplished his true purpose for being on this earth? It would mean he was no better than Patricia, just a waste of human life.

• • • •

THE WEEK DRAGGED ON and he attended several more pity parties at his office for many different clients. The rush he’d felt from Patricia’s account had already faded; he realized he still had a whole novel to write and was out of ideas. He wanted to craft at least three more murders but had no life experience to draw from.

He was down in the dumps again the next Monday morning when he met with Patricia. She looked the same as always, all her efforts going to her hairdo and none toward her physique. He crossed one of his lanky legs over the other and half-listened to her complain about her husband going out of town for the week on business. His mind drifted back to her account of Charlie’s slaying. It dawned on him that he was jealous she had witnessed her brother’s murder. That was exactly the sort of thing he needed for his book.

He wanted to write a masterpiece so bad he could kill for it. For reasons he couldn’t explain, he examined Patricia from across the room, as a hunter would eye his game. She continued to grumble about her husband’s business trip. This gave him an idea.



“We should do this more often,” Adams said.

Stephenson glanced at his partner as he took the exit for the Auburn Airport. “More often? I don't know how often we can make an arrest by answering a Craigslist ad for items stolen during a home invasion turned double homicide.”

“No, I mean go undercover. Even if it is my day off.” Adams pulled his sweatshirt over his holstered firearm. “I'm good at this.”

“You better be good at this. I'm planning to make a clean arrest and make it home in one piece.”

“Don't worry, we will. What could go wrong when you're with me? I should be the one concerned; you're the rookie here.”

Stephenson smirked. Although he'd been working homicide less than two years, he had proven he could handle himself in a life and death situation.

“Does it seem weird to you that these guys are storing their stolen goods in an airplane hangar? That can't be cheap rent,” Adams said.

“They're not renting it. After Jason told me where to meet him, I checked and found the hangar is registered to Walter Perry, Jason and Bryce's father. He died in 2012.”

“That makes more sense. How convenient for them to inherit such a large storage space when they make their living burglarizing homes.”

Stephenson turned the unmarked vehicle into the airport and slowly headed in the direction of the hangars. As they got closer, he spotted the two brothers standing in front of a T-hangar halfway down the row.

Stephenson recognized Jason and Bryce Perry, both convicted felons who'd been the prime suspects in a series of home invasions over the last few months. When their latest robbery ended in the fatal stabbing of the two homeowners, he and Adams had taken over the investigation. Their deaths were two of the most brutal killings he'd ever seen. He stopped the car a few feet in front of them.

“Let's do this,” Adams said before stepping out.

Jason approached Stephenson as he got out of the car. “I thought you said you couldn't bring anyone to help you? My brother could've stayed home.”

“Tony said he could come last minute.” Stephenson motioned to his partner. “I have a bad back, so I figured I could use the extra help. The TV looked pretty heavy.”

“It's not *that* heavy, but whatever.”

Jason looked back and forth between Adams and Stephenson before opening the door on the far side of the hangar. He and Bryce went in first. Bryce held the door open for Stephenson and Adams to follow.

Jason flicked on the overhead light. Although the hangar was only a third full, the two detectives could see it contained everything they were hoping for. Two large flat screens leaned against one wall. TV stands, a stereo, speakers, all kinds of electronics, home office equipment, and a few pieces of accent furniture were also stored in the large space. It was the final piece of evidence they needed to make their arrest.

“So here's the TV,” Jason said, pointing to the larger of two flat screens.

Adams pulled out his badge when Bryce turned around to face them. Stephenson reached inside his jacket and placed his thumb on the release lever of his gun holster.

“Jason and Bryce Perry, you're under arrest for—”

Seeing Adams' badge, Jason shoved his brother into Stephenson and bolted toward the door. Stephenson pushed Bryce out of his arms. Adams drew his firearm and fixed it on Bryce while Stephenson turned and chased after Jason.

“Get down on the ground and put your hands on your head!” Adams ordered.

Bryce froze, staring at Adams in wide-eyed shock.

“Now!” Adams said.

Keeping his eyes on the detective, Bryce slowly got to his knees and complied.

Stephenson ran out of the hangar in time to see Jason disappear around the corner of the building. Stephenson sprinted after him. When he rounded the corner, he watched Jason turn left down another row of hangars. After turning down the same row, Stephenson picked up speed and started to close the gap.

A small, bright yellow aircraft was parked outside an open hangar and Stephenson realized Jason was headed straight for it. Stephenson watched the pilot manually spin the propeller before the engine roared to life.

Stephenson spotted the gun in Jason's hand as he neared the plane. The pilot threw up his hands when he saw the gun pointed at his head. Stephenson stopped twenty feet from the plane and drew his 9mm. He raised his weapon at Jason, but no longer had a clean shot.

Jason stood behind the pilot with his gun to his head, using him as a human shield.

“Drop the weapon!” Stephenson yelled over the rumble of the plane's engine.

Jason ignored the order and backed up to the door of the plane. With his arm around the pilot's neck and his gun pressed against the side of his head, Jason climbed into the small aircraft and pulled the pilot in after him.

Stephenson aimed his gun at the plane's windshield, but Jason sat behind the pilot who completely blocked his shot. The plane's engine grew louder and the aircraft came directly toward him. Stephenson jumped out of its path as the plane picked up speed.

The aircraft sped toward the taxiway as Stephenson holstered his gun and raced after it. He pushed himself as hard as he could. Despite the plane's increasing speed, Stephenson managed to come within arm's length of the tail.

The plane sped up and the distance between him and the tail widened. When the plane slowed to make the turn onto the taxiway, Stephenson knew this was his only chance to stop it. Already running as fast as he could, Stephenson threw himself forward and dove onto the tail. His hands slipped, but he managed to grab hold of the rudder cable. His feet dragged violently underneath him as the plane veered to the right.

His ankle folded underneath him against the pavement as the plane pulled him across the taxiway, but he was struggling too hard to hold on to the cable to notice. The plane bounced across the grass that separated the taxiway from the runway. Stephenson strained to maintain his grip as the plane swerved onto the adjoining runway.

Out the corner of his eye, he spotted Adams speeding across the taxiway in their unmarked vehicle. Adams drove over the grass and brought the car to a stop in front of the plane. The plane took a sharp turn to avoid colliding with the vehicle and Stephenson cried out as his legs scraped against the pavement.

One of his hands lost its grip as the plane bumped across the grass before continuing back onto the taxiway. The plane took a hard left, causing his other hand to slip off the cable. He rolled to a stop as the plane crashed into a parked four-seat Cessna.

The propeller broke in two upon impact. Half of it landed a few feet from where Stephenson lay on the taxiway. Oblivious to the pain in his ankle, he got to his feet and rushed toward the plane. Adams had gotten out of the car and followed right behind him.

“Are you nuts?” Stephenson heard his partner call out.

He ignored the question and kept running toward the plane.

“You okay?” Adams asked when they approached the back of the plane.

Stephenson drew his firearm before moving to the front of the aircraft. Adams did the same.

“I’m fine.”

Stephenson stood at the door of the plane and aimed his gun at Jason. The pilot was visibly terrified but looked only mildly injured.

“Hands above your head!”

He kept his gun fixed while he waited for Jason to comply. Slowly, Jason raised both hands above his head. Stephenson used his left hand to open the door of the plane.

“Get out of the plane and get down on the ground. Keep your hands on your head.”

Jason complied and Adams handcuffed his hands behind his back.

“Are you hurt?” Stephenson asked the pilot who was breathing heavily in the front seat.

He rubbed his temple. “I hit my head when we crashed, but I think I’m all right.”

“Help is on the way,” Adams said. “I’ve already called for backup and an ambulance. They should be here any minute.”

Adams left Jason lying face down on the ground while he retrieved Jason’s pistol from the back seat. Stephenson helped the pilot out of his light aircraft. After Stephenson made sure he had no visible injuries, the pilot took a seat on the ground away from Jason while they waited for more help to arrive.

Adams ran back to the car to radio their backup unit and let them know they were on the taxiway.

“Are you crazy?” Adams asked after he got back from making the call. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry,” Stephenson said, suddenly aware of the pain in his ankle. “I couldn’t let him get away. Especially not with a hostage. Jason wouldn’t have had any use for the pilot once they landed somewhere.”

They heard the wail of their backup unit’s siren as it pulled into the airport.

“How did you know the plane couldn’t take off with you holding on to the tail?”

Stephenson glanced back at the plane before turning to his partner. “I didn’t.”



Stephenson's phone vibrated in his pocket as he stepped outside the boutique, family-owned jewelry store ten minutes east of downtown Seattle. He saw it was Adams and continued walking down the busy street to his car.

"Hey. How'd it go?"

"I just finished booking them. They'll have their first court date tomorrow. What did your x-rays show?"

"A couple bruised ribs and a sprained ankle."

"I'm surprised it wasn't worse. What did the sergeant say?"

"That he's glad I wasn't killed and to never do anything that dangerous again. But he understands my desperation to catch Jason and keep him from killing the pilot. He didn't say so, but I'm sure he would've done the same thing."

"You're lucky McKinnon is the only person in the department who's crazier than you when it comes to catching a killer. How long are you off for?"

"I'm hoping only a week. I'll see the doctor on Friday about coming back to work."

"Get some rest. I know you probably won't, but take more time off if you need to. Are you home now?"

Stephenson looked down at the small bag he carried from the jewelry store. "Actually, I had an errand to run."

"An errand? After you nearly died? Please tell me you're joking."

"I didn't nearly die. And no, I'm not joking."

"You're unbelievable."

Stephenson pictured his partner shaking his head on the other end of the call.

"Must've been an important errand," Adams added.

"It was."

"Well, I'm definitely not running any errands on my way home. I'm exhausted from watching you in action today."

Stephenson smiled. "Next time I'll let you chase the runner."

"There's just one problem with that."

"What?" Stephenson opened the door to his car.

"I don't like to run."

He let out a short laugh. "That's what I thought."





Eric stayed up practically all night thinking of how he would kill Patricia. By the next evening, he had a plan. He'd done an incredible amount of research in the last twenty-four hours and felt certain he could pull off her murder without a hitch. Or a trace. Her husband's business trip was short, only two days. He'd be flying out of Sea-Tac on a red-eye to New York tomorrow night, and he planned to kill her right after he left.

He remembered Patricia telling him the conference her husband was speaking at paid for him to park at the airport, so she didn't have to drop him or pick him up. Eric would make sure her time of death was right after her husband left for the airport so he'd be the prime suspect. Or, at least, he would be after Eric sent the police Patricia's medical record that he'd doctored up to incriminate him.

He checked his mailbox first thing when he got to his apartment building and was ecstatic to find his lock-picking kit had arrived. How he loved living in a world with overnight shipping.

Once inside his apartment, he was filled with a nervous excitement. He gathered everything he would need for tomorrow night. He'd have to time it perfectly to ensure her husband went down for the crime. At least he would no longer have to live with Patricia. He was about to do the man a favor. This made him smile.

He made a neat little pile on his dining table with his leather gloves, lock-picking kit, and a black baseball cap. He couldn't risk forgetting something. A gun would have been easier. But, being from Australia, he had always despised Americans for their overuse of guns. He shivered at the thought. Guns just seemed so...violent.

He spent the rest of the evening going over every detail he'd preplanned in his head. Finally, he headed for bed, assured his plan was foolproof, if not ingenious. All this research and planning gave him a greater respect for murderers. At least, those who got away with it. Getting away with murder was no small accomplishment.

He climbed into bed with a book to calm his nerves. It was a romance, which wasn't his usual genre, but he needed something to relax him. It was also a *New York Times* bestseller, and he figured it wouldn't hurt to check out his competition.

The book was written by a bloke from the Pacific Northwest, the story taking place in Seattle. The author's name was familiar to him even though he'd never read any of his other novels. One of his patients must've mentioned him.

He snapped the book closed after only ten minutes upon reading the line: *Winter came and went*.

Winter never came and went in Seattle. It lingered and stayed way beyond its welcome until it seemed it would never end. By mid-February, the entire outside world looked to have turned a shade of gray. Life was sucked dry of color. Finally, when it felt like there was nothing left to live for, a tiny patch of sun would peek through the clouds just long enough to give one hope that spring was, although late, on its way.

No wonder he made so much money as a psychiatrist. Over the nearly twenty years he'd lived in Seattle, he'd heard several people say they didn't mind the weather. This never made any sense to him. Winter in Seattle was akin to watching a Renee Zellweger movie. The ending never came soon enough.

He turned out the lights, the book spoiling any further appetite for reading. He'd no sooner rested his head against his pillow when he felt a steady, rhythmic vibration in his head. He knew instantly what it was. The drumming. It was even louder than usual. He tried to ignore it, but he could feel it

resonate in his bones. He needed to rest; he couldn't afford to be disturbed. He had a murder to pull off tomorrow. And not just pull off, but get away with. But only if he kept a clear head.

He'd tolerated the all-too-frequent noise coming from his neighboring apartment ever since the mediocre musician had moved in two months before. This was only because he was a night owl and the drumming always quit before he went to bed.

The drumming stopped. But who knew for how long, and he couldn't risk not being at his best tomorrow. He threw back his comforter, walked into the hall of his building, and knocked on the drummer's door. He waited for a minute and was about to knock again when the door opened.

There stood his twenty-something, good-for-nothing neighbor. His curly, shoulder-length hair looked its usual mess. He was dressed in sweats and a worn-out t-shirt.

The drummer seemed to be home at all hours of the day and he'd never seen him wear anything nicer than what he wore right now. He'd wondered on occasion how the drummer could afford to live in such an expensive building in the heart of downtown and had concluded his parents must be footing the bill.

"Hiya neighbor." He smiled. Eric didn't.

*Who says that?* he wondered. He realized the answer to his question was staring him in the face, grinning like an idiot while showing off his perfectly straight teeth.

He was glad he'd never had children. Imagine spending all that money on orthodontics only to have them grow up to be nothing more than an unemployed, semi-talented drummer who annoyed the other residents in his apartment building.

"Hi," he said. "I came to ask if you could stop drumming for the night, given the time and the fact that this is an apartment building."

His neighbor ran a hand through his hair. "Oh. Sure, man. No problem. Sorry."

He hadn't expected him to be so agreeable. He'd already planned on aggressively convincing him to be quiet. But apparently there was nothing more to be said.

"Thank you." He walked back to his room, perplexed by the obnoxious drummer having been so polite.

He lay his head back on his pillow and reveled in the quiet. Would he really be capable of murder tomorrow? It was a silly question to ask himself because he already knew the answer. He was, and had always been, capable. In retrospect, he'd always carried a grudge for the squeamish and weak because he had the ability to do whatever necessary to fulfill his destiny. No matter what. And killing Patricia was the only way to take his writing to the next level.

After tomorrow, he would never be the same. He could never take it back or erase it from his memory. He wondered how his life might have been different if he'd never come to America. There were some things he missed about Australia, like decent people. But he had grown accustomed to life in America, even preferred it. It was now his home.

When his excitement dissipated enough for him to fall asleep, he dreamt of Charlie.



Eric couldn't stop daydreaming about killing Patricia the next day as he suffered through listening to all the pathetic problems of his patients. He envisioned her lying on her bathroom floor, her eyes bulging and her pale skin with a bluish hue. It grew harder to fake interest in his patients as the day went on. Fortunately, most of them were too consumed with themselves to notice.

Finally, his workday came to an end. The sun had already set when he pulled out of the parking lot right behind his last appointment and tailgated the slow-moving traffic back to his apartment. As soon as he let himself in, he went to his room and changed into running tights, athletic shorts, and a zip-up sweatshirt. This way, if anyone saw him in Patricia's neighborhood, they would just assume he was out for an evening jog.

He tied his running shoes and checked the time on his watch. He'd made better time than he thought getting home, and it was too early for him to go to Patricia's. Her husband's flight wouldn't leave for nearly another four hours.

He wondered how to fill the time until he went to her house and realized he was starving. He'd been so preoccupied with killing Patricia he'd forgotten to eat lunch. He surmised it would be best not to have low blood sugar when pulling off a murder and went into his kitchen to make a sandwich.

He sat down at his dining table next to his killing supplies. It surprised him how much he enjoyed his ham and cheese on whole wheat. No condiments. That was how people got fat. He was nervous, yes, but not too nervous to enjoy a good sandwich. The next half hour passed slowly, and he gathered the pile off the table. It would be better to be ahead of schedule than behind.

He used his free hand to wipe the crumbs off the table, take his plate into the kitchen, and load it into the dishwasher before leaving. He hated coming home to a mess.

Avoiding traffic cameras on the way to Patricia's Madison Park home took longer than he planned. He didn't put her address into his GPS in the unlikely event he became a suspect, but he'd found it on a map earlier and had a good idea of where he was headed.

He found McGilvra and turned onto it. He slowed when he saw 3890, counting aloud until the street number reached 3898. He made sure there were no other cars on the street and stopped in front of the two-story home.

Although it was dark, he could tell the front yard was immaculately landscaped. Much more than he would've expected, knowing Patricia. He couldn't imagine Patricia wearing gardening gloves in less-than-ideal weather pruning the bushes or weeding the lawn. Either her husband oversaw the yardwork, or they paid to have it maintained.

Blue lights flashed from inside a front room window. Just as expected, Patricia was home watching TV. He turned his car around at the end of her cul de sac and parked on an unlit part of the street a few blocks away. He checked the time on his phone before slipping it back into his pocket. Patricia's husband's flight would depart in just over two hours. It would take him about forty-five minutes to get to the airport, so Patricia should be all alone.

It dawned on him as he got out of his car that he should've come earlier and watched for Patricia's husband to leave the house. That way, he could've killed her almost immediately after his departure. *Oh well*, he thought, *by the time someone found her body, her time of death would be only an estimation anyway. An hour or so shouldn't make that big a difference.*

He felt his sweatshirt pocket for his lock-picking kit and gloves. Satisfied he had both, he got out of his car and zipped his keys into his shorts. He slipped on the gloves, assuring himself no one

would find them odd in this weather.

His blood pumped with excitement as he jogged down the quiet street in the freezing cold. By the time he reached Patricia's, the ache in his ears and the burn in his throat from the cold reminded him of why he did indoor yoga to keep in shape. He stopped in her driveway, seeing his breath as it escaped his lungs.

The dimly-lit front yard made it easy to approach her fence. He reached over the wood structure and undid the gate latch. His pulse quickened as he trod softly along the gravel on the side of the house.

This was the first time, in all his preparation, that he stopped to wonder if she had a dog. He moved slowly, on his guard against a beast that might jump out and attack him. But the yard remained quiet. Upon reaching her back door without having his plan ruined by some stupid mutt, he felt himself relax. He chided himself for worrying; Patricia was far too lazy to take care of a dog.

He tried the door and was glad to find it locked. It would've been a shame to not use his lock-picking kit when he'd come so prepared. He pulled out his tools and started to pick the lock. It wasn't quite as easy as the guy had made it look on YouTube. But after a minute, he heard the sweet click of the lock come free.

He entered a small, narrow room and quietly closed the door behind him. He listened for a security alarm, but the house was quiet except for the sound of the TV playing down the hall. He knew Patricia had an alarm system, but she'd told him in one of their sessions that she never set the alarm until she went to bed. So far, so good. The door at the end of the room was open to the hall. The hall was dark except for the flickering blue light from the TV.

He moved toward the door, his running shoes sticking to the linoleum floor. He could make out a washer and dryer against the wall and realized he was in the laundry room. Fortunately, the sound from the TV muffled his footsteps.

He peered out into the hall, making sure it was empty before he stepped out. The light from the TV illuminated the doorway at the end of the hall, which looked to open to a large living area. He paused in the hallway and listened. It sounded like a sitcom and when laughter from a studio audience sounded through the speakers, he heard Patricia let out a deep chuckle. Although he despised her, he was happy for her to have one last laugh. If she only knew what he had in store for her.

He turned and moved in the opposite direction down the hall. He needed to find her bedroom. The other end of the hall opened to an entryway and stairwell. A light shone from above the stairs, and he decided to try upstairs for her room.

He looked at the framed photos that lined the wall as he ascended the carpeted staircase. He was about halfway up when he realized Patricia wasn't in any of them. In fact, the two people who were pictured in most of the photos were a woman in her forties and her teenage daughter.

Patricia didn't have any children. It was the one thing he liked about her. His phone chimed to the sound of his reminder alarm. He scrambled for the phone in his pocket, cursing himself for not putting it on silent. He held up his phone and fumbled to silence it. The words, *Reminder: Kill Patricia* lit up his screen.

He cursed again at his phone when he caught movement at the top of the stairs out the corner of his eyes. He recognized the skinny teenage girl from the photographs standing at the top of the stairwell. Her curly brown hair came down to her waist, and, despite it being below freezing outside, she wore only a spaghetti-strap tank top and very short shorts.

Her eyes widened upon seeing him, and she let out a high-pitched scream as he turned and ran down the stairs. Obviously, somehow, he had gotten the wrong address. He immediately blamed

Patricia. *Had she moved and not told him?*

The girl was still screaming when he reached the bottom of the stairwell. He ran toward the front door when he heard his phone skid across the tiled entry.

“Crikey.”

When he stepped forward to pick it up he saw a woman running toward him from down the hall. He recognized her short, dark hair from the family photographs. He swiped his phone off the floor just as she grabbed a vase off the entry way table and threw it at his head. He dove to the side to avoid the vase. The porcelain shattered as it hit the floor next to him. The girl continued to scream at the top of the stairs.

The woman seemed to be looking for something else to throw at him as he stood. He put both hands in the air to try and calm her down.

“It's okay. I was just leaving,” he said, moving toward the front door.

The woman seemed unassured and charged him. Fortunately, the woman was petite. He waited for her to get close and grabbed ahold of her forearm before shoving her onto the floor. The woman cried out in pain and struggled to get up while he made a move for the front door.

To his relief, the door was unlocked and swung open when he pulled. He ran across their front lawn. He could still hear the girl screaming when he reached the front sidewalk. He continued running until he reached his car. He waited to turn on his headlights until he had finally fled their neighborhood.

Eric caught his breath and tried to clear his head on the drive home. It was fortunate he'd been wearing the baseball cap. They shouldn't be able to give a very good description. But how had he gotten the wrong address?

“Dammit, Patricia!” he yelled.

His shout cut through the silence of his small sedan. He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, inadvertently honking the horn and making himself jump. “Dammit!”



Although last night had been a terrible blow to Eric's ego as a killer, he wasn't going to let one small slip keep him from carrying out his master plan. He just needed to regroup. He would count last night's mishap as a learning experience.

He also realized how he'd managed to show up at the wrong address. And it wasn't even Patricia's fault. In his excitement, he had turned onto McGilvra Boulevard East instead of East McGilvra Street. Who knew there could be two streets named McGilvra in the same neighborhood? It was an honest mistake.

He'd come home last night and had a meeting with himself over a large glass of red. He decided he could still kill Patricia in the exact way he'd planned, only he would have to do it tomorrow night, just before her husband came home. He realized it would be even better for him to discover her body and be at the scene when the police showed up. They would suspect him immediately.

He just needed to iron out a few more details before tomorrow night. He couldn't afford any more mistakes.

In the meantime, it was business as usual. He did his best to appear interested in his other self-centered, needy clients as the day went on while his mind focused on how to kill Patricia...and get away with it.

"My mother was an amazing woman. She won three Olympic gold medals for synchronized swimming before she went into politics. She served as the Ambassador to the United Nations for four years."

He looked up from his notepad to his teary client sitting across from him. Susan was in her late forties, and, if he remembered right, had just lost her mother to cancer. She paused from whatever she'd been saying for the last ten minutes and her eyes brimmed with tears. He handed her a tissue box, which she accepted.

"Take your time," he said. *I charge by the hour*, he thought.

Three more patients and many sob stories later, he was, at last, done for the day. His blonde, overly-bubbly secretary poked her head into Eric's office after his last appointment had left.

"I wanted to make sure it was still okay that I take Wednesday off next week?"

"For my birthday?" she added, seeing the blank expression on his face.

He vaguely remembered her asking him about it a while back. "Umm...sure. That should still be fine. You arranged for a temp to fill in for the day?"

"Yes. Did you need me to do anything else before I go?" she asked with a smile.

She was always smiling. Why, he could never be sure. She was what Australians would call *a few 'roos short in the top paddock*, but she was pleasant and always looked nice. In the eight months she'd worked for him, she'd always showed up on time and was competent enough to get the job done. He didn't need her to be a rocket scientist.

"Actually, yes. Would you mind smiling at me just a little bit less? You always act like there's so much to be happy about. It makes me feel like a rotten human being."

"Are you asking me out?" She beamed at him, as though he'd be thrilled by her discovery of his secret motives.

He was dumbfounded. She had to be kidding.

"No," he said.



She made no effort to hide her disappointment, and he realized she'd been totally serious. Hopeful even. She looked as though he had crushed her. He couldn't take the way she was looking at him.

"I mean, yes," he heard himself say. "I was."

Her depression quickly changed to giddy excitement. She smiled wide.

"I've been wondering how long it would take you to finally ask."

As if there had been anything between us? he wondered, perplexed.

"So, when?"

"When what?" he asked.

"When do you want to go out?"

"Oh. Right. Umm..." He wanted to say he was in the middle of planning a murder but figured that probably wasn't a good idea. Even though she would probably think he was being hilarious.

"How about tonight?" She looked gratified, like she'd done him a favor by offering to give him exactly what he wanted. Only he didn't want it at all.

"Umm..." He cursed himself for not being able to think of an excuse. He had nothing. "Sure."

She practically jumped in the air.

"Great! I'm starving, I'll just grab my purse. Do you mind driving? I know this amazing little sushi place downtown. You like sushi, right? You're going to love it. Their sake is the best. I'll just be two secs."

In a blur of movement, she turned to fetch her purse, sending her blonde curls swinging through the air. Apparently, both of her questions were rhetorical.

He sighed. This was not what he had planned for the evening. He wasn't even sure how he had gotten himself into this mess. He couldn't let himself be outsmarted by his twenty-two-year-old secretary and get behind in planning Patricia's murder. He was on a schedule. He would just have to tell her the sushi didn't agree with him and hurry home right after dinner.

No sooner had he gathered his thoughts when she reappeared in his doorway. She brushed her blonde fringe out of her eyes.

"Ready!" she announced with glee.

"Great."



Stephenson took a swig from his beer as he flipped the steaks one last time. It had taken longer than usual to barbecue them in the forty-degree weather, but they finally looked about perfect. Not wanting them to be overdone, he used his metal tongs to remove them from the grill. He turned off the barbecue before lifting the plate of meat and heading inside his townhouse through the sliding door.

Serena was already seated at his kitchen table but was too engrossed in her phone to look up when he came inside. Her shiny, dark hair framed her face as she looked down, fixated by her screen.

After making them each a plate with salad and a baked potato to go with their steaks, he joined her at the table.

“I hope you can put that down while we eat,” he said.

She looked across at him through her long, false lashes.

“Of course I can.”

She slid the phone away from her plate.

“You know you didn’t have to cook for me. I could’ve met you somewhere for dinner.”

Stephenson cut into his steak.

“I thought it would be nice since I had the day off. We always go out.”

“You had the day off because you almost got yourself killed this weekend. I still can’t believe you did that.” She reached her hand across the table and grabbed hold of his. “But I’m glad you’re okay. And thank you. This is nice.”

He took another drink from his beer.

“You’re welcome. I might not be in good enough shape to chase murderers around, but I’m not too beat up to cook you dinner.”

“So, what’d you do today?”

“I had to give my medical leave form to Sergeant McKinnon. Then I met with a—”

Serena’s ringtone blared atop the table. “Sorry,” she said before picking it up. “Hi, can I call you back later?”

Stephenson took a bite of his steak.

“No, I just can’t talk right now,” Serena said. “I’m having dinner with Blake.”

He looked across the table at her. She seemed to be looking anywhere but back at him.

“I told you about him,” she continued. “Anyway, I have to go. I’ll give you a call back later tonight.”

“Who was that?” Stephenson asked after she placed the phone back down on the table.

She took a stab of her salad. “Oh, just another realtor from my firm. He wants to talk about doing a joint listing.”

“You told him about me, huh?”

She looked up defensively, then saw he was smiling.

“So, what do you want to do for your birthday?” he asked.

“I’ve got a bunch of listings to show.”

“On Saturday?”

“That’s when most people are available to look. I’ve told you this.”

“I was just hoping we could do something fun for your birthday.”

Her phone went off again. She checked the screen.

“Sorry, it’s a client. I have to take it.”

She got up from the table to answer it. Stephenson finished his dinner alone while she took the call in his living room.

“They want me to do a showing tonight,” she said, coming back into the kitchen as he rinsed his plate.

“What time?”

“I need to leave now.”

“Seriously? You’re not even going to eat?”

“I’m sorry. It’s my first listing over a million. I need to show the firm I’m ready to sell high-end properties.” She came toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Thanks for cooking for me, I’m sure it’s delicious.” She lifted her head and kissed him softly. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She turned and grabbed her purse off the table. He leaned against the counter as she rushed out the door. He looked across at her untouched plate while he finished his beer.



They hit rush hour traffic on the way to the restaurant, and it took another twenty minutes to find a parking spot downtown. When they finally got to the modern sushi house, the place was packed. Eric held the door open for his secretary to enter first, which she appeared to take as a sign of his undying love. As soon as he stepped inside, he was accosted by potted bamboo plants slapping him in the face.

The few seats in the small entry area were already filled with people waiting for a table. The music that played reminded him of something from *Lost In Translation*. He put his name in for a table for two and was told by the hostess it would be at least a thirty-minute wait. *Thirty-minutes!* He didn't have thirty-minutes. He needed to get back to planning Patricia's murder so he could return to writing a bestseller. He couldn't believe he had agreed to this.

"You're welcome to wait at the bar if you like." She pointed behind her, where there were a few barstools still open.

"That sounds great," his secretary chimed in.

They walked together toward the bar. He realized he didn't even know her name. That could be awkward. He'd obviously known it at one point, like when he had hired her, but somewhere between then and the last eight months she'd worked for him, it must've slipped his mind. Probably because he didn't care.

"Do you like sake?" she asked after they'd taken seats at the white marble bar.

He did, but he needed to stay focused so he could continue with his planning and research after dinner. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes. Although, one drink probably wouldn't hurt.

"I do. You?"

"Love it."

His eyes followed the sound of the kitchen doors opening to the right of the bar. He watched a chef carry a huge tray of raw fish and veggies out to a table for a large group. He wore a Japanese-style chef hat, white with red trim and a flat top.

"What can I get for you two?"

He turned his attention to the bartender behind the counter. He looked like he was probably in college.

"We'll have two sakes, whatever's your best seller."

"You got it."

Eric looked over at his secretary. She stared at him while biting her lip and twirling a small piece of her hair. She was apparently enthralled with his ability to order nothing but the best. He noticed she had taken off the sweater she had worn all day at the office. Her low-cut, pink floral blouse showed off her large breasts.

She looked at him with her green eyes, and he appreciated her beauty for the first time. She had a slender nose, average-size lips, and baby-smooth skin that screamed of youth. She was a pretty girl but not his taste. Too dumb.

He came to terms with the fact he would not be able to think about Patricia's death until their dinner date was over. He forced himself to turn his attention toward his secretary, hoping to get through the dinner as quickly and as painlessly as possible.

"Have I ever told you I love your accent?"

He was about to reply when she continued. It seemed it was another rhetorical question.

“Where are you from again?”

She paused this time, and he assumed this one he was supposed to answer.

“Australia.”

“That's right, I remember you saying that before. Isn't that where Arnold Schwarzwahatever is from?”

“I think that would be Austria.”

“Oh.” She looked confused. “So, anyways....”

She rambled on about how she couldn't believe it took him so long to ask her out when she'd known he'd had a thing for her since pretty much the beginning. She clearly had a wild imagination. She was still talking when they finished their sakes, and he wasn't sure how he could survive listening to her for the next hour. She changed the subject to her hair while he signaled the bartender for two more drinks. He felt himself relax after downing the second one.

A waitress called his name for their table and he practically jumped for joy out of his barstool.

His secretary giggled at his reaction. “You must be starving!”

*Something like that.* “Yes.” He'd had enough sake that he smiled back at her as they followed the waitress to their table.

She seated them at a small table against the wall. The seat next to the wall was a cushioned booth and across from it was a chair. Eric extended his arm to offer his secretary the booth. She beamed at him before sitting down. His head had cleared a little from the sake by the time he took his seat. They needed to get the show on the road so he could get back to business.

“You like California rolls?” he asked his secretary before the waitress walked away.

“Love them.”

*Of course she did.* “We'll start with some California rolls.”

“Anything to drink?” the waitress asked.

His secretary looked eager for another drink, and he figured it would be just as easy to ditch her if she was drunk, even if he had to order an Uber to drive her home.

“We'll have a bottle of your best sake.”

The waitress nodded and tried unsuccessfully to suppress her smile surfacing, presumably in hope of a big tip.

*We'll see about that,* he responded in silence. He looked over the menu as he inadvertently pictured himself standing behind Patricia with his hands around her throat.

“So....” His secretary said from across the table, apparently her best attempt at a conversation starter.

*Oh, right. You again.* “So.” He set down his menu. “You know what you want for dinner?”

“You want to share something?”

*Not really,* but to speed things along, he agreed.

“How about the halibut?”

“Sure.” *Whatever.*

He was staring at the pastel painting of over-fed tangerine and white coy swimming in a lily pad-infested pond that hung on the wall behind his date when the waitress came back with their sake and California rolls. Quick service. He liked it. He wasted no time in giving her their dinner order.

“Great. Won't be too long,” she said.

Maybe she would get that big tip after all. He poured his secretary a large glass of sake and filled his only half full.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” she asked hopefully.

"I'm driving."

"Oh, right." She laughed before taking a big swig of her sake.

She finished off her glass and had already halfway downed another when their food arrived. Thankfully it hadn't taken too long. His secretary's words started to slur as they ate.

She was in no shape to drive home from his office, where they had left her car. And this so-called date would be over right after dinner. He had work to do. Which reminded him, he was supposed to come down with food poisoning.

He waited until they had finished eating. Her sake glass was empty again, and he refilled it with what remained in the bottle.

"So, what made you decide to become a psychiatrist?"

He honestly didn't know and couldn't come up with one good reason. He wiped fake sweat from his brow. "Would you excuse me?"

"Sure, are you okay?"

"I think the sushi may have not agreed with me," he said while holding his stomach before scurrying away to the loo.

He took his time taking a leak and washed his hands for a full two minutes. He checked his over-bleached teeth for seaweed and splashed his face with water. He partially towel dried his face but made sure his hairline stayed wet when he left the bathroom. It was time to tell what's-her-face goodnight.

He was glad to see her sake glass was empty when he got back to their table. The drunker she was, the easier this should be.

"You don't look so good."

"I don't feel so good."

He caught the attention of the waitress as she walked by. "Can we get the check please?"

"Got it right here." She handed him a black leather booklet.

"Thank you."

Nothing like a waitress who already knows what you need. He slipped his Visa into the plastic cardholder and handed the booklet back to her.

"I'll be right back," she said.

His secretary looked either worried for him or depressed their evening was ending early. Maybe both.

"I'm probably going to be sick again and won't be able to drive you back to the office. Can I get you an Uber?"

"No. I—" She swallowed hard. She looked terrified, and he couldn't understand why.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"Um...it's just that I can't go home tonight."

"Why not?"

"I told my boyfriend I was spending the night at my sister's. And I can't go to my sister's because she's out of town and I don't have a key."

"You have a boyfriend?"

She reached across the table and put her hand on top of his, knocking over her empty sake glass in the process. "I know you're thinking I'm a horrible person, but it's not what it seems. I do have a boyfriend, but he's really controlling and I'm going to leave him. I've been planning to do it for a while, I just haven't found a way to tell him yet. Anyway, I didn't want to pass up the opportunity when you asked me out, so I told him I was spending the night at my sister's place."



“Maybe you should just tell him the truth.” It seemed simple enough.

“You don't understand. He's—” she trailed off, looking frightened.

“Has he ever hurt you?”

“No, no, it's not like that.” She shook her head in an overly eager effort to convince him. She squeezed his hand. “But please, let me stay with you. I can't go home tonight.”

She pulled her hand away when their waitress came back but kept staring intently into his eyes.

“Have a great night you guys,” the waitress said after handing him back his card.

He ignored her and stared back at his busty blonde secretary. He wasn't sure he believed her boyfriend had never hurt her. She looked genuinely scared. He'd seen enough cases of domestic abuse over his career to know, due to fear or denial, victims were often not forthcoming about their abusers. And, with how much she'd had to drink, he doubted this was an act. It wasn't like him to feel compassion, but there was something about the way she looked at him with those big green eyes that he just couldn't tell her no.

“All right, you can sleep on my hide-a-bed.”

“Thank you.”

He could swear he saw her choke back tears as she leaned back against the booth and pulled her hand away from his. He stood from the table and held out his hand to help her up.

“Let's go.”



“Your apartment's amazing.”

Eric's secretary clutched her sweater to her chest as she turned to admire his living room.

As soon as he'd let her in, he quickly snatched his leather gloves and lock-picking kit off the table. He held them tightly in his hand just barely behind his back as to not look like he was hiding something.

“Can I get you something to drink?” He supposed even though his guest was a pain in his ass, keeping him from planning the murder that would shape his destiny by releasing his creative genius, he could still be a proper host. He also found her endearing despite her flaws.

“Yes, thank you.”

She stepped forward to admire his expansive bookshelves.

“I've got water, wine, or vodka.” He also had coffee, but he wanted her to go to sleep so he could get on with things.

She smiled at the options. “Wine would be great, but I can get it myself since you're not feeling well.”

*Oh, right.* He was sick. “Yes, help yourself. The wine fridge is to the right of the sink.”

“Thanks.”

He went to the linen closet, pulled out a blanket and pillow for the hide-a-bed, and set them on the coffee table. “The couch folds out into a bed. You okay to do it yourself?”

“Sure, I'll be fine.” She had already made her way into the kitchen.

This went easier than he had thought. He was free at last to plan Patricia's demise. He just needed his laptop.

“Well, I'm going to try and get some rest. You probably won't see me for the rest of the night.”

“Thank you for letting me stay.”

“It's no problem.”

He grabbed his laptop off his desk and unplugged it from the wall. He noticed his secretary giving him a wondering look as he carried it into his room, but she didn't say anything. Probably because of his overreaching hospitality.

He waited until after two to sneak out of his room for a glass of water. His secretary was out cold on the couch. She hadn't even bothered unfolding it into the hide-a-bed. Her empty wine glass sat on the floor next to her. He picked up the glass and admired her for a moment, watching her sleep. Her chest moved up and down beneath the throw blanket with each of her even breaths. Her blonde hair lay sprawled out across the pillow.

He found himself wishing she were more of an intellectual. Maybe then, there could be something between them. Although, his true reason for not falling head over heels wasn't because of her IQ, but because no one would ever compare to his wife. Or rather, his ex-wife.

He pictured her as if their last day together was only yesterday. Her hair was neither brown nor blonde. It was a unique shade of honey somewhere in between. She was a natural beauty and Australian through and through. She shared many of the same magnificent qualities of her beloved country. He could never love another the way he loved her.

He sighed and continued to the kitchen to get his glass of water before returning to his room to iron out the final details of Patricia's death.

HE AWOKE TO THE SMELL of coffee and nearly jumped out of bed at the sight of his secretary standing over him, holding a steaming mug in her hands.

“Crikey!”

She giggled. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I made coffee. Are you feeling better?”

He let out a breath and brought his hand to his forehead. There was no way it could be morning already. He had stayed up until after three going over every detail of his perfect plan for Patricia’s murder, making sure he had thought of everything. There could be no room for error. He had fallen asleep after he’d finally assured himself his plan was foolproof.

His bedside clock read seven fifteen. He sat up and accepted the coffee. “A little.”

She was wearing a gray Seattle Mariners t-shirt that he recognized as his own. His shirt came down to the top of her bare thighs. It was obvious from the shape of her nipples protruding through the thin cotton that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Her normally smooth blonde hair had a kink on each side from where she had slept on it. She looked adorable. Beautiful, even.

She pulled at the bottom of the shirt. “I hope you don’t mind; I got this from a pile of clean clothes in your laundry.”

“How did you know they were clean?”

She smirked. “Because no one would fold their dirty clothes like that.”

Except for him.

“You up for going to work today?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m feeling much better.”

“Good. Mind if I use your shower?”

“Not at all. Help yourself.”

“Great.” She turned and he took a sip from his mug.

“This is good. You know how to make a cup of coffee.”

She flashed him a cheeky, American smile. “I know.”

• • • •

IT WAS A NORMAL DAY apart from the few times he caught his secretary eyeing him as if they’d had some top-secret love affair last night. But, instead of being annoyed, he found it endearing.

They walked out of the office together after his last patient of the day. A light, wet snow was falling when she turned to him before getting into her car.

The sun had just disappeared below the horizon, and he admired the way the street lamp highlighted the contour of her round cheekbones.

“I had fun last night. Thanks for letting me crash at your place.”

“Me too,” he said as she got in.

He’d wondered about her boyfriend a few times throughout the day. *What had he done to her that she was so afraid to go home last night?* He opened his mouth to ask her if she was sure it safe for her to go home, but he was too late.

She gave him a wave before pulling out of the office parking lot, and he assured himself she would be fine. He climbed into the heated seat of his BMW and suppressed a smile. There was no denying how he felt. Contrary to his best intentions, he liked her.



He counted his blessings for going to the wrong house on Wednesday night. He realized there was something he'd forgotten to consider. An alibi.

He knew there were security cameras in the building's parking garage, but whether they covered every parking space he wasn't sure. He had located two cameras in the parking area, but it seemed there were a few parking spots near the entrance that were not covered by the cameras.

Before work that morning, he called down to his building's apartment manager. A woman answered on the second ring.

"Yes, good morning," he said. "My car was parked in the underground parking last night and appears to have gotten scratched by another vehicle. I was wondering if there might be security footage that could show what happened?"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Yes, we do have security cameras that cover almost all the parking garage. Do you know what parking spot you were in?"

"42A."

"Okay, let me just double check if we would have footage of that area."

"Thank you." Eric waited on the line for a couple minutes before she came back on.

"You still there?"

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, our cameras don't reach to that parking spot. I'm so sorry. There are only about four spots outside of our cameras' view, and 42A happens to be one of them."

Just as he had thought. "What about at the entrance? Can you see what cars came and left overnight?"

"No, I'm sorry. Our only cameras are inside the parking garage; we don't have anything at the entrance."

"Well, that's disappointing."

"Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

"Yeah, me too," he said before hanging up.

*Perfect.* That was all he needed to know before he carried out his plan. Luckily, 42A was open when he got home from work. Now all he had to do was create an alibi and he would be off to kill Patricia.

• • • •

DRESSED IN HIS BRIGHTEST-colored flannel pajamas, Eric knocked hard on his neighbor's door. He needed him to remember this.

When he didn't answer after about five seconds, Eric knocked even louder. He heard footsteps heading toward the door from inside the apartment. He knocked three more times before the door flew open.

"What's your problem, man? You didn't even give me a chance to come to the door."

His neighbor looked his usual self, liked he'd just rolled out of bed. Eric wasn't sure, but it looked like his neighbor was wearing the same clothes as the last time he'd seen him.

"My problem is you."

To this, his eyes narrowed and a look of confusion washed over his face.

“I’ve got a busy day tomorrow, and I’ll be turning in early. So, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t planning on doing any obnoxious drumming this evening. I need a good night’s sleep.”

“I’m not gonna do any drumming. I realize it’s getting a little late for that.”

Eric couldn’t leave until he made sure this conversation would stick in his neighbor’s mind.

“Well, I’m not so sure. I remember a few times you seemed to go on a drumming rampage late at night without any regard for the rest of us in the building. I’m surprised no one’s complained.”

Eric knew no one else on their floor would complain. There were only four units on their level. One was currently unoccupied and the other was inhabited by ninety-year-old Betty Jensen. She couldn’t hear a thing.

He opened his mouth to protest, but Eric cut him off. Eric raised the palm of his hand just below his neighbor’s face.

“But I’m not here to argue with you. I just ask that you do me the courtesy of staying off the drums tonight so I can get a good night’s sleep.”

“No problem,” he said. He frowned at him before slamming his door closed.

*Brilliant.* He had irritated him just enough to jog his memory if the cops ever questioned him about his alibi. Now he could go to Patricia’s.

He went back to his apartment to change his clothes. When he walked by his neighbor’s door on his way out, he heard him start to beat on the drums. He smiled at how easily he’d unnerved him. Bastard.





Eric donned his baseball cap and gloves before getting out of his car at the end of Patricia's street. This time, he made sure to leave his phone behind.

With his lock-picking kit safely stowed in his pant pocket, he jogged down the neighborhood street with his head down. He expected his heart to be racing, but it was calm. Steady.

He paused when he reached the end of Patricia's driveway, feeling a sense of déjà vu from two nights earlier. Her front porch light was on, but, aside from that, the house was dark. He could tell her hedges needed trimming, and the plain front lawn could've used some landscaping. This was definitely Patricia's house.

He moved along a tall hedge on the edge of her property and stopped at a wooden fence. Just as he had done two nights previous, he reached his hand over the fence and undid the latch to open the door. He stepped into Patricia's backyard and softly closed the latch behind him.

Not surprisingly, there was no dog waiting to attack him on the other side. Her backyard was even darker than the front of the house. He moved slowly along the house's exterior, careful not to trip on any crap she might've left laying out on the lawn. He made it to the French doors off the back patio and felt into his pocket for his lock-picking kit. His hand slipped in the darkness just as he was about to insert his tool into the lock. He felt the metal instrument scrape against the door handle before he inadvertently jabbed it into the wood door.

He took a deep breath and tried again. This time the tool slid easily into the lock, only the lock didn't budge as easily as it had when he broke into the wrong house. He pulled it out and tried another time, wiggling the tool back and forth. The lock still didn't give, and he worried he might have to devise another way to get inside. He hadn't seen any other doors on the home's main level other than the front, which he hoped to avoid using if possible.

The lock pick finally glided farther into the lock and he heard a click. He tried the handle and felt relief when it turned inside his hand. He pulled on the lock pick to remove it, but it was stuck. He tugged harder to no avail before he wrenched it back and forth with enough force that it came loose.

He tucked the pick back into his pocket. When he twisted the handle again, he realized he had all but dislodged the lock in his effort to remove the pick. Loose bits from the lock rattled inside the doorknob as he slowly opened the door and stepped inside the house.

Eric had intended to break in without a trace, but now he wondered if the cops would be able to deduce that the back-door's lock had been picked. It wasn't as bad as breaking into the wrong house, but it wasn't according to plan.

His eyes had adjusted well to the dark, and he could see that he stood in a breakfast nook off the kitchen. He heard a TV going in the other room. That was good, it would cover the noise of his footsteps. He crept toward the sound of the TV while he kept an eye out for Patricia. As he moved closer to the open doorway, he could see a blue, flashing light shining out into the hall. He paused before leaning his head just enough to see into the room.

He realized he risked exposing his presence much too early by poking his head inside the doorway, but it was too late. He was already exposed. His heartrate increased. He took an inward sigh of relief when he recognized the back of Patricia's gray bob on the sofa.

He judged her for being such a slug that she wasted her life away sitting on the couch, staring at a screen until her mind went numb. Although, he should have been grateful. This was exactly how he had hoped to find her.

He turned to look for her bedroom, where he would wait for her to come to bed. He saw a staircase at the end of the hall and figured it would be a good place to start. He caught himself stopping to look at her wall of family photos when he was halfway up and quickly reproached himself. *What do I care?* he thought.

He entered the room closest to the top of the stairs and could tell, even in the dark, it was the master bedroom. He felt repulsed but not surprised by the unmade bed and pile of dirty clothes on the floor. What an animal.

He found her walk-in closet and stepped inside in search of one of her husband's ties. He felt around in the dark, but with his gloves on it was impossible to find what he needed. *Oh, screw it,* he thought. He flicked on the light to the closet. Patricia was immersed in her TV anyway; she wouldn't notice the light. He just needed to be quick. Her husband's clothes occupied the right side of the closet, and, fortunately, he was much more organized than Patricia.

Unlike her chaotic hodgepodge of clothes on the left, her husband's shirts were hung according to color and shirt type. His shirts went from white to black, t-shirts on one side and dress shirts on the other. Pants were folded neatly on the shelves below. His neckties hung on hangers next to his dress shirts, and he grabbed one before flicking off the light.

He looked around for a better place to hide as his eyes readjusted to the dark and saw she had an en suite bathroom. *Perfect.* He checked his watch. Now for the hard part: he had to wait. From what Patricia had told him in their sessions, she always went to bed by ten. She complained about her husband being a night owl and disturbing her when he finally came to bed after midnight.

He waited behind Patricia's bathroom door with a rush of nervous tension. The minutes passed by about as slowly as Patricia moved toward anything, other than the fridge. He used the time to remind himself to take detailed mental notes on everything about Patricia's murder. Even the way it felt to kill. He had decided to write his novel from the point of view of the serial killer he had crafted in his mind. They say all a writer's characters are a part of themselves, which, he supposed, was probably true.

He suddenly felt the urge not to kill, but to pee. He laid the necktie down on the bathroom counter and untied the drawstring of his joggers. He could see well enough now in the dark that he had no problem aiming into the toilet bowl. He had just released a stream when light flooded the bathroom and Patricia waltzed in. Upon seeing him, she let out a scream. His body involuntarily jerked in her direction before he was able to stop the urine flow, and he trickled piss onto the floor. In a panicked attempt to pull up his pants, his waistband slipped out of his hand. His sweats fell to the floor from the weight of the lock-picking kit in his pocket.

Patricia wore a grandmotherish nightgown, and, after the initial shock of finding him taking a wiz in her en suite bathroom, she looked relieved when she recognized him.

Truly, she couldn't think this was a social call. He supposed his baseball cap didn't exactly say *I'm here to kill you.* But she would be beyond delusional to think he came over to keep her company while her husband was away. He was a good ten years too young for her, in addition to being out of her league. Plus, he couldn't stand her.

He took as big a step toward her as he could with his pants down at his feet and watched her face change to suspicion and then to fear. She screamed again, louder this time, and took a step out of the bathroom. He had planned to strangle her from behind, but, knowing he wouldn't be able to catch her with his pants down, he had to improvise.

He swiped the tie off the counter and used both hands to loop it over the back of her head. Her eyes filled with terror as he pulled it taut across the front of her neck. She scratched and clawed at the

tie as her face turned the color of beetroot. He felt a tinge of nostalgia for his homeland. He would never understand why Americans didn't put pickled beets on their sandwiches.

He hadn't intended on strangling her head-on and didn't like the awkwardness of watching the capillaries burst in her bulging eyeballs as he squeezed the life out of her. He forgot about the details he needed for his book and closed his eyes until she stopped resisting and he felt her weight start to sink to the ground. He loosened his hold on her neck and opened his eyes.

He expected her to fall to the floor but was taken aback to see she was still alive. Patricia's face was now an ugly purple. She gasped for air and placed the back of her hands against the counter to stay on her feet. She looked at him in shock and horror of what he had done before she swung her fist toward his face. It was as if she saw him for who he really was for the first time.

He grabbed hold of her hand before she made contact and twisted it behind her back, forcing her to turn toward the bathroom counter. She let out a weak cry of protest. He grabbed her by the back of her hair and threw her forehead into her bathroom mirror. Patricia groaned. When he pulled her head away, he saw the mirror had cracked as though a baseball had hit it. Before she could react, he flung the tie around her neck once again, only this time he tightened it from the back.

She groped at the necktie and threw her legs back one at a time in an unsuccessful effort to kick him. It didn't take long for him to realize this was no different from strangling her from the front since her asphyxiated face stared back at him in the shattered mirror. He didn't like it any more than he had the first time. He closed his eyes, promising himself that if he ever killed again, he would keep them open.

He pulled the tie as tight as he could and felt the weight of her body as it went limp. He leaned forward, pressing his body against hers to help take some of the weight from his arms. He continued to hold the noose tight around her neck for what felt like an eternity.

Once he was sure she was dead, he opened his eyes. Out of breath, he let her go. He thought her fat corpse would slump forward onto the counter. But, before he could stop it, he watched her body heave to the side. Her skull smacked against the side of the toilet on the way down.

She lay on the tile floor, her swollen face littered with burst capillaries. Blood seeped out from a gash in her forehead where it had collided with the mirror. His breathing slowed. He looked down at the mess of his yellow piss and her dark blood on the pale tile, reminding him of ketchup and mustard on a hot dog. This had not gone at all to plan. And, judging from the color of his urine, he needed to drink more water.

This led him to wonder, *was there DNA in urine?* The fact that he was uncertain made him question his abilities as a doctor. But it had been a long time since medical school and, thank goodness, he didn't ever have to deal with his patients' piss. After a moment's consideration, he decided there probably was. *Drat.* He was going to have to clean this mess up.

He should've been a medical examiner. Then he could've written a crime thriller without needing to kill one of his own patients. He realized his pants were still around his ankles. He pulled up his jockers and cringed as the urine-soaked fabric rubbed against his legs.

“Crikey.”

Keeping his gloves on, he checked under her bathroom cabinet for cleaning supplies. There were none. Of course not. He was about to go in search of some, and, when he thought there was no way this night could've gone more wrong, he heard the sound of the front door close. A man's voice echoed through the house.

“Patricia, I'm home.”



Eric considered his options as he assessed the mess around him. Either he needed to make a quick escape or kill her husband too and make it look like a murder-suicide. He opted for the quick escape. He pulled a few sheets of toilet paper off the roll and wiped his urine spill as best he could, careful not to smear Patricia's blood.

He tossed the paper into the toilet bowl and automatically flushed. He realized the noise this would create as soon as he pulled the lever. Footsteps sounded up the stairs.

The man's voice called out again, but this time it was louder. "Patricia?"

There was no window in the bathroom, so his only route of escape would be out the window beside her bed. Patricia's husband would no doubt see him before he could get away. He would have to kill him.

He pulled at the tie that was still tight around Patricia's neck. He struggled to get his finger in between the tie and her neck since he had looped it through itself to get a better cinch on her neck. Her neck fat sagged over the tie, making it impossible to grip with his gloved hands.

He didn't have time for this. Patricia's husband was probably already at the top of the stairs. He swung open the door to the bathroom cabinet and pulled out her curling iron. He turned off the bathroom lights, ran across the dark room, and dove under Patricia's bed.

No sooner had he tucked under it than the bedroom lights came on. His heart pounded against the carpet as he watched the man's patent leather dress shoes stop in the doorway.

"Patricia?"

Eric gripped each end of the curling iron's electric cord and wrapped them once around the back of his hands. He waited for the feet to move. He thought maybe the man was going to turn back downstairs when they started toward the bed. They didn't slow as they moved past him, and Eric knew he was headed for the bathroom. For this to pass as a murder-suicide, he needed to minimize any signs of a struggle with Patricia's husband. That would probably be easier if he killed him before he saw Patricia.

His feet had almost reached the edge of the bed when Eric stretched out and grasped his ankle just as he started to take a step. Eric yanked it backwards as hard as he could from his awkward angle. He felt the floor shake when the man fell to the ground.

Eric moved fast, crawling over the husband's back until he was within arm's reach of his neck. The man started to flip onto his back, but Eric used his weight to keep him face down to the floor. With one of his knees pressing into the middle of his back, he looped the electrical cord around the front of his neck, crossed his arms, and pulled it taut.

The husband yelled out. Eric pulled harder. His yell turned into a wheeze as Eric compressed his vocal cords. Just like Patricia, he brought his hands to his neck and frantically scratched against his noose. Eric estimated the man had about fifty pounds on him. He was concentrating so hard on strangling him that he was knocked off balance by the sudden roll of the man's body.

Next thing he knew, he was staring at the ceiling with the heavy weight of Patricia's husband on top of him. Eric had slightly loosened his grip on the cord when Patricia's husband knocked him onto his back, but quickly regained his hold when he heard him gasp. The man rolled back and forth on top of him, his weight crushing the air from Eric's lungs. Eric wrapped his legs around the man's middle as best he could to keep him from rolling away. It took all his strength to maintain a tight pull on the

cord. His hands shook from the strain on his muscles as he noticed the man's movements become weaker. He exhaled and forced himself to hold tight for a little longer.

Eric was overwhelmed by the powerful scent of the man's cologne. It was about five times too strong for what was socially acceptable. There was something wrong with a man who wore that much. For a moment, he pitied Patricia. Her husband's body finally went limp, but he didn't let go. He wasn't about to make the same mistake that he did with the man's wife. He counted backward from thirty in his head to distract himself from the burn in his arms and hands. It felt like an eternity until he reached zero. Satisfied Patricia's husband was dead, Eric pushed his fat corpse off him. He moved onto his hands and knees to catch his breath.

He lowered himself onto his elbows and examined the man he had just killed. He had a thick build, in addition to the medium-sized potbelly that was obvious underneath his dark suit. His balding hair was overly-slicked back. He was clean-shaven and wore a large class ring on his right hand. He had even more neck fat than Patricia.

Eric wondered if maybe he had judged Patricia a little too harshly.

The man's face was now the color of merlot, and he decided to have a glass when he got home. Eric wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around the room for a way to rectify the situation. He needed to hang him from something, but the room only had recessed lighting on the ceiling.

He left him on his bedroom floor and stepped out into the hall. He crossed his arms at the top of the staircase and looked at the nineties chandelier that hung over the stairwell. A chain helped support its weight on the electrical socket. *Perfect.*

He went back and grabbed the fat man's lifeless hands to pull him out to the stairwell. He was surprised by the effort it took to drag him. He had a new appreciation for the term *dead weight*. He thought he was in shape from his regular yoga practice but now wondered if he needed to incorporate something more into his daily workout routine. He released him when they reached the top of the stairs and took a deep breath.

Eric looked again at the chandelier and then at the length of the curling iron's electrical cord. He surmised it would be possible to hang him from the chandelier. Possible, but not easy. He was glad he had worn active gear.

He reached down and linked his forearms under the husband's armpits. Eric stood, pulling the dead man with him. He leaned the man's top half over the railing, careful not to let him fall. Once Eric had him propped in a stable position, he looped the electrical cord inside itself around the man's neck and pulled tight against the power inlet.

After checking if it would hold, he grabbed the end of the curling iron and climbed on top of the wood stairwell railing. He stood up slowly, stopping a few times midway to find his balance with his arms held out at his sides. He held tight to the curling iron attached to the man's neck and used the weight of his corpse to help him stay upright.

He realized the cord was a little short to reach the chandelier unless he pulled the corpse forward. Eric carefully pulled on his neck so that his feet were barely touching the floor. If he pulled any farther, he was afraid his body might topple over the staircase.

Now for the tricky part. He now had enough cord, but he couldn't reach the chandelier without falling. He would have to lob it over the top and hope the curling iron caught on the gaudy crystals.

He threw it over the chandelier, but, when he did, he inadvertently jerked the corpse's neck. The curling iron had almost crossed over top the chandelier when the weight of Patricia's husband pulled it down, before it had a chance to snag on anything. Eric watched as the man's body pivoted over the railing and crashed to the hardwood floor near the front door below.

Eric felt himself fall forward and reacted by throwing himself backward. His back landed hard on cheaply padded carpet. He rushed to his feet and leaned over the railing. Patricia's husband lay face down on the floor in his pinstripe suit with the curling iron wrapped around his neck.

That wasn't good. Eric had read enough true crime to know a medical examiner could tell if a body had been moved postmortem, so he couldn't just drag him up the stairs and have another go at hanging him by the chandelier. He'd probably also sustained injuries from the fall. Eric figured he only had one choice.

He climbed back on top of the railing and launched himself toward the chandelier. He only managed to grab it with one hand. The light fixture swayed to the side while he reached for it with his other arm. He had no sooner gotten hold of it with both hands when it detached from the ceiling, bringing Eric and its surrounding drywall down with it.

He felt the air leave his lungs when his back hit the floor. He decided to leave this part out of his novel.

He stayed there for a moment while he regained his breath and waited for a sign that he had broken his back. He wiggled his toes and, once certain he hadn't broken a bone, sat up slowly. He pushed the chandelier off him and onto Patricia's husband. He wound the curling iron securely around it before standing.

He shook himself off from the fall and assessed his work. He moved some of the drywall pieces on top of the dead man and wiped his hands together over his body to rid his gloves of the white powder. He looked up at the hole in the ceiling then down at the dead man again. *This could pass as a suicide.*

He had one more look around before concluding his work here was done. He let himself out the back, the same way he had come. He broke into a jog when he reached the sidewalk in front of the house. The cold night air felt good as he headed back to his car and reflected on the evening.

Although there were a few hang-ups, he thought he pulled off the two murders swimmingly. Especially when he had only planned the one. Not too bad for someone who'd never killed before. He couldn't wait to translate them into his novel.

He got to his car and opened the driver's side. Before getting in, he took one last look in the direction of Patricia's house. He was completely alone on the quiet street. *Sayonara Patricia.*





“Can I get a name for the coffee?” the gothic barista asked from behind the counter.  
“Blake.”

Stephenson checked his watch and backed away from the register to wait for his drink. He had plenty of time. His girlfriend wouldn't be leaving for work for another hour. He'd already bought flowers to go with her skinny vanilla latte.

Counting Crows played throughout the coffee shop as he looked over at the small, empty table where he and Serena had spent their first date over a year before. She'd picked the coffee shop—an artsy, locally-owned cafe where most of the customers stayed to drink their coffee out of bright-colored pottery while they lounged on a couch or in an overstuffed chair. They'd had an instant connection and ended up talking for hours. He'd never met another woman like her.

His hand brushed against the small, square jewelry box he'd safely zipped into his jacket pocket. He wanted to surprise her with something thoughtful without being too over-the-top. Serena hated any sort of grand gestures, especially in public. So, he would propose on her front doorstep on the morning of her birthday. It would be private, which she would appreciate, but Stephenson hoped it would be romantic enough.

It was Saturday, and he was planning to take her out to dinner when she got off work. He would've preferred to propose to her then, but he was on call over the weekend and next up for a homicide case, so the chances he might have to cancel were high.

“Blake!” the barista called out before moving on to make the next coffee.

He grabbed the latte off the bar and walked out of the busy coffeehouse to his car. He seemed to hit every light on the way to Serena's house. He drummed his hands nervously against the steering wheel as he waited for light after light to turn green. He didn't want her latte to get cold; he wanted everything to be perfect. His heart was pounding by the time he pulled in front of her house. He checked to make sure the ring was still in his pocket before getting out of his car.

He was surprised to see a Land Rover in the driveway. It was early, but maybe one of her friends had also stopped by to wish her happy birthday.

With Serena's latte in one hand and flowers in the other, Stephenson strolled up her drive and rang the doorbell. He waited a minute for her to come to the door and was about to ring again when he heard Serena's footsteps come through the entry way. Only it wasn't Serena who answered the door.

A shirtless, muscular man a few years older than Stephenson stood inside Serena's doorway squinting from the morning sun.

“It's a little early to be ringing people's doorbells, don't you think?” The man ran his hand through his bedhead of dark hair.

Serena appeared behind him, wrapped in a towel with wet hair dripping down her shoulders. Her eyes widened when she saw who was at the door. She nearly dropped her towel but managed to recover it before it fell to the floor.

“Blake! What are you doing here?” She saw the flowers and latte in his hands. “I mean...um...look, I'm sorry. I meant to tell you.” She pushed herself in between her male guest and Stephenson. “Shawn and I met through work. I never meant for any of this to happen, but one thing just led to another. We've been seeing each other for the last few weeks.”

“Few *weeks*?” Stephenson was in shock. He thought they were in love, that they'd spend the rest of their lives together.

“I was just trying to find the right time to tell you.”

She laid her hand on Stephenson's arm, but he shook it off.

Shawn remained in the doorway behind Serena, as if he were part of the conversation.

“That would've been before you decided to start cheating on me.”

Stephenson's cell rang from inside his pocket. He tossed Serena's bouquet of flowers onto her front lawn before he answered. His fingers rubbed against the leather jewelry box inside his pocket when he pulled out his phone and he fought the urge to throw it out alongside the flowers.

“This is Stephenson.” He stayed on Serena's front porch as he took the call.

“Hey, it's Adams. We're up. A jogger found the body of a young woman just off one of the trails at Discovery Park this morning. So, looks like you and I get to spend some quality time together this weekend. I'm already on my way to the scene.”

“I'll be right there.”

Stephenson hung up and put his phone back in his pocket.

“Happy birthday,” he said before taking a drink from her latte and turning back toward his car.

“Blake, wait!” Serena ran out onto the porch in her bath towel.

He ignored her and took another swig from the artificially-sweetened coffee. He needed a shot or two of whiskey, but it would have to do for the moment.

Serena continued to holler at him from her front lawn as he peeled out and headed for the crime scene.



The next morning, Eric stared out his apartment window while he breathed through chair pose. In the distance, he watched a sailboat glide across the sound. He took a deep breath and could almost smell the fresh sea air.

He wore an almost identical outfit to what he had worn to kill Patricia. Since he practiced yoga seven days a week, nearly half his closet was active wear. He had already laundered everything he wore last night, including his running shoes, just in case they had picked up anything that could link him to the crime scene.

He decided not to do any novel writing last night when he got home from killing Patricia and her husband. He thought it would be best to let the night's events sink in. He jotted down some notes and made a few sketches while he enjoyed a glass of merlot before going to bed. He wished he could've taken pictures of their dead bodies, but he couldn't afford to have that kind of evidence on his phone.

He surprised himself by sleeping like a baby. He had thought he might have trouble sleeping after committing murder, but he was totally at peace. When his alarm woke him at seven that morning, he felt refreshed and ready to dive into his soon-to-be bestseller.

The sailboat disappeared behind a skyscraper and he moved into humble warrior. He wondered how long it would be before Patricia and her husband's bodies were found.

He liked to do yoga before he started writing. It helped clear his head and get the juices flowing. He focused on his breath entering and leaving his lungs.

He was three breaths into bird of paradise when there was a hard knock at his door. He took one more deep breath before going to answer it. He opened the door to find a man with pale blond hair and gray-blue eyes dressed in business casual. He was clearly of Nordic descent. He flashed his police badge at chest level.

Eric hadn't expected to be questioned so soon. Patricia's murder investigation seemed to be moving much faster than he had anticipated.

The detective was young. That was good. Probably hadn't been solving murders for too long. Eric smiled inwardly, thinking to himself that these were two he wouldn't solve.

A shorter, brown-haired man stood behind him. He looked to be closer to Eric's own age, probably in his forties. He reminded him of Mark Wahlberg, only more muscled. The buttons of his shirt barely contained his pectoral muscles, and his biceps protruded out of his leather jacket. *No one was naturally built like that*, Eric thought. It was a clear sign of a man who was trying too hard. Surely, he spent hours in the gym every week trying to boost his self-esteem.

"I'm Detective Stephenson, and this is Detective Adams," the blond one said. "Are you Dr. Eric Leroy?"

Eric felt a tinge of nervous tension run through his bowels. He knew this was probably just routine to ask if he knew what kind of relationship Patricia had with her husband, but he suddenly feared they somehow knew what he had done.

"I am," he said, hoping to sound as if he had no idea why the police would be knocking on his door on a Saturday morning.

"We need to ask you a few questions. Just routine. Do you mind if we come in?"

"Not at all." He opened the door wide.

"Thank you."

He led them into his living room and motioned toward the couch. "Would you like to have a seat?"

They followed in single file. "Thanks," Blondie said before they both took a seat.

Eric moved his yoga mat out of the way and sat down across from them. He decided to let them speak first. It was utterly important he not seem as though he knew why they had come knocking on his door. He crossed his legs and felt himself relax. He had planned his reaction to Patricia's murder to the tee. They didn't know what he had done, he reminded himself. The ball was in his court.

The Marky Mark lookalike cleared his throat before speaking. "I'm afraid we have some bad news."

Eric relaxed his mouth and opened his eyes wider as if to say *Oh, no*.

"The body of your front office assistant, Daisy Colbert, was found early this morning in Discovery Park. She appears to have been murdered," Blondie said.

*My secretary?* They must be confused. He refused to accept what they were telling him. They had come to question him about Patricia's murder, not his secretary's. There had to be some mistake.

"I just saw her at work yesterday. She was fine. Are you sure you have the right person?"

"Yes, her body has already been identified by a next-of-kin. We know this news is a shock, but we wouldn't have come before she'd been positively identified."

"I just saw her yesterday," Eric repeated, in disbelief of what he had heard. It couldn't be true. Not his beautiful, sweet secretary.

"Do you have any idea of who might have wanted to hurt her?"

It took him a moment before he realized the blond one had asked him a question. It was the boyfriend. He knew it was the boyfriend.

"From what she said, it sounded like her boyfriend could be pretty controlling. In fact, I think she was afraid of him."

Both detectives wore flat expressions, giving Eric no idea whether they believed him or not.

"And, just for our records, where were you last night between ten p.m. and two a.m.?"

Eric was in shock but fortunately had already prepared a response to this very question. "I was in bed, asleep."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Not really. But I did knock on my neighbor's door around eight to ask him to keep his drums down."

The bodybuilder pulled out his cellphone. "Which neighbor?" he asked.

"915."

He appeared to type this into his phone. Or maybe he was just texting his girlfriend.

"Is there anyone else you can think of who may have wanted to hurt Daisy?" Stephenson asked.

*Daisy. Her name was Daisy.* "Like I said, from what she'd told me, her boyfriend was very controlling. Jealous too. If I were you, I'd be looking at him."

"Was he ever jealous of the two of you?" the brown-haired detective asked.

Eric thought quickly about his response before he answered. "No."

Marky Mark put his phone back in his pocket, and the two of them exchanged glances before getting up from the couch. "I think that'll be all, Dr. Leroy. Thanks for your time." Stephenson reached out his hand to shake Eric's, and he returned the handshake.

Eric followed behind them as the two men walked toward his door.

"Do you have a suspect? I mean, have you arrested her boyfriend?" he asked.

"Everyone is a suspect at this point in the investigation. We haven't made any arrests yet."

“I'm sure it was her boyfriend.”

“We'll look into that.”

From Blondie's expression, Eric couldn't tell if he took him seriously.

They reached his front door and Adams let himself out first.

“How did she die?” Eric asked before Stephenson went through his doorway.

Stephenson turned and looked him in the eyes, examining him for his reaction. “She was strangled.” Stephenson stared at him for a moment before closing the door behind him.



“Play it again.” Stephenson stood over Adams’ shoulder and looked down at his partner’s computer screen.

Adams played the video from the beginning. Sweat shone against Dwayne’s forehead as he sat across the metal table from Stephenson and Adams earlier that morning. His hands fidgeted on his lap.

“We know this isn’t the first time you’ve hurt Daisy,” Adams said. “We’ve seen the reports from police responding to your residence for domestic disputes—three different times. The police were called twice by your neighbor...and once by Daisy.”

“Is that what happened last night? Did things get out of control?” Stephenson asked.

“That was different. I didn’t kill her.”

Stephenson and Adams waited in silence to see if he would continue.

“We’ve had our fights, but I would never kill her.” Dwayne chewed his lip and looked back and forth at the two detectives. “All couples fight.”

“It seems a little one-sided to call it a fight when you’re the only one throwing the punches. We also know your ex-girlfriend, Kristi Tilman, filed a restraining order two years ago claiming you knocked her around,” Stephenson said.

“She’s a liar.”

“What happened to your hand?”

Dwayne glanced at his red knuckles on his right hand.

“Did you hit Daisy last night?”

“Yeah. But only once. We’d both been drinking. She told me she was gonna move out, and I lost my temper. I hit her on the side of her face. Then she told me to get out, so I did. She was alive when I left.”

“Was it an accident? Now’s your chance to tell us your side of the story,” Adams said.

“I didn’t kill her!” He pounded his fists onto the table, spilling his paper cup of water.

Stephenson held out his hands. “Calm down.”

“Your neighbors heard shouting and doors slamming in your apartment right before the time Daisy was killed,” Adams said.

“We had a fight, okay? I stormed out around ten and drove around the city to try and cool down. I ended up crashing at a friend’s place in West Seattle.”

“Where exactly did you drive around for an hour?” Adams asked.

“Downtown.”

“Downtown Seattle?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a thirty-minute drive from your apartment. What made you go there?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll need the name and address of your friend who let you spend the night.”

Stephenson looked away from the screen at the sight of their stickler superior, Lieutenant Greyson, marching through the Homicide Unit on a Saturday afternoon.

“What brings you here on a Saturday?” Stephenson asked as they made eye contact.

Adams stopped the video.



Greyson paused a few feet from their desks. "I have to lead a press release later today," he said. "Two people were found dead in their Madison Park home this morning, and one of them was Martin Watts."



Eric stared blankly at his computer screen. He'd been trying to write his novel for over an hour, but all he could think about was his secretary. And her son of a bitch boyfriend who had killed her. He was so upset he nearly cried for her.

He Googled to see if they'd arrested him yet, but there weren't any new articles since the initial one saying her body had been found. He skimmed the article again. It ended by stating no arrests had been made. He balled up his fist before releasing it to slam his laptop closed.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there plotting her boyfriend's demise when he heard another knock at his door. Happy for the distraction, he got up and answered it.

He was surprised to see the same two detectives standing in his hall. Their expressions were just as unreadable as the last time they came.

"I'm afraid we've had an unexpected development," Blondie said.

What could be more unexpected than his beloved secretary being murdered?

"We'd like you to come downtown and help us straighten a few things out."

Eric wanted to appear helpful and like he had nothing to hide. Plus, getting an inside tour of Seattle's Homicide Unit would be great for his story.

"Sure," he said. "Although, I don't know if I'll be of much more help. You really should be talking to her boyfriend."

"This isn't about your front office assistant. It's about one of your patients," Marky Mark said.

*Oh, yeah. Patricia. They must've found her.* He tried to look confused. He'd been so sad about his secretary's death that Patricia's had escaped him.

"Oh, no. I hope it's nothing serious. I don't think I can take much more bad news today."

Both detectives eyed him suspiciously. "We'll explain at the precinct," Blondie said.

"Okay, I'll just grab my coat."

• • • •

THE HOMICIDE UNIT WAS different than Eric had imagined. He realized he'd pictured it looking like the ones he'd seen on TV. It was smaller, more open, more cluttered, noisier, and much less glamorous than he had anticipated. Walking through the depressing hallway to the tiny shoebox of an interview room made him feel like he should pay more taxes. He would never understand why Americans fought socialism so hard.

The detectives let him enter the room first and motioned for him to have a seat. He obliged and hoped he wouldn't have to sit in the ass-numbing, unpadded chair for too long. Beavis and Butthead took their seats across from him in what looked to be equally uncomfortable chairs. They stared at him in silence, sizing him up. Eric stared back, his face revealing nothing.

Marky Mark finally broke the silence. "Do you have a patient by the name of Patricia Watts?"

"Yes."

"We're sorry to inform you that she was killed last night." The two detectives exchanged a look. "Probably not long before Daisy."

Eric dropped his jaw. "What?"

"We're sure this must be a shock, especially after the death of your front office assistant."

He tried to appear dumbfounded. "Yes, it is." He brought his hands to his face and wondered why he never pursued a career in acting. There were plenty of Australian actors who had made it in

America.

“Patricia's husband, Martin, was also found dead this morning. At this point, we're treating both deaths as suspicious. Did Patricia ever say she was afraid of her husband? Or that he had ever hurt her?”

Eric slowly took his hands away from his face, as if he were still taking in the news about Patricia's husband. He hoped he looked as though he was struggling to focus.

“Well, um...she never said he had physically hurt her. If she had, I would be obligated to report it. But, I wouldn't be surprised if he ever was. From what she'd said, he was extremely controlling. Oftentimes, that type of behavior is a precursor to abuse.”

“What do you mean by extremely controlling?” Blondie asked.

“I would have to look over my notes to give you all the details, but he didn't like her having any friends and tried to keep her away from her own family. Many abusers use isolation as a way of controlling their victims.”

Fortunately, he had already doctored up her medical record to match what he had just said.

The detectives looked unimpressed by this information. So, he gave them more.

“He was always telling her she was fat, always lowering her self-esteem. I remember a specific instance when he wouldn't let her buy any new clothes until she lost weight.”

He was annoyed he hadn't come up with anything better. He tried again. He figured he could always alter her medical records to substantiate his statement.

“He had also threatened to kill himself on several occasions if she didn't do what he wanted. He sounded incredibly unstable, but, according to Patricia, he refused to get any help. He always blamed everything on her.”

To this, they raised their eyebrows. Eric withheld a smile to their reaction.

“And Patricia? Was she unstable?”

“Patricia? No. Most of her problems were because of her husband, she even said so. I encouraged her to leave him if she ever felt unsafe, but she insisted he would never physically hurt her. I wish I could've done something to prevent this, but, unfortunately, my hands were tied unless I knew he had hurt her physically.”

“We've got a warrant for Patricia's psychiatric records. We'll need you to send those over ASAP.”

“Of course. I'll go by the office on my way home and send them to you. All our records are electronic.”

“Where were you last night between eight p.m. and midnight?” Marky Mark asked.

Eric scoffed. “I already told you, I was at home. In bed. Asleep.”

“Actually, I only asked you earlier where you were between ten p.m. and two a.m. Did you leave your apartment at all last night?”

“No.”

“Well, that'll be all. Thanks for coming down, and we'll need those medical records as soon as you can get them to us,” Stephenson said as he and his partner stood up from the interview table.

They pushed in their chairs and moved toward the door.

“Oh, and just one more thing,” Stephenson said, turning around to face him. “We haven't been able to locate the cell phone of your front office assistant, Daisy. Are you aware of her leaving it at the office or have any idea where we might find it?”

“No.”

“All right. We may need to search your practice if we don't find it soon.”

Eric nodded and followed them to the door. "Have you arrested Daisy's boyfriend yet?" he asked as Stephenson held the door open for him to exit first.

"No. But don't worry, we'll make sure her killer doesn't get away with it."

Then he remembered the question he had planned but had forgotten to ask. "How did Patricia and her husband die?"

"They both died by asphyxiation due to strangulation."

"Could it have been a murder-suicide?" Eric asked.

"We haven't ruled out that possibility." Stephenson answered.

"Strange that two people you know are murdered on the same night, in the same way, at almost the same time. Almost seems like too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence," Marky Mark said.

Eric decided in that moment that Blondie was his favorite of the two. "I hope you're not insinuating that I killed anyone. You know, sometimes coincidences are just that. Coincidences." Like Daisy's boyfriend killing her the same night he killed Patricia. How he hated him.

"You okay to walk yourself out?" Blondie asked.

"Sure." *You good-for-nothing cops.*



Adams took a sip from his cold coffee when they got back to their desks.

“I can't believe you volunteered us for the Martin Watts case after we just got the girl in the park. Now we'll definitely be working all weekend.”

“Their deaths could all be related. You don't think it's strange that three people who all know Dr. Leroy die by strangulation on the same night?” Stephenson asked, annoyed his partner cared more about being home on the weekend than solving their case.

“Stranger things have happened. The guy's a psychiatrist. I'm sure she's not the first of his patients to die of unnatural causes. I just don't like the idea of taking on an extra caseload when we don't even know if they're connected. The husband and wife are probably going to be ruled a murder-suicide by the ME anyway. And the media is going to go crazy when they learn a famous romance writer offed his wife before hanging himself.”

“We don't know that yet.”

“Not officially, but I'll be shocked if that's not what happened. Plus, the girl was killed by manual strangulation on the other side of town from where the husband and wife were strangled using a necktie and an electrical cord from a curling iron.”

Stephenson normally got along fine with Adams, but after catching Serena cheating on him that morning, his partner was getting under his skin. He looked down at the framed picture on his desk of his late partner, Detective Christina Rodriguez. She had been only thirty-three when she was murdered. There wasn't a day that went by he didn't think about her; sometimes he still couldn't believe she was gone.

“The ME isn't going to be able to explain why their back-door lock had been picked. And Pete thought Martin's ligature marks were more suggestive of homicide than suicide when we were at the house. If he'd hanged himself, the ligature line would've moved upward on the back of his neck. And the ligature marks were straight all the way around. My gut says it'll be ruled a double homicide, or at least undetermined pending our investigation.

There is no way that chandelier would've held the weight of a man that size long enough for him to suffocate. It would've been practically impossible to even ensure the curling iron would catch on the light fixture anyway. He would've had to jump off the railing at the top of the stairs. I don't see how he could've done it.”

“Well, I guess we'll just have to wait for the autopsy results. At this point though, it looks like Dwayne killed Daisy.”

Stephenson couldn't disagree. Since Daisy's body had been outside on a near-freezing January night, determining her time of death at the crime scene had been difficult for the ME. For now, they were relying largely on other environmental factors to pin down the precise time of her death. A light snow covered the top of her body when the jogger had found her that morning. When the medical examiner checked underneath her body at the scene, it was dry. The snow had started around midnight the night before, so they were working with an approximate time of death between ten p.m. and midnight.

Daisy had bruising on her left temple. It looked consistent with her being punched in the side of her face, as Dwayne had admitted. She'd also sustained bruising to both of her arms, probably from being restrained by her killer while he strangled her. Both these injuries helped explain her lack of defensive wounds.

Stephenson and Adams had found ten empty beer bottles scattered around the main living area of Dwayne and Daisy's apartment, which matched Dwayne's story that they'd been drinking.

Dwayne gave them the names of the two friends that let him stay the night but told them they'd left early that morning on a week-long snowboarding trip to Canada. Being out of the country, they didn't have cell service, leaving no one to confirm his alibi. Dwayne stated he hadn't returned to his and Daisy's apartment until that morning. Both Dwayne and Daisy's cars had been parked outside their residence when the detectives visited him earlier that day.

Dwayne had willingly answered all their questions and gave them permission to search his car. CSI was processing it now along with Daisy's.

Stephenson wasn't ready to admit that his partner may be right, but it was shaping up to look like there was no connection between Daisy's death and Martin and Patricia's. Although, there was something not right about Patricia and Martin's deaths. It was a bizarre scene, and Stephenson didn't buy the murder-suicide theory. Why would the husband leave the front door unlocked and pick the lock on the back door only to hang himself? It made more sense to Stephenson that he'd come home and walked in on his wife's killer.

When Stephenson learned earlier that day that Patricia was a patient of Daisy's boss, he'd insisted they take the case. He couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but Dr. Leroy had given him a bad feeling. And to have three people he knew all strangled on the same night seemed like more than a coincidence.

The doctor had looked genuinely shocked when they informed him of his front office assistant's death, but his reaction to the deaths of Martin and Patricia had felt rehearsed to Stephenson. Adams hadn't seemed to notice.

"They were an odd couple, you know?" Adams mused. "Daisy was a beautiful girl from a seemingly normal family. What was she doing with an overweight sleazeball who probably liked to beat on her?"

Stephenson let his question linger in the air while he continued going through Dwayne's cell phone records. His gaze drifted to the sleeves of his navy sweater that Serena had bought him for Christmas. He wished he would've worn something different. He didn't need the sweater serving as a constant reminder of her. The wool was beginning to feel like sandpaper against his skin. He tugged at the neckline and tried to focus on the stack of papers in front of him.

Adams studied his partner from across their desks. "You seem agitated today."

Stephenson shot Adams a look of annoyance before going back to looking through Dwayne's phone records. "I'm not."

"You piss off your girlfriend or something?"

Stephenson ignored the question.

Adams let out a snort. "All right, whatever you say."

"Dwayne made several calls to Daisy's cell after she died. Makes me wonder if he didn't know she was dead."

"He could've done that just to try and look innocent. Or maybe he was calling it to try and find it. That could be why we haven't been able to locate it," Adams said.

"Maybe. Two of the calls did ping a cell tower in vicinity of Discovery Park just before midnight, which places him at the scene of where Daisy's body was dumped but could also confirm his story about driving around the city for an hour before crashing with friends."

"I doubt his story is true."

"Found anything yet on the traffic camera footage in that area?"

"Not yet. I'm still looking."



Stephenson's desk phone rang.

"Stephenson."

"Hey, we've finished processing the cars of both your victim and her boyfriend."

Stephenson recognized Matt's voice from CSI.

"I've sent you an email with our preliminary report. We found Dwayne's fingerprints inside Daisy's car on both the driver and passenger side. His prints were also on both front doors. No prints inside the trunk and no blood anywhere. Daisy's fingerprints were all over the inside of Dwayne's car. We also found a few strands of hair that look to be a likely match to hers in the front and backseat. Nothing inside the trunk. And no blood."

"Thanks, Matt."

"No problem."

Stephenson hung up and briefed Adams on what Matt had said. Afterwards, Adams went back to looking through the traffic cam footage.

"Looks like you're no longer the only rookie on the squad," he said a few minutes later.

Stephenson turned to see an attractive, blonde woman in her mid-twenties being shown her desk across the room by another detective.

"I'd like to be her partner," Adams said.

"Thank you."

"No offense."

"None taken," Stephenson went back to looking through the phone records.

"I'm gonna ask her out."

Stephenson looked up to see if Adams was serious. It appeared he was. Adams looked back at him with a straight face. Stephenson didn't know how to respond. Adams was a great detective, but when it came to women, he was a total screwball. Apparently, it hadn't occurred to Adams that the beautiful, young detective might not be interested in an overly-muscled, forty-something divorcee such as himself.

"I don't think that's such a good idea. Plus, she just got here. You don't even know her."

Stephenson watched Adams check out the new detective as her partner showed her around the Homicide Unit.

"I'll give it a few days first."

Stephenson rolled his eyes.

Detective Suarez came over to their desk to introduce them to his new partner.

"Stephenson, Adams, this is Detective Tess Richards." He motioned toward the blonde rookie at his side. "She's just joined the squad."

Adams leapt from his chair and shook her hand. Stephenson subtly shook his head when he saw Adams lay his left hand on top of hers, sandwiching her hand between both of his during the handshake.

"Great to meet you. It's about time we had another female on the squad," Adams said, finally letting go of her hand.

Only so you can hit on her, Stephenson thought.

"Thanks," she said. She pulled her hand back to her side as he let go.

Stephenson stayed seated. "Welcome to the squad," he said with a friendly smile.

She returned his smile. "It's great to be here."

The two detectives stepped away from their desk as Suarez continued showing her around.

"I think she likes me," Adams said after they walked away.

“You're an idiot.”



Eric got a call from the homicide detectives later that afternoon. They hadn't found Daisy's phone and wanted to search his office building. They said they'd get a warrant if they needed to but asked if he'd instead drive over and let them in. Eric obliged. He didn't have anything to hide. At least, not at his practice and not about Daisy.

He hung around while they searched his entire medical suite. They started with his office, and Eric followed them inside while they searched. He took a seat in the chair normally reserved for his patients, hoping to make them uncomfortable enough to hurry up. Not that he had to worry what they would find; there was no way they could know he altered Patricia's medical records. He just didn't like them going through his stuff.

"It's not here," Marky Mark said after rifling through every drawer of his desk.

"I could've told you that," Eric said before following them out into the hall.

Eric reclined in the waiting room while they went through the front desk area where Daisy spent most of her time. He longed to see her again, sitting behind the desk, too bubbly and bright for a psychiatry practice. An hour later, he wished he'd brought his laptop to work on his book. Although, everything in the office reminded him of Daisy and he probably wouldn't have been able to concentrate anyway.

Soon after that, the two of Seattle's finest announced they were done with their search.

"Did you find it?" Eric asked.

"No," Blondie said. "Thanks for letting us in."

"No problem. If there's anything else I can do to help, let me know."

"We will," Marky Mark said with a flat expression.



Stephenson pulled into the darkened driveway of his Northgate townhouse late Saturday night. He killed the engine but didn't get out of the car. Daisy's preliminary autopsy results had come back just before he'd left the precinct. The bruising on her left temple was consistent with her being punched in the head, as Dwayne had said in his interview. Pete believed the contusions on both her arms were caused from her killer restraining her during her strangulation. He guessed the killer straddled her, using a knee on each of her arms to hold her down. They'd have to wait and see if any DNA could be obtained from under her fingernails, but, without any defensive wounds, it seemed unlikely.

Her boyfriend was still their prime suspect in her death. Adams had found Dwayne's car on a traffic camera less than a mile away from Discovery Park around ten thirty the night before. The park was a twenty-minute drive away from downtown where he said he'd driven around. It was also in the opposite direction from West Seattle where Dwayne claimed to have spent the night. It didn't make sense for him to have gone there apart from dumping his girlfriend's body. They were close to being able to arrest him, but they needed a little more evidence.

Pete wouldn't have the preliminary autopsy results back for them on Patricia and Martin until tomorrow morning. With not much more they could do that night, he and Adams had called it a day nearly sixteen hours after they'd arrived at Daisy's crime scene.

He reached into his pocket for his phone and was surprised when his fingers rubbed against the smooth leather case that housed Serena's ring. In his rush to get to the crime scene that morning, he'd forgotten to take it out of his coat.

He pulled the small jewelry box out of his pocket and opened it. He wanted to get her something unique, so he'd gotten the ring specially designed. He'd made sure there wasn't another one exactly like it.

After taking the emerald-cut diamond ring out of its case, he held it up. The diamond gleamed in the faint light coming from his neighbor's front porch. He placed the ring back in the box before slipping it back into his pocket.

He took out his phone and tapped on her photo that was still on his home screen. A shortcut came up with an option to *Call Mobile*. His finger hovered over the screen as he struggled against the desire to call her. *Where is your pride?* he thought before finally shoving his phone back inside his coat. He wiped away the tear that managed to escape down his cheek before he got out of his car and went inside.



Stephenson pressed his palm against the cool tile of his shower wall while he closed his eyes and let the hot water beat against his face. He pictured Serena from yesterday morning wearing nothing but a towel with her hair dripping wet, standing next to her newfound love. Or whatever. Maybe he'd just been replaced by some casual fling.

He forced the image out of his mind and tried to focus on his new case. He heard his phone ring over the sound of the water and turned off the nozzle before stepping out of the shower. He grabbed his towel off the wall and quickly dried his hands before picking his phone up from the bathroom counter.

“Hey, Pete.”

“Morning. I just wanted to let you know I've sent over the preliminary autopsy results for Martin and Patricia.”

“Great. I'll have a look now.” Stephenson wrapped the towel around his waist and walked into his bedroom. He placed Pete on speaker and set the phone on his bed while he logged onto his work laptop. “What's the manner of death?”

“For Patricia, homicide, as we'd already surmised. She suffered a nonfatal injury to her forehead prior to death when she collided with the bathroom mirror. The injury was significant enough that she would've been shoved with significant force against the mirror. She also has scratch marks around the ligature mark on the front of her neck and what looks to be her own tissue present under her fingernails. We'll have to wait for the DNA testing to be sure it's only her tissue and not her attacker's. And you know, these defensive wounds would be consistent with her trying to free herself from the necktie when she was strangled. At the scene, you saw the ligature mark around her neck was straight. The lack of blood pooling above the ligature mark and the way her body was found are also inconsistent with hanging.”

Stephenson had begun to skim the report as Pete spoke. “And what about her husband, Martin?”

“His autopsy, I'm afraid, was not as straightforward. His ligature mark does angle upwards slightly on the back of his neck, which could be consistent with hanging. However, like Patricia, the lack of blood pooling above his ligature mark suggests the pressure around his neck was released shortly after death, which would be inconsistent with him hanging himself. Although, being that we found him on the floor, it's possible he fell from the chandelier not long after he asphyxiated. I suppose it will be up to you to determine if that chandelier could've held his weight long enough for that to have happened.

“Also like Patricia, he has scratches around the ligature on his neck. This could be consistent with defensive wounds in a homicidal strangulation, or he could've panicked at the last minute and tried to free himself from the cord around his neck.

“He sustained some bruising across his torso which appears to have occurred just prior to his death. But I'm unable to determine if this was a defensive wound he incurred in the process of killing his wife or if he was held down during a homicidal strangulation. There's more details in my report, but, for the time being, I've ruled Martin's manner of death as undetermined.”

Stephenson looked at the photo of Martin's body lying atop the metal autopsy table, the bruising across his middle exposed.

“Could his killer have pinned him down by wrapping his legs around Martin's chest while he strangled him from behind? If the killer was positioned slightly higher than Martin when he killed



him, that could also account for why his ligature marks come up on the back of his neck.”

“I suppose that would be one plausible scenario,” Pete said. “I’ve finished the evidence collection process from both of the deceased, so they are ready for you to pick up and submit to the crime lab.”

Stephenson had investigated enough cases by now to know that this evidence collected by the ME would include clothes, hair samples, swabs, blood, nail clippings, and a DNA card from each of the victims.

“Great. I’ll be right over.”

“Oh, good. I’m ready to get out of this place. I’d like to think I’ve done enough work for one weekend.”

“Wish I could say the same, but I’ve got a lot more still to be done.” This wasn’t exactly true, but he wanted to sound normal. Truth was, he was grateful for the distraction his work had provided that weekend. “See you soon.”

He ended the call and dialed Adams.

“Is it morning already?” he asked, sounding groggy.

“Yes, and we’ve got an undetermined manner of death for Martin. Patricia’s been ruled a homicide, but no surprise there.”

“Huh. Well, maybe you were right after all. I take it we’re treating Martin’s death as suspicious, then?”

“Sure are. I’ll meet you at the station in half an hour. We’ve got some work to do.”

“Can’t wait.”

• • • •

ADAMS GOT TO THE HOMICIDE Unit five minutes after Stephenson. He slapped the Sunday edition of *The Seattle Times* on Stephenson’s desk and waited for his partner to read the headline.

“This is thanks to our press release last night.” Adams sighed. “It’s all over the national news too. I told you the media was going to be in a frenzy over this case.”

“We had to do a press release. He’s a world-famous author.”

“I know. I just don’t like the added pressure.”

Stephenson scanned the news story before handing the paper back to Adams. “It doesn’t matter whether he’s famous or not. We were right to take the case, and we’ll treat it no different than any other.”

“I just hope we can solve it soon.”

• • • •

THEY SAT ACROSS FROM Daisy’s sister, Emily, three hours later in what the detectives called the “soft room”. It was similar in size to their two interview rooms, but instead of stark white walls, a one-way mirror, and chairs that were bolted to the ground, the soft room provided neutral colors with painted walls, a carpeted floor, and multiple chairs that could be moved around.

Emily had come to the Homicide Unit on her own accord, tearfully asking to speak with them when she arrived. Stephenson set a cup of water on the table in front of her before taking his seat.

“Thank you,” she said.

She wore no makeup and looked about five years older than Daisy. Her eyes and nose were red from crying, and she dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

“So, you wanted to talk with us about Dwayne?” Stephenson asked.

She nodded. “He left a voicemail on my phone Thursday night threatening to kill Daisy.”

Stephenson and Adams exchanged a look.

“Do you still have the voicemail?” Adams asked.

“Yes.” She pulled her phone out of her purse. “He called me three times that night looking for Daisy, but I didn't answer. I was out of town. She must've told him that she was staying with me, but I had no idea where she was and didn't want to get in the middle of it. She would stay with me sometimes when she wanted to get away from him. I don't know where she was that night...” her voice broke into sobs. “Maybe if I'd answered and told him she was staying with me she'd still be alive.”

“This isn't your fault,” Stephenson said.

She wiped her face with her tissue after she placed her phone on the table and played the voicemail for them to hear.

Dwayne's voice came through the phone's speaker: Where's Daisy? I know she's not with you, that lying bitch! Tell me where she is. I'll kill her if she's with another guy. You tell her to call me—or she's dead.

“I didn't think he was serious. He and Daisy fought all the time. It was their normal. Don't get me wrong, I hated him. But I didn't think for a second that he'd actually kill her.”

Stephenson watched the color drain from her face. He recognized the look that washed over her as one he'd seen before on other victims' family members. He pulled the garbage can beside her chair moments before she threw up. Most of her vomit made it into the can, but some splattered onto the beige carpet.

“I'm so sorry.” She covered her hand with her mouth as she looked down at the mess on the floor.

“Don't be,” Stephenson said. “We know this is really difficult. And you're doing great.”

“I just can't believe she's dead!” Emily burst into fresh tears and buried her face in her hands.

“Don't blame yourself.” Stephenson placed his hand on her arm. “You did the right thing by coming in. May we borrow your phone?”

With her hands still covering her face, she nodded.

“Is this the only voicemail Dwayne left you that night?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. We're just going to make a copy of it for evidence. Are you okay to wait here?”

She pulled her hands away from her face, exposing her red, tear-streaked cheeks. “Yes, that's fine.”

“We won't be too long.”

Stephenson picked up her phone and followed Adams out of the interview room.

Adams turned to Stephenson after they stepped out into the hall. “Well, it looks like we need to bring Dwayne in to have another chat. Maybe we won't be spending the entire weekend here after all.”

• • • •

THEY WENT BACK TO DWAYNE's apartment and he agreed to ride back to the station with them to answer more questions. They brought him into Interview Room One. If he was aware that they were close to arresting him for murder, he didn't show it. It seemed that asking for a lawyer hadn't even entered his mind.

“We've confirmed your friends' address in West Seattle where you say you stayed last night,” Adams began. “We also tried calling both of their cells, but they were turned off. Based on their social media pages, it looks like they did in fact head to Canada for a week-long snowboarding trip like you said.”

“Okay. So why did I need to come in then?”

Adams cleared his throat. “Well, here's the thing Dwayne. Daisy probably died between the time you say you left your apartment and when you arrived at your friends' place. So, even if you did stay at their house, you still could've killed Daisy and dropped her body at Discovery Park before you went to their place.”

“We also know that your cell phone pinged a cell tower near Discovery Park around Daisy's time of death, which places you close to where her body was dumped. And we have your car on a traffic camera a mile away from the park at 10:37 p.m.,” Stephenson added.

“I didn't kill her,” Dwayne said matter-of-factly.

They played him a recording of the voicemail he'd left on Emily's phone Thursday night.

“Did you leave this voicemail on Daisy's sister's phone the other night?” Adams asked as the recording played.

“Yeah, but I didn't actually mean it! I was pissed, okay? She didn't come home that night, and I was worried she might've been with another guy. I just wanted her to come home. I swear.”

“Maybe you didn't mean to,” Stephenson said. “Like you said, you were pissed. If you explain it to us, we might be able to help you.”

“I didn't kill her!”

Dwayne stood up from the table.

“All right, calm down.” Adams put up his hands. “We're going to give you a little time to think and make sure there's nothing more you want to tell us. We'll be back in fifteen minutes, okay?”

“I've already told you everything.”

Dwayne paced back and forth in the small space.

The two detectives got up and started for the door. “We'll be back,” Stephenson said before leaving Dwayne alone in the interview room.

“I think we can get a confession out of him,” Adams said after Stephenson closed the door behind him. “He already admitted to striking Daisy and he hasn't asked for a lawyer. Hopefully, he'll open up when we go back in there.”

They walked back to their desks where they sat down across from each other.

“I'm thinking Dwayne probably strangled her at home and then dumped her body at the park,” Adams said.

Stephenson leaned back in his chair. “So, we have the neighbors hearing an argument between Dwayne and Daisy right before her time of death, a history of domestic disputes, Dwayne's admission to hitting her, his threatening voicemail to Daisy's sister, traffic camera footage and a cell tower placing Dwayne near the location of where Daisy's body was dumped right around the time of her death, and her fingerprints and strands of hair inside his car. And he's got no alibi.”

“You still think there's a connection between Daisy's death and that couple in Madison Park?”

Stephenson sighed. “No. I think Daisy's killer is sitting in Interview One,” Stephenson said.

“I'll fill out the affidavit if you call the judge to get the arrest warrant. Then let's go back in there and see if we can make him crack.”

• • • •

DWAYNE HADN'T EXACTLY cracked, but they'd had enough on him to arrest him even without his confession.

“How about I take you out for a congratulatory beer since we closed our case?” Adams asked as they walked side by side through the parking garage.

“Thanks, but I'm pretty tired. I think I'll just head home.”

“Yeah, me too. But I plan on enjoying what's left of my Sunday. You should too. There's even still time for you to see your girlfriend.”

Stephenson didn't respond, and they walked in silence the rest of the way to their cars.

Adams stopped when he reached his car, parked across from Stephenson's. He pulled his keys from his pocket and looked up at his partner.

“You've been acting different this weekend. You sure you're okay?”

“Yeah. I'm fine, thanks.”

Adams stood still for a moment and looked like he was trying to read him. “Okay. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“See ya,” Stephenson said.

Adams watched his partner get into his car before he climbed into his own and followed Stephenson out of the parking garage.



Eric got up early Sunday morning and decided to go to his favorite café, The Streamliner, on Bainbridge Island for breakfast. He hoped that its organic coffee and buttermilk biscuits might help take his mind off Daisy. Maybe even clear his head enough to work on his book.

With his laptop bag slung over his shoulder, Eric made his way down the steep, city street to the ferry. A light mist was falling, but he didn't mind. He needed to get out of his apartment.

The ferry ride was uneventful. He sat inside and stared out the window at the calm water that shone a cobalt blue in the winter morning light.

Only a short walk from the ferry, The Streamliner was busy as usual when he stepped inside.

It was more American diner than Australian café, but there was a quaintness about it that reminded him of his home country. Although, it had grown busier in recent years. Its notoriety for good food and local feel had caused it to become a tourist destination.

He took a seat at the counter and ordered the breakfast special. He sipped his steaming coffee and was about to open his laptop when he realized he was in no state to write. Or, for that matter, to eat. His grief was just too strong.

His eyes wandered to *The Seattle Times* on the counter to his left.

"Care to read it?" his fellow diner patron asked, motioning toward the paper. "I'm all done."

"Thanks," he said.

He slid the paper toward him as the man stood from his seat. He held up the front page.

### *NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR MARTIN WATTS AND WIFE FOUND DEAD IN SEATTLE HOME*

They must be mistaken. *How had I not known this? Why hadn't Patricia ever told me?* He racked his brain through all their sessions. Strangely, he couldn't recall much of anything other than the murder of her brother and her never-ending complaints about her husband. So, maybe she *had* mentioned it. His mind might've just been elsewhere.

He moved his attention back to the paper and read through the entire article. The police hadn't yet released their cause of death. But, according to the article, they were treating both deaths as suspicious. Eric wondered what that meant exactly. Hopefully, they were just waiting on official autopsy results to announce it as a murder-suicide.

Apparently, Martin was a famous man. Not only were most of his books *New York Times* bestsellers, but many of them had also been made into high-earning film adaptations. None that Eric had seen, however, being that they were all romance.

He looked for an article on Daisy's death and was saddened to find it all the way back on page 8. His breakfast arrived and he set down the paper, still blown away that he had killed a bestselling author without even knowing it. He supposed it was one way to get rid of some competition. The scandal of Martin's death would undoubtedly boost his book sales for the short term, but Eric hoped people would've forgotten about him by the time his own book was released.

Despite having no appetite since he'd heard of Daisy's death, his poached eggs and buttermilk biscuits looked incredibly delicious. Before he knew it, his plate was empty. Eric set down his fork and looked again at Martin's headline. He sighed, wondering how many million copies Martin Watts would sell today.

If only he could be on the front page of *The Seattle Times*. In a way, he was famous already. The man who killed Martin Watts. Too bad the world would never know.



SEEING THE MEDIA CRAZE over Martin's death had helped take his mind off Daisy, but by the time he got back to his apartment she had crept back into his mind. Eric spent the rest of Sunday moping around his apartment, trying to get her out of his head so he could make progress on his manuscript. He needed to write while Patricia and Martin's murders were fresh in his mind. After finishing his hour of yoga, he went to work on the novel.

His thoughts drifted between his book and his secretary for the rest of the day. In his grief over Daisy, he kept thinking back to his ex-wife, Stella. *Gorgeous Stella*.

They married young. She had been nineteen and he had been twenty. They had some pressure from their families, he supposed, because Stella had gotten pregnant. But that wasn't the only reason they got married. In fact, it only made them happier. They were madly in love, and he had been planning on marrying her one day anyway.

She was a professional surfer, which made her a local celebrity in their hometown. She'd even won some international competitions by the time they got married, and her name was becoming well-known in more than just Australia.

Stella's family despised him for getting her pregnant, as if he'd ruined her life. Although they hated him, they thought them getting married was *the right thing to do*.

They were married on the beach in Nelson Bay, the small coastal town in Eastern Australia where both Stella and he had lived their entire lives. He replayed the day in his mind like a scene from a movie. It was January, in the middle of a heat wave. How he missed January in Australia. Stella looked radiant. He remembered sweating through his suit, looking at her and thinking he was the luckiest man alive.

Poor Stella must have been sweltering in the heat, being pregnant, but she didn't complain. She had never looked happier. The ceremony was small, private, and low-budget, with just their families and a few close friends. The minister finally pronounced them man and wife, which they sealed with a tender kiss.

Afterward, Stella grabbed his hand with a twinkle in her eye and pulled him toward the turquoise water. She kicked off her heels when they reached the waves. She waded into the water, pulling him along behind her. Before he knew it, they were swimming side by side in the refreshing sea, he in his suit and she in her wedding gown. Dolphins surfaced not far from where they swam. Thinking back on that day still made him smile.

When Stella lost the baby only a couple weeks later, they were devastated. This made her family hate him even more. Eric was sure that her sister or parents tried to talk her into divorcing him at that point. But he knew that he didn't have to worry. The love they shared was real. They tried to get pregnant again over the next few years, but never did. Even though they weren't without their problems, they were very much in love. Or, so he had thought. Their life together was as close to perfect as one could get. Until the day she left and never came back.



ERIC WOKE THE NEXT morning before his alarm. When he saw the book on his nightstand, it suddenly dawned on him why Martin's name had sounded familiar. It was the book he'd tossed aside after reading that stupid line about winter in Seattle. He picked up the novel and opened it to the last page, already knowing who he would see.

There he was. Martin Watts, *New York Times* Bestselling Author. Martin looked better in his photo than he had in person, even before he killed him. His photo had no doubt been photoshopped to make him look more attractive. You couldn't even tell how fat he was.

Eric set the book back on his nightstand and got out of bed. He supposed readers preferred books written by attractive people. Fortunately, for him, that wouldn't be a problem.

When he walked past the drummer's apartment door on his way to work, Eric wondered if he'd played his drums at all the day before. If he had, Eric hadn't even noticed.





It was Monday night when he saw the news. Eric had taken a break from writing his book to check if there were any breakthroughs in Daisy's case. And, lo and behold, there was. Dwayne Morrison, Daisy's live-in boyfriend, had been arrested for her murder.

When Eric had opened his internet browser to his national news homepage, he was annoyed to see that Patricia and her overrated husband were once again the center of attention. Although, Eric did feel a little prideful that his handiwork had resulted in the biggest news story in the country. For today at least. Bold, red letters filled the top of the page.

*MANNER OF MARTIN WATTS' DEATH STILL UNDETERMINED; WIFE'S DEATH RULED HOMICIDE*

He wondered what exactly they meant by undetermined. The article said Martin was found at the base of his staircase lying under a fallen chandelier with an electrical cord around his neck. Everything Eric read implied suicide. It made him wonder why they hadn't made a ruling on his cause of death. He clicked out of the article and searched for news related to Daisy's murder.

Eric set down his glass of wine and read through the article on his laptop more than once. It didn't give many details, like what evidence had led to Dwayne's arrest. Just that his bail had been set for \$300,000. Eric scowled at Dwayne's picture at the top of the article, his hatred for him growing the longer he stared.

The picture showed Dwayne being led out of an apartment building by Marky Mark and Blondie. Dwayne was overweight and there was little distinction between his chin and his neck. He had dark brown hair and his polo shirt was too tight for his gut. Eric wondered what beautiful Daisy could've possibly seen in him. Aside from his looks, Daisy deserved to be with someone who appreciated her, who loved her. Someone like himself.

He got up and paced around the living room before refilling his glass of wine and sitting back down to work on his book. Daisy would get justice, and he needed to focus on finishing his manuscript. The world needed his novel.

He'd only written half a page when he realized that Dwayne getting arrested wasn't justice at all. What if he gets some unconscionable attorney to make a jury find him not guilty? Or what if he strikes some sort of deal for a lighter sentence? He could be a free man in less than ten years. The thought made Eric nauseous. Even on the minute chance that Dwayne got the death penalty, he'd probably die of old age on death row. And that was much, much more than he deserved. He should've killed him before the cops could get to him. That would've been justice.

He stared at the picture of Dwayne on his screen. The more Eric thought about him, the madder he became. He should've never allowed his fate to be determined by the so called "justice system" of the United States. He deserved to die just like Daisy.

Eric fantasized about winding an electrical cord around his neck, hearing the pathetic sound of him wheeze as he slowly tightened his grip. Dwayne would try to disarm him by swinging his arms behind him, but it would be to no use. Eric would only pull tighter and soon his attempts to pull the cord away from his neck would stop. Eric would relish in taking the last breath from his body.

When he looked at the clock he realized he'd been daydreaming about revenging Daisy's death for over an hour. How could he have been so careless? He got up to pour another glass of wine, hoping

the distraction would help take his mind off Dwayne so he could concentrate on the matter at hand: becoming the greatest author in the world.

But it didn't help. As he walked past his couch, he remembered the way Daisy had looked in her sleep. So lovely.

He sighed, thinking of the temp he had hired to replace Daisy for the time being. She was twenty years older than he had hoped, hard on the eyes, and had an extremely unlovable personality.

She seemed to snub her nose at him every chance she got. Whenever he asked her to do something, she pursed her lips before mumbling an unenthusiastic *all right*. As though he was being completely unreasonable for asking her to do her job. As if he was working for her. Just thinking about her frumpy brown hair and sensible flats made him cringe.

It reminded him that he needed to hire a permanent replacement for Daisy. Preferably a bubbly, young blonde who liked to wear spiked heels. But he'd have to worry about that later. He had a book to finish.

He took a sip from his wine after sitting back down to write. He closed out of the article about Dwayne and forced himself to recall everything about Patricia's murder. He opened a new document, ready to reconstruct every detail about that night for his book. He would change the victims' names, of course, but everything else would be the same.

No sooner had he started typing when he heard the familiar sound of his neighbor's drums pulsating through the wall. He tried to tune it out, but the beat grew louder, faster. He couldn't think straight.

He needed total silence when he wrote. He found any noise, even classical music, a total distraction that blocked his creative pathways. While he would've loved to get lost in his favorite AC/DC album while he crafted his novel, that is exactly what his novel would be if he did: lost.

In his book, *On Writing*, Stephen King tells how he cranks head-banging hard metal while he pens his manuscripts. Eric was in awe of this. For him, that would be utterly impossible. His genius was best unleashed in the quiet.

His neighbor never drummed this late. At least, he never did until Eric asked him not to. The throb of the drums felt like it was coming from inside Eric's head. He couldn't take it anymore. He jumped out of his chair and marched down the hall to his door. He banged twice. Then again. But the drums didn't stop. He banged again, but his neighbor probably couldn't hear it over his obnoxious drumming.

Eric took a deep breath and tried to calm down. But his anger about Daisy's death, Dwayne's arrest, his new dud of a secretary, and his neighbor's relentless drumming was an overwhelming force he could no longer contain.

He had tried to be nice. If his neighbor had answered the door, he would've politely asked him to stop. But now he had forced his hand. There was only one thing left to do. Eric turned back for his apartment to retrieve his gloves, lock-picking kit, and something he could use to strangle the drummer.

• • • •

ERIC ENDED UP GRABBING one of his ties out of his closet. He figured it worked well enough on Patricia, it would do the job for his neighbor—who was still hammering away on the drums.

Eric went out into the hall and double-checked that he was alone before using his gloved hand to try his neighbor's door. Lucky for him, the dimwit had left it unlocked.

Eric slid his lock-picking kit into his pocket before he let himself inside and closed the door behind him. His neighbor's apartment was a mirror image to his own. Eric spotted him as soon as he

stepped inside.

The drum set sat smack in the middle of the living room. Fortunately, his neighbor faced away from him toward the window. Eric wrapped each end of the tie around his gloved hands as he crept toward him.

Eric could see his reflection in the window in front of his neighbor. But he was oblivious to Eric's presence, his head bobbing up and down with each beat. Eric almost felt sorry for the insensitive little prick. Almost.

A large, painted canvas stood on an easel to the left of the drum set. Eric couldn't help but admire the oil painting as he snuck closer. Painting supplies were scattered on the floor under the painting. Although it looked to be a work in progress, it was an exceptionally beautiful work of art. Maybe the drummer should've spent a little more time creating masterpieces and a little less time perturbing his neighbors with his late-night, so-so drumming.

He was directly behind him when his neighbor finally noticed his reflection. He jumped and started to turn around, but it was too late.

Eric wrapped the noose around his neck and pulled with all his strength. The young man's drumsticks fell to the floor as he stood. He grasped at the necktie and spun around to face Eric. Eric moved quickly to stay behind him and keep a tight hold on the noose, but his neighbor kept spinning. Eric jumped onto his back so he wouldn't lose hold of the necktie. The drummer stumbled forward, knocking Eric into the side of easel. The intricate painting fell to the floor. Eric cringed as his neighbor stepped on it as he struggled to free the tie from his neck. They moved across the living room until Eric's weight finally pulled the drummer backward. Eric grunted as his neighbor slammed him against the wall that divided their apartments. Eric's back slid down the wall and they dropped to the floor.

His neighbor thrashed about in a wild motion until finally his movements slowed. Eric held tight until he went limp like an overcooked vegetable. A couple minutes later, he knew it would be safe to let go. His neighbor fell to the side. Eric pushed the rest of his body off his lap before getting up. He didn't look down. He had no desire to see his bloated, discolored face. After all, he did have a heart.

Standing next to the drum set, Eric suddenly wanted to play. It seemed a shame to kill the people that irritated him most if he couldn't enjoy it a little. He had drummed in a band in his early years in Australia, before medical school. They were called Great White. He smiled at their choice of name. They weren't half bad—but never picked up much of a following. They toured around New South Wales the summer after they graduated from year twelve but were too broke to tour any longer.

He bent over and picked up the drumsticks from the floor. When he did, Eric inadvertently got a close look at the whites of the drummer's bulging eyes. They were now pink with pops of bright red from the broken blood vessels. He knew the neighborly thing to do would be to close them, but he didn't do it. Instead, he stepped over his body and took a seat on the stool in front of the drums.

He tapped softly at first, timid that he wouldn't be any good after so many years of not playing. It didn't feel right with his gloves on. If he was going to play, he wanted to put his heart and soul into it. He slipped off his gloves and dropped them on the floor next to him. He made a mental note to wipe the drumsticks off before he left. He closed his eyes and started again.

Gradually, the beat took over him, and his rhythm grew louder and louder. He was amazed by how good he was, like he had never stopped playing. He and the rhythm were one, and, for a while, he lost track of time. It was magical. Like he was high on drugs though he was completely sober. He felt as though he could stay until his neighbor's body decayed.

Eric finally came to his senses. He needed to get back to his book. He let out a sigh and let the drumsticks rest atop his thigh. He knew he shouldn't have taken off his gloves. That was a rookie mistake. But the temptation had been too sweet. He looked around the apartment, wondering what he could use to wipe away his fingerprints. He spotted the small can of paint thinner lying next to the fallen easel. That would work.

He picked up his gloves and went into the kitchen in search of paper towels. He retrieved a nearly full roll from the pantry. He turned the can on its side, soaking a few paper towels and spilling the solution onto the floor. He vigorously wiped the drumsticks until he was certain no trace of his fingerprints remained. Like a good neighbor, Eric disposed of the paper towels in the kitchen garbage before he pulled his tie away from his neighbor's neck and headed for the door.

He felt elated as he meandered back to his apartment. Not only would he never have to hear the sound of those drums come through his apartment walls again, but this killing would make a wonderful addition to his story.



Eric was a page into recreating his neighbor's death when he remembered that his car was parked in a spot visible by the building's security cameras. He would likely be the prime suspect in his neighbor's murder once his body was found. Having his car parked in the parking garage all night wouldn't do him any favors.

He checked the time and did a quick Google search for local movie showtimes. A movie he hadn't heard of was starting in ten minutes at the theater closest to his apartment. He grabbed his wallet and keys and dashed out of his unit.

He fought the urge to take the stairs and waited impatiently for the elevator to take its thirty seconds to come to his floor. He looked away from his neighbor's door as he stood in the hall. He didn't want to succumb to feelings of guilt and ruin his night at the movies. Two minutes later, he drove out of the parking garage into the dark, rainy night.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a movie at the theater. Although his outing was a forced necessity to create an alibi, he was actually looking forward to it. The only downside was it meant he would lose two hours that he could've been writing. And he would never get that time back.

Playing his neighbor's drums had made him nostalgic for his old rock band. He remembered as he drove that he had one of their old hits downloaded onto his phone. He connected it to Bluetooth and rocked his head back and forth to the beat. As time had gone by, he'd forgotten how good they were. He wondered if they would've stuck together if they could have made it big. He replayed the song for the rest of the drive. By the time he got to the movie theater, he was in a fantastic mood.

"One for *Fifty Shades Freed*, please," he said to the teenage girl behind the ticket counter. *Freed from what?* he wondered. He guessed he'd find out soon enough.

She smiled awkwardly as if she were trying to suppress a giggle. "That'll be twelve fifty."

Eric reached into his wallet and pulled out his credit card so the detectives could verify his purchase.

"Unless you have a senior's discount," she added.

His jaw dropped open. Her smile was gone.

"Are you kidding? I'm forty-five."

Her face flushed as she took his card. "Sorry, we're told to ask if..." she paused, as if realizing what she was about to say.

"If what? Do I look like a senior?"

She avoided eye contact as she passed him back his card and movie ticket. "Enjoy your movie," she said, ignoring his question.

"Unbelievable," Eric said, stepping away from the counter.

The previews had just finished when he walked into the theater. It was empty aside for a middle-aged woman seated in the middle of the back row. He sat down on the end of her row, pretending not to see her smile as he sat down.

The movie was not exactly what he was expecting, although he wasn't sure what he'd expected. It was horrible, all the way to the end, when he read *Based on the Bestselling Novel by E L James*.

*Bestselling novel?* If that was what it took to write a bestseller then his book would be winning him a Nobel Prize.

The story wasn't even as entertaining as his co-inhabitant of the theater, who he caught making pathetic eyes at him more than once during the film. *Women*. He hurried out to the men's room while

the credits played, sparing her the embarrassment of trying to pick him up.

He checked his watch on his way out of the theater and saw it was just after ten thirty. If his neighbor wasn't found for a few days, he wondered how precisely the police would be able to pinpoint his time of death. He might need a longer alibi.

He went back to the ticket counter where the teenage girl was still working. She looked less than thrilled to see him.

"I'd like to see another movie. What do you have playing?"

"Um, *Fifty Shades Freed* starts again in five minutes. That'll be our last showing of the night."

"I don't mind being a little late. Have any other movies started in the last half hour?"

"No, sorry. Everything else is just getting out."

Right. "Then it'll be one adult for your next showing of *Fifty Shades Freed*," he said, passing her his credit card.

"Oh. Okay." She ran his card before handing it back to him with another movie ticket and a dumbfounded expression. "Enjoy the show. Again."

"Thanks."

He walked back into the theater and was glad to see that his ex-movie patron from the eight fifteen showing was gone. He just wished he'd brought a book.

• • • •

ERIC WAS STARTLED AWAKE by a sharp poke in his arm. He swatted at the hand that jabbed him, disoriented by his unfamiliar surroundings. The young girl from the ticket counter slowly came into focus. She backed away, putting him at arm's length.

"Excuse me, sir. The credits have been finished for over ten minutes, and we're closed. We need you to leave now."

He rubbed his eyes and got up from his seat. He could remember watching the opening scene of the movie for the second time but realized he must've dozed off soon after. The girl followed him out of the theater and into the main lobby.

He pushed open the glass door and walked through the parking garage to his car. He started his engine and saw that it was after midnight. But since he napped through the second showing, he knew he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. At least not for a while.

He stopped in front of the first bar he saw and went inside for a drink. Or two. He figured he might as well extend his alibi until he was tired enough to go home to bed.

The bar was surprisingly not as sleazy as it looked from the outside. The black and white interior appeared recently renovated and had a modern, industrial feel. The lights that hung from the ceiling were turned down low and pop music blared through the speakers. The seating was a mixture of booths and tables with a long row of barstools set against the bar's concrete counter. A giant mirror covered the wall behind the bar.

The place seemed busy for a Monday night. He took one of the last two empty seats at the bar, next to a twenty-something blonde who was involved in a heavily animated conversation with the two women on the other side of her.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

"Scotch and soda. Make it a double," he said.

The bartender placed a short glass tumbler in front of him a minute later. It was filled to the brim. A single round ice cube floated in the pale brown liquid. Eric emptied the glass after only a few



swigs and signaled the bartender for another. He replaced Eric's empty glass with another filled just as full as the first.

Eric started to take a drink as the blonde to his right turned in his direction. After quickly looking him over, she smiled.

"Hi," she said.

He swallowed his mouthful of Scotch. "Hi."

"I'm Laci."

"I'm Eric."

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

"No. This is my first time here. You?"

"Every once in a while, with my friends."

Although not nearly as beautiful, her facial features and blonde hair shared many similarities to Daisy's. As they continued to engage in small talk, he couldn't help but think about sitting at the sushi bar with Daisy while they waited for their table a few nights before.

"What are you drinking?" he asked when his glass was empty.

She glanced at her half-full martini glass, still half full. "A lemon drop."

He flagged the bartender who made his way toward them at a tortoise's pace.

"We'll have two lemon drops," Eric said when he finally came within earshot. "And make mine a double."

He nodded and turned to make their drinks.

A comfortable silence passed between them, and Eric continued to feel nostalgic for his lovely secretary.

"You remind me of someone," he finally said.

She playfully rolled her eyes. "Like who? You're ex-girlfriend?"

"Not quite. Her name was Daisy."

"Was? Like you don't know her anymore?"

Their lemon drops appeared in front of them and he wasted no time in taking a drink. "Mmm. This is good."

She grinned. "Yes, they are. You said her name *was* Daisy?"

He took another drink. "Yeah." He looked down at the lemon rind floating in his martini glass. "She's dead."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

He noticed this made her uncomfortable and watched her take a sip of her drink. She looked straight ahead as if trying to think of what to say. Or maybe she was debating whether to keep talking to him. He finished his delicious lemon drop and pointed to hers that she'd left untouched while she finished her other martini.

"You mind?" he asked.

"Oh. Umm, no. Go ahead," she said. "You bought it."

She turned back toward her girlfriends as he downed half the lemon drop in one swig.

"I'll have another," he said to the bartender as he walked past. "And make it a double."

Eric watched him unenthusiastically make him another martini. He finished off what was left in his glass and pushed it in the bartender's direction when he set down his newly-made drink. Sometime between his first sip and the bottom of the glass he sobbed for his beloved secretary, overcome by the tragedy of her death. His glass had not long been empty when Laci stood to leave.

“It was nice meeting you.” She placed her hand on his shoulder. “I’m really sorry about your friend.”

She turned to follow her friends out of the bar. Seeing her long blonde curls bounce against her back as she moved struck a chord inside him. He jumped from his barstool, nearly losing his balance on the unsteady floor. His eyes were blurred with tears as he chased after her.

“Wait! Daisy, don’t go!”

He grabbed her by the arm, but she pulled away and hurried toward her friends at the door.

A male patron stepped away from the bar and pressed his palm against Eric’s chest when he started to go after her.

“I think you better just let her go, dude.”

Eric wanted to punch him in the face but knew he was in no condition to put up a fight. The room was spinning despite his standing still. Instead, he put up his hands as a sign of surrender.

“Okay. I’ll let her go.”

The man slowly pulled his hand away from Eric’s chest. Satisfied when Eric didn’t make a run for the door, the man walked back to the bar. As soon as he was out of reach, Eric bolted outside.

He scanned the cars parked along the street before jogging to the parking lot adjacent to the bar. Eric saw her climb behind the wheel of a red Honda with her two friends in tow. He raced to the car as she started the engine.

“Hey!” a male voice shouted from behind him.

It was probably the tough guy again, but it didn’t deter him. He needed to get to her. Her eyes widened when Eric reached the car and he heard its doors lock.

“I’m calling the cops!” the man yelled from the sidewalk.

Eric rapped frantically on her window.

“Daisy! You can’t do this. You can’t leave!”

He tried to open her handle with no success. Her friend shrieked in the backseat.

The car pulled forward and Eric dove onto the hood in a desperate attempt to make her stay. She screamed from behind the wheel and the car jolted to a stop. Eric rolled off the front of the car onto the wet pavement. He stood up, staggered to the side, and shook himself off before climbing back on top of the hood toward the windshield. All three of the women made terrified noises from inside the car.

He pressed his face against the glass in front of the driver’s seat. “Please, don’t go. I beg you. I can’t bear to lose you again.” He sobbed with his hands and face still against the windshield. “Daisy!” he cried.

The women’s shrieking eventually quieted, and Eric rolled over onto his back. He continued to cry for his secretary while he looked at the unexpectedly clear sky. He hardly noticed the flashing red and blue lights from the squad car that pulled up beside him. Two uniformed officers stood over him with stone cold expressions. They were completely unsympathetic to his state.

“Sir, we’re going to need you to get off the car and place your hands on top of your head.”

Eric did as he was told and was shocked to feel the cold metal of a handcuff lock around his wrist in exchange for his cooperation.

“You’re under arrest for disorderly conduct,” the officer said while he secured the cuffs to his other wrist.

The other officer read him his Miranda Rights as they led him into the back seat of their car. Eric watched through the window as they questioned the three women. The officers walked back to the squad car when they were finished and Eric saw the red Honda pull out into the street.

“Daisy,” he muttered under his breath as the car disappeared into the night.



Stephenson watched Adams stifle a yawn from across their desks Tuesday morning. The city was wet and gray out the window behind him. He and Adams had spent the day before interviewing Martin and Patricia's neighbors, family members, and Martin's publicist. They also revisited the crime scene and went through Patricia's medical file from Dr. Leroy.

The neighbors neither saw nor heard anything the night of the murders. The victims' family and friends had no idea who would do this to them. And revisiting the crime scene had given them no new information.

Nothing appeared to be missing from the home. Both victims' wallets were left in the house full of credit cards and cash. Expensive electronics and Patricia's jewelry had also been left untouched.

They had no clear motive for the crimes. According to Patricia's file from the psychiatrist, her husband was a controlling narcissist who often inflicted emotional abuse on his wife. However, everyone they interviewed loved Martin and had nothing but glowing things to say about him. But, if there was one thing Stephenson had learned during his time as a detective it was that no one ever really knew what went on behind closed doors. In this case, either way, it seemed to be irrelevant. Martin didn't kill Patricia. The husband and wife appeared to be victims of the same crime.

Although they'd arrested Dwayne for Daisy's murder, it was bothering him that three people connected to Dr. Leroy were murdered on the same night by strangulation. The doctor's neighbor had confirmed his statement that he'd knocked on his door and asked him to keep the noise down for the evening, but that was about two hours before Daisy's time of death and approximately an hour before Patricia and Martin's. Because the building's security footage in their parking garage only covered part of the parking area, they couldn't tell if his car had been parked in the garage or whether he came or went anywhere that night.

The doctor seemed to have no motive to kill Daisy, or Patricia and Martin for that matter. And all the evidence pointed to Dwayne as Daisy's killer. Nothing so far had linked the doctor to Martin and Patricia's deaths, but there was something he didn't trust about Dr. Leroy.

Despite all their efforts yesterday, they'd gotten nowhere in the investigation. When they'd finally decided to go home and get some rest late last night, it had felt like a waste of a day.

Adams' face lit up when he saw Detective Richards walk past their desks. *Here we go*, Stephenson thought.

"Got your first case yet?" Adams asked, raising his voice just enough to get her attention.

She turned to face the detective. "Yep. Suarez just got the call. We'll be heading to the crime scene in the next few minutes."

"Enjoy," Adams said with a wry smile.

"Thanks." Her eyes traveled to Stephenson and lingered for a moment before she smiled.

"Morning," he said casually.

"Morning." She looked down at the framed photo of Detective Rodriguez on his desk. "Your girlfriend's a cop too?" She motioned toward the photo.

"My late partner, actually. She was killed just over a year ago."

Her expression turned somber; she obviously had no idea. "I'm so sorry. That's horrible."

Stephenson was about to respond when Adams interjected. "He does *have* a girlfriend though. Getting pretty serious, right Stephenson?"

"Actually, we broke up."

Adams' eyebrows shot to the top of his forehead. "What? When?"

"Saturday morning."

"What happened?"

Richards glanced at her desk before turning back to Stephenson. "Looks like Suarez is ready to go. I'll see you guys later."

"Sure," Stephenson said, grateful she'd excused herself from their conversation that had just turned personal.

"So?" Adams pressed.

Stephenson took a deep breath. He might as well tell him the truth. He knew it would probably do him good to talk about it. "I went over to her house to propose on her birthday and found another guy had spent the night. Apparently, they'd been seeing each other for a few weeks."

Adams' jaw dropped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to talk about it."

"Wow. I'm sorry, man. I really am. That's rough."

Stephenson nodded.

"Well, at least you didn't marry her," Adams said.

"I guess."

• • • •

STEPHENSON'S CELL PHONE rang half an hour later. "Stephenson."

"Hey, it's Richards. We just got to the crime scene and I wanted to make sure our homicide isn't related to those cases you're already working on. Our victim is a twenty-three-year-old male who was strangled in his apartment. I know you picked up other strangulation cases over the weekend."

"Yeah, we made an arrest for one of them, but we're still working the other two."

"You guys want to come have a look at the scene? See if it might be connected?"

"Sure, what's the address?" He scribbled it down on a notepad as Richards rattled off the downtown location. "Could you say that again?" He looked in disbelief at the address he'd jotted down.

She repeated the address.

"Thanks, we'll be right there."

"Be right where?" Adams asked as Stephenson hung up.

"You're not going to believe this. Dr. Leroy's neighbor has been murdered. And guess how he died?"

• • • •

"OUR VICTIM IS TWENTY-three-year-old Robert Benson," Richards said.

The apartment looked the part of a bachelor pad. A drum set took up much of the space in the small living room. A pair of drumsticks sat neatly atop the stool. Next to the drums, a large painting and easel lay on the floor of the small living space, surrounded by a mess of painting supplies. Presumably, it had gotten knocked over in the struggle that led to Robert's death.

In the kitchen, Detective Suarez spoke with a member of the CSI team. The team was already working away at processing the scene. Stephenson and Adams stood over the body of Dr. Leroy's neighbor. He lay face-up on the hardwood floor. He was barefoot, wearing a faded black t-shirt and baggy jeans. Even though his face was now mottled with a purplish-gray hue, Stephenson recognized him as the young man he and Adams had confirmed the doctor's alibi with a few days before.

“We spoke to him over the weekend to confirm his neighbor's alibi for our other strangulation cases.”

Richards raised her eyebrows. “Really? That's interesting. Well, looks like you two might need to have another chat with that neighbor.”

“What's that smell?” Stephenson asked. “Acetone?”

“Paint thinner.” Richards pointed to an open can on the floor with clear liquid surrounding it. It lay next to a fallen easel and painting. “We found paper towels in the kitchen garbage that appear to be soaked with it.”

Stephenson looked at the mess of liquid on the floor. “If Robert was cleaning up a spill, he didn't do a very good job.”

“Maybe it got knocked over during the struggle, and the killer tried to wipe up the mess,” Adams said.

It seemed too sloppy for Dr. Leroy. And Stephenson doubted anyone else was responsible for his neighbor's death.

Richards pointed down at the victim. “His friend found him just like this earlier this morning. Robert here was supposed to pick the friend up from the airport last night at eleven thirty but didn't show. His friend called him several times without an answer and ended up taking a taxi home. He came by this morning to make sure Robert was all right. He's pretty shaken up.”

“How'd the friend get in?”

“The door was unlocked. There's no sign of forced entry.”

“No indication the lock been picked?”

“Not that we could tell.”

Stephenson looked over at Adams. “So maybe he knew his killer and let him in.”

“Or he felt safe enough to leave his door unlocked,” Adams said.

“His friend has already given us his statement, but I asked him to stay in case you two had any questions for him. We haven't been able to find what was used to strangle him. It looks like the killer may have taken it with them.”

Stephenson bent down to get a closer look at the victim. “His ligature mark is very similar to Patricia's. I'm guessing it was a necktie.” He lifted one of Robert's hands to his nose with a gloved hand. “I can't smell any paint thinner.”

“Doing my work for me, detective?”

Stephenson looked up to see Pete heading toward them from a few feet away. His coat was wet from the rain and his normally neat short curls were in disarray atop his head. Despite the ME's slightly disheveled appearance, Stephenson could tell he was in a good mood. He placed his black canvas bag of supplies that he brought to every crime scene down next to Robert's body.

“As best I can, doctor,” Stephenson said, stepping back from the body and allowing Pete to start his examination.

Pete knelt over the victim. “I agree, it does look very similar to Patricia's ligature mark.” He carefully turned Robert onto his side and inspected the back of his neck. “Do you have reason to believe his death is related to Martin and Patricia's?”

Stephenson looked at Adams before he answered. “Yes.”

Pete continued to inspect the body while Stephenson turned back to Richards. “Have you requested the building's surveillance footage?”

“We've placed a call to the building's manager. She should be here any minute and can show us what they have. There are no cameras on this floor or in the elevator, but there are a couple in the

building's parking garage.”

“Yeah, we learned that when we requested footage over the weekend to check the doctor's alibi. Problem is, the cameras in the parking garage don't cover the exit or the parking spaces close to it. But we'll see what they show. We should talk to the building manager about getting a camera on the exit. You said the friend who found Robert is still here?”

“Yeah, he's waiting out in the hall. His name is Travis. He confirmed the address for Robert's parents. They live in Kirkland.” She handed him a small piece of paper with their handwritten address.

“Thanks. We'll take over from here. Sorry to take your first case away from you.”

“That's all right. You owe me one,” she said, nudging him with her elbow.

“Okay,” Stephenson said before turning to Adams. “Let's go talk to the friend.”

Adams nodded and turned to Richards before following Stephenson out of the apartment. “See ya later.”

They reached the front door of the apartment and Stephenson bent down to examine the lock for himself. Like Richards had said, the lock looked perfectly intact.

“Richards was totally flirting with you back there,” Adams said in a lowered voice.

“Really? I didn't notice.”

“It was obvious.” Adams shot him a sideways glance. “I hope you're not planning to ask her out before I do.”

Stephenson grinned at the overly-concerned look on his partner's face. “Relax. I'm not planning on asking anyone out. I've got other things on my mind.”

He stepped out into the hall and Adams followed behind. It was easy to spot Robert's friend. The young man had taken a seat in the hallway with his back resting against the wall. His knees were pulled to his chest. As Stephenson approached him, he saw that his eyes were red from crying.

“Hi, I'm Detective Stephenson and this is Detective Adams. You're the one who found Robert this morning?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I already gave the other detectives my statement, but they asked me to hang around in case there were any more questions.” He stared at the wall opposite him as he spoke, avoiding eye contact with the detectives.

“When was the last time you talked to Robert?” Stephenson asked.

“Um...I texted Rob before my flight left from Boston yesterday and he texted me back saying he'd be there to pick me up when I got to Seattle.”

“And what time was that?”

“Around nine p.m. in Boston, so I guess around six o'clock here.”

“Did he ever mention any problems with any of his neighbors?”

“No. Why?” Travis looked up and made eye contact with the detectives for the first time. “Do you think one of his neighbors killed him?”

“How did you get into Robert's apartment this morning?” Adams asked.

“I knocked a bunch of times and he didn't answer. I called his phone and could hear it ringing inside his apartment. When I tried the door, it was unlocked. I went inside and that's when—” his voice broke. Travis cleared his throat. “That's when I found him.”

Stephenson watched Travis' eyes brim with fresh tears.

“Thank you for staying. We're very sorry about Robert.”

“Are you going to catch whoever did this?”



Stephenson made a point not to make promises he couldn't keep to friends and family of homicide victims. But, in this case, he felt strangely confident he would bring Robert's killer to justice.

"Yes we are."

Stephenson could feel Adams' eyes on him as they walked back down the hall to Robert's apartment. But if he felt Stephenson was wrong for promising to catch Robert's killer, he didn't say so.

Pete turned Robert's body onto its side and pulled his t-shirt up to his arm pits as the detectives reentered the apartment. Richards knelt beside him, listening intently, as the medical examiner took advantage of the teachable moment with the young detective.

"This is the lividity I'm talking about." Pete pointed to the purplish discoloration of Robert's back as Stephenson and Adams approached. "When the heart stops, blood pools in the dependent parts of the body. Since there is no lividity present on the victim's abdomen, it would seem he died in this position. The discoloration doesn't shift when I turn the victim, which means the lividity is fixed. This tells me the victim has been dead for at least eight hours." Pete looked up at the two detectives standing over him. "The victim's liver temperature is seventy-eight degrees; he's in full rigor, and, as I was just showing Detective Richards, his lividity is fixed. Right now, I'm estimating he's been dead for approximately eleven to thirteen hours."

Adams checked his watch and turned to Stephenson. "That puts our time of death between seven thirty and nine thirty last night."

"I'll notify Robert's parents if you want to chase up that security footage," Stephenson said.

"You sure?"

Stephenson nodded.

"Okay. Call me when you're on your way back. I'll probably still be here. I want to see what else CSI finds in Robert's apartment before I go back to the homicide unit."

"Will do."

"I'll call you when I get done with the autopsy," Pete said.

"Thanks." Stephenson took a deep breath as he moved toward the elevator and prepared to do the hardest part of his job.

• • • •

STEPHENSON CHECKED his phone before pulling out onto the street as he left the home of Robert's parents. He'd placed it on silent before doing the notification.

He looked out his window at the landscaped lawns that lined the steep street as he drove to the end of the block. The Benson's large water-view home was like all the others in its Kirkland neighborhood. Overlooking Lake Washington, the newly-built, two-story house left little space between them and their neighbors. Like many homes in the area, the lot was developed for a much smaller structure in the sixties or seventies, which would've been demolished and replaced with their current dwelling. The upscale neighborhood was just up the hill from the lake and offered a mixture of both mature trees and new homes.

He felt drained after informing the Bensons of their son's death. It didn't matter how many death notifications he'd done before, it never got easier. He doubted it ever would. The Bensons were obviously well-off, but Stephenson didn't envy them. No amount of money could ever replace their loss.

He reflected on his conversation with Robert's parents as he drove across the floating bridge over Lake Washington back to the city. On a bright summer day, the view of the lake with Mount Rainier in the backdrop made for a spectacular sight. But on this dreary day in January, the visibility from the

bridge was poor. Stephenson could only make out the water close to the bridge, which rippled on the surface from the wind and rain.

He called Adams when he got to the other side of the bridge.

“How did it go?” Adams asked.

“They were in shock. Grief stricken, as expected. I wish I could unsee the look on their faces when I told them. I hate that part of the job.”

Adams exhaled into the phone. “I know. Me too.”

“Are you still at the scene?”

“Yeah, CSI is still processing it. After you left, I noticed Robert’s drumsticks reeked of acetone. We dusted them for prints but there were none. It seems they were wiped clean with the paint thinner that had spilled on the floor. I’ll have them sent to the lab to be tested for mineral spirits and acetone.”

Stephenson wasn't surprised by the finding but still found it disturbing. It left only two possible scenarios in Stephenson's mind. Either the doctor had played his neighbor's drums prior to killing him or he'd played them after strangling Robert and while his dead body lay at Dr. Leroy's feet. He thought the second scenario more likely, which meant they were dealing with a psychopath.

“I’m still going over the building’s security footage so I’ll be here a little longer. You coming back?”

Stephenson passed the exit that would take him to Robert’s apartment, deciding to make another stop first. “No, I’m going to pay Leroy a visit. I’ll meet you back at homicide this afternoon.” The only positive thing that had come from his visit with the Bensons was it made him even more determined to catch their son's killer.

“Okay, see you then.”

A few minutes later, Stephenson pulled into the parking lot of Dr. Leroy's psychiatry practice. He was all but convinced the doctor had murdered his neighbor. And he sure as hell wasn't going to let him get away with it.



Eric was half asleep listening to a typical whiny millennial complain about the stresses of her day job when his drab new secretary rudely interrupted them. She threw open his office door and butted into the middle of his client's private session. He noticed she didn't even have the good grace to look sorry. He felt his left eye begin to twitch.

After sleeping off his few too many drinks in a jail cell, he'd been released early that morning. Slapped with a thousand-dollar fine, Eric was told he would receive a subpoena in the mail with an upcoming court date for his misdemeanor charge. His head throbbed despite the aspirin and half a pot of coffee he'd consumed before coming to the office. He tried not to feel down on himself for the absurdity of his actions after he'd left the theater.

"There's a police officer here to see you. He says it's urgent," she blabbed.

"Police officer?" His client sat forward in her chair.

He really needed to get a new secretary.

"Well, tell him that he has to wait. As you can see, I'm with a client."

"I don't think he's going to take no for an answer."

*It seems like the one who's having a hard time taking no for an answer is you,* he wanted to say. He checked his watch. There was only fifteen minutes left in his client's session, and he had lost interest in anything she said nearly an hour ago. He looked down at her chart to find her name.

"I'm sorry, Bridgett. But it looks like we will have to pick this up again next week. My apologies for the interruption."

Bridgett looked at his secretary and then back at him.

"Okay."

She sheepishly stood from her chair and followed his secretary out of the room. It was moments like these when he missed Daisy almost more than he could bear.

The door hadn't yet fully closed behind them when Blondie pushed it back open. He did not look happy to see him.

"Good afternoon, doctor."

Eric crossed his leg and set down his notepad.

"Good afternoon, detective."

He shut the door but remained standing just inside of it. Eric looked from him to the chair and then back to him again, as if daring him to sit down. He didn't. Probably afraid Eric would start reading his mind if he did. And then he would know they had nothing on him.

"What were you doing last night between seven p.m. and midnight?"

*Well, fair dinkum. They'd found his body already. That was quick for a bloke who never seemed to leave the apartment.* Eric thought it might be weeks before his body was discovered, after someone finally complained of the smell or a relative came to check on him.

"Um...let me think."

He picked up his pen and tapped it against his notebook.

"I went to the movies. I think I have my ticket stubs in my wallet if you'd like to see." He reached into his back pocket.

"I would. What time was the movie?"

"I actually saw two movies, back to back. Well, the same movie. Twice. The first showing was around eight thirty." Eric pulled out the movie tickets and held them up. "Eight fifteen to be exact," he

read aloud before handing it off to the detective. He had made sure to also have the receipts handy. He pulled them out next and held them out. "Here's my receipt with my credit card information."

Blondie took it from him, looking unimpressed. His expression changed, and Eric realized he must've seen the movie title.

"Fifty Shades Freed, huh?"

"Yes."

"You go by yourself?"

"I did."

"Interesting. And it was good enough that you had to see it twice?"

"What can I say? I liked it. So kill me." He smiled. Blondie frowned. "No pun intended."

"You were late," he said, ignoring Eric's joke. "This receipt is timed eight twenty-one."

"Only a few minutes. They were still playing previews for a while after I took my seat."

"What did you do from seven p.m. until the time you got to the movies?"

"Let me think." Eric motioned toward the chair across from him that was usually occupied by his patients. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to have a seat?"

"I'm sure."

The detective shifted his weight from one foot to another and Eric could tell he'd made him uncomfortable.

"Suit yourself. Anyway, I got home about six. I made dinner and then watched TV until I decided to go to the movies." That last part was a lie. He never watched TV that early in the evening. But there was no way he was going to tell him about his book. Or murdering his neighbor. "Why do you ask?"

The cop looked like he was trying to read him before he answered.

"I'm afraid that yet another person that you know has been murdered."

Eric portrayed a look of surprised concern. "I hope you're joking."

"I never joke about murder."

His stone-cold expression and unmoving form reminded him of a statue, and something about this struck Eric as funny. He did his best to suppress the laugh that rose to the surface but was unable to control the smile that escaped his lips.

"Something funny?"

He relaxed his mouth.

"No. It just doesn't seem like that could be possible."

"You're not going to ask who it is?"

"I assume you're going to tell me."

"Your neighbor, Robert Benson. The one you asked to stop drumming the night of Patricia, Martin, and Daisy's murders."

"That's awful. He was so young."

"Yes. I've just come from notifying his parents of their twenty-three-year-old son's death. Their lives will never be the same."

If he was trying to make him feel guilty about killing the drummer, he was wasting his breath. Eric had heard the TV going in his neighbor's apartment during the day and all throughout the weekends. He shuddered at the thought. *What kind of lowlife watched TV during the day?* His neighbor, apparently.

Eric had always been revolted by people who watched TV during the daylight hours. It seemed a little more civilized when it was at least dark out. But people who sat on their ass wasting the

daylight hours by numbing their brains with mindless television and having no ambition whatsoever never ceased to disgust him. Eric reminded himself of this whenever he started to feel sorry for killing him.

“Did you go straight home after the movies?”

“Well, no. But that's a long story.”

“I have time,” he said.

Eric sighed. Of course he did. “I stopped at a bar on the way home.”

“You have a receipt to show for that too?”

“No. I got arrested before I was able to pay my tab.”

His face perked up. “Arrested? For what?”

“Disorderly conduct. I had a few too many. I slept it off in a jail cell and they released me this morning. I'm sure you'll be able to verify that without a problem.”

“I will.”

Eric could see the detective was intrigued by his arrest. More so than he thought he should be.

“Was something bothering you that caused you to drink so much?”

Eric scoffed at his lousy attempt to psychoanalyze him. “Nope.”

“Have you ever been inside your neighbor's apartment?”

He was about to say no but changed his mind in the off chance that he'd left some trace of himself inside the drummer's apartment.

“Yes, once.”

Blondie waited for him to offer more information. Eric obliged.

“We rode together in the elevator one afternoon, and I asked if I could have a go at his drum set.”

“Have a go?”

“Yes. I was the drummer in a band during my youth in Australia.”

He paused, proud of this fact. The detective looked back at him blankly. *What a buzzkill*, Eric thought.

“Anyway, I asked if he would mind if I had another crack at it since it had been so long, and he said sure.”

“And how long ago was this?”

He should probably make it recent. “Two nights ago.”

Blondie crossed his arms and Eric had difficulty reading his expression.

“A few of the tenants complained about his drumming to the building's manager, but not you. I would imagine you felt he was pretty inconsiderate though. Living right next to him and all.”

He was fishing for information, but Eric didn't take the bait. “I wasn't bothered by it. But I guess I've always had a deep appreciation for the arts.” Eric looked at him like he knew he would understand, even though he knew he wouldn't.

“Did you hear anything last night, before the movie?”

“Mmm...” He pretended to think for a moment. “No.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Sorry I can't be of more help.”

Blondie seemed to study him, obviously not believing what Eric had said.

“It would help if you allowed me to search your apartment. Would you consent to that?”

“I'm afraid not without a warrant.”

Blondie looked as though he'd expected this.

“It must be hard to trust people after all the terrible things you see on the job,” Eric said. “You have a family, detective?”

When he didn't respond, Eric continued. “I imagine it's difficult to switch off from the dead bodies, heinous crimes, and murderers you encounter when you go home and feel obligated to act normal with your family, wife, or girlfriend. Like it's all just another day at the office. That must be wearing.”

Eric could see he'd struck a nerve, but not in the way he intended. He had misjudged him.

“Oh, wait. You don't have any of those,” Eric corrected.

Now he had gotten under his skin. The detective's eyes narrowed, but he otherwise tried to ignore Eric's observation. Blondie was young, probably not yet thirty. But old enough to have a family, or at least someone to go home to.

“You let the job consume your life, don't you? Well, I guess that makes things easier. No one to have to interact with after some of the grotesque things you must see.”

“While I'm here, I may as well inform you that your client, Patricia, and her husband's deaths are being treated as a double homicide. So, don't leave town. I'll probably need to speak with you again soon.”

If the young cop was trying to shock him, he failed.

“Anytime. You know where to find me.” Eric took a business card off his desk and held it out for the detective. “Here, this has all my contact information.”

He hesitated to accept it. “Thanks, but we've got all your information already on record.”

He lifted the card higher. “Just in case.”

Reluctantly, Blondie took the card and slipped it into his back pocket before turning to leave.

“Thanks for your time, doctor,” he said as he opened the office door.

“If you ever need to talk about anything, I'd be happy to fit you in. I think you'd find I'm an excellent listener.”

Blondie slammed his door shut.





Stephenson looked up from his desk when Adams got back to the Homicide Unit later that evening. Adams took a seat across from his partner. “How’d it go with the doctor?”

Stephenson placed his hands on the back of his head. “He has an alibi for most of the night. He went to the movies, actually two movies in a row. He watched two back-to-back showings of *Fifty Shades Freed* and paid with his credit card. I stopped at the theater on my way back and checked their security footage. He was there.”

“Interesting movie choice.”

“It gets better. He stops at a bar on the way home, gets drunk, follows a group of women to their car where he jumps onto the hood and hysterically begs them not to leave. According to the arrest report, he kept calling one of them Daisy. He cried out her name the whole ride back to the station.”

Adams raised his eyebrows.

“What did the building’s security cameras show?” Stephenson asked.

“Not much. There’s a camera at the front entrance and three in the parking garage. Twenty-eight of the seventy-five people who entered through the building’s front entrance between five and ten last night had to be buzzed in. The rest used their keycard. I asked Robert’s friend, Travis, if he recognized any of those twenty-eight visitors, but he said no. The footage isn’t the best quality, but I’ll run those images through our facial recognition software to see if we get any hits.”

“How did Travis get in the building without Robert letting him in?”

“He was let in by a woman leaving for work. She must’ve presumed he lived in the building. So much for controlled access.

“Anyway, there’s only one other resident on Robert’s floor other than Dr. Leroy. She’s ninety years old and was watching TV in her apartment during Robert’s time of death. She didn’t see or hear a thing. The entrance to the parking garage is gated. You can only get in with the building’s keycard. The parking garage cameras show Dr. Leroy get into his car and leave the garage at 8:10 p.m. and he doesn’t come home until seven thirty this morning.”

“So, his alibi’s solid, but only from 8:10 onwards,” Stephenson said. “I’m guessing the doctor probably killed Robert shortly before he left for the movies, but that’s going to be difficult to prove unless we can get a more precise time of death. What else did you find at the scene?”

“Not much. I dropped Robert’s laptop and cellphone off at TESU to be analyzed.”

The Technical Electronic Support Unit was located on the seventh floor next to the Homicide Unit.

“I also sent the drumsticks to the crime lab on my way here from the crime scene. They’re backed up as usual, so it’ll be a few weeks before we get the official results. So far, there’s no match to Dr. Leroy’s fingerprints anywhere in the apartment.”

“Leroy said he went over and played the drums two nights ago.”

It didn’t surprise him that Dr. Leroy lied, but it made him wonder why he’d said he’d been in his neighbor’s apartment on Sunday night. There must be something that linked him to Robert’s crime scene.

“You think the killer played the drums before he killed him?” Adams asked.

“Or after.”

Adams leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk.

“We need to search Dr. Leroy’s apartment. I spoke with Judge Tanner about it this afternoon, but she doesn’t think we have enough on Leroy for a warrant. Maybe we should ask if he’d let us do the search without one.”

Stephenson let out a sigh and leaned back in his chair. “I already tried. He said no.”

Adams nodded. “Figures. Robert's building manager said she'd received two complaints about the noise from Robert playing his drums in his apartment. Both from tenants on the floor below who have solid alibis for last night. There were no complaints from his next-door neighbor, Dr. Leroy. I think he preferred to take matters into his own hands. The manager said if she got one more complaint, she would've given Robert notice to evict the apartment.”

“I'll check the traffic cams between his apartment and Martin and Patricia's address on Friday night.”

“I'll help you,” Adams said.

Even though their addresses were less than five miles apart, it took several hours for them to go through every traffic cam footage between Dr. Leroy’s and Martin and Patricia’s residence the night of their deaths. Stephenson studied the map after looking through the last of the footage. It would’ve been possible for Dr. Leroy to have avoided all traffic cameras on his way to their house, but it would have required a great deal of premeditation.

“It's kind of strange that a middle-aged man with a clean record would suddenly murder three people within less than a week. Although, it happens, I know. When did he move here from Australia?” Adams asked.

“Twenty years ago. He was twenty-five. I requested a background check from the Australian authorities, but I’m waiting on the report.”

“Oh, and I almost forgot,” Stephenson added. “Dwayne's two friends saw his arrest on the news and came home early from their snowboarding trip in Canada. They came into the station this afternoon to confirm Dwayne had spent the night at their place the night of Daisy's murder. Only it doesn't change anything. Like Dwayne had said, he didn't get to their house till about midnight, so it leaves plenty of time for him to have killed Daisy. Their statements will be pretty much useless to his defense.”

“I agree,” Adams said.

Stephenson shut down his laptop and stood from his chair. “Let’s call it a night.”



Adams was already at his desk when Stephenson got to work the next morning. Stephenson had his coat halfway off when Adams got up from his seat.

“You might want to leave that on,” he said. “I came in early this morning, and I stumbled upon something interesting.”

“What's that?” Stephenson pulled his rain jacket back over his shoulder.

“I searched for Martin and Patricia's case file using their address, only I typed in 3898 McGilvra instead of East McGilvra Street. Coincidentally, this pulled up two files, 3898 McGilvra *Boulevard* East and 3898 East McGilvra *Street*. The first report is for a break-in that occurred a few blocks from Martin and Patricia's two nights before their deaths. And the addresses are only one word different. Nothing was taken from the home, and, when the mother and daughter surprised the intruder, he fled but hasn't been caught.”

“So, did they see his face?”

Adams smiled. “They did. He was wearing a baseball hat, but they describe him as being in his mid-forties, Caucasian with light brown hair, and approximately five ten with a thin build.”

“It could be Dr. Leroy.”

“Yes, it could. They believe the intruder entered the house through the back door, *and* there's a slight indication the lock was picked. I'm thinking if I got the address wrong, maybe he did too. Anyway, I've already printed off a photomontage that includes Dr. Leroy for them to ID. If we head there now, we could probably question the daughter too, before she goes to school.”

“Nice work. Let's go.”

• • • •

THEY PULLED IN FRONT of the Madison Park home twenty minutes later. It was in the same neighborhood as Martin and Patricia's house, where the streets were lined with maple trees and the homes aged from the 1920's to new. Stephenson was glad to see two cars were parked in the driveway. The rain had started to come down hard, and he pulled the hood of his jacket over his head as he stepped out of the car.

When they got under the covered front porch, he drew back his hood. Adams rang the doorbell. Moments later, a teenage girl cautiously opened the door only enough to see who was there.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

According to the police report, she was seventeen.

Adams smiled, hoping to put the girl at ease. “Good morning. I'm Detective Adams and this is Detective Stephenson. We have some questions for you and your mother about the break-in you had last week.”

She looked back and forth between the two detectives.

“Mom!” She turned back toward the inside of the house. “Some detectives are here to ask about the break-in,” she yelled.

“Okay, I'm coming,” a woman's voice called from upstairs.

The girl opened the door wide and stepped aside to make room for the detectives.

“Come on in.”

“Thank you,” Adams said, stepping into the entryway.

Stephenson followed closely behind. The girl used one hand to fling her long dark curls behind her back while she closed the door with the other. A thin middle-aged woman descended the carpeted stairway that led to the entryway, securing an earring as she went. In contrast to her daughter's casual attire, she wore fitted black pants and a red blouse. She stepped carefully in her stilettos.

“Ms. Phillips?”

“Yes. Call me Beth.”

Adams repeated their introduction as the woman reached the bottom of the steps.

“Have you caught him?” she asked, looking expectantly at the detectives.

“Not yet,” Adams said. “But we're hoping you and your daughter might be able to answer some questions that would help us identify him.”

She let out a sigh in her obvious disappointment. “Of course. Would you like to have a seat?”

She motioned toward the sofa in a formal living room to the right of the entryway.

“That'd be great, thank you.”

The detectives took a seat on the sofa. The woman sat across from them in an armchair while her daughter started to go upstairs.

“Kaitlyn, come sit down.”

Kaitlyn looked put out as she turned back down the steps. “I'm gonna be late for school.”

“This is important. It won't take long,” Beth said.

The girl let out a loud sigh before plopping herself down next to her mother in an identical armchair. She looked across at the detectives with a pained expression.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like Chris Pine?” Kaitlyn asked, staring at Stephenson.

“Kaitlyn.” Beth looked slightly shocked at her daughter's question.

Adams rolled his eyes. “Trust me, he knows how good he looks. You don't have to tell him. Don't make my life any harder than it already is. He doesn't even work out. It's disgusting.”

Although he knew his partner was half-joking, his comments were out of character for him to say in front of their two witnesses. He was normally nothing but professional. Stephenson wondered if Richard's flirting with him was getting to his partner.

“Anyway, we have some photos we'd like both of you to look at and see if any of these men is the man who broke into your house.”

Adams pulled the photos out from the inside of his jacket and laid them on the coffee table.

“Okay,” Beth said.

Stephenson held his breath while the mother and daughter leaned forward to look closer at the pictures.

They stared at the photos for almost a minute before Beth spoke. Stephenson knew what she was going to say before she said it. There'd been no look of recognition on either of their faces.

“I'm sorry, I don't know. It all happened so fast, and he was wearing a baseball hat so it's hard to tell from the pictures. I can't be sure.”

“What about you, Kaitlyn?” Adams asked.

The girl was still staring down at the photos.

“Maybe this one.” She pointed down at Dr. Leroy's photo. “But I'm not sure. He looks different without the hat.”

*It's him,* Stephenson thought. “Take your time, Kaitlyn. Is this the man who broke into your house?”

She bit her lip and took another look at his picture then glanced across at all the others. “Maybe. But he also kind of looked like him.” She pointed to a man in another photo who had similar features

to Dr. Leroy.

Stephenson tried his best to hide his disappointment. They were so close to her making a positive ID of Dr. Leroy.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It could've been either of those two.”

“Did you notice if he had an accent? Did he say anything while he was here?”

Beth's eyes lit up. “Yes, he said he was leaving when I came into the entryway. Now that you mention it, I think he might've had an accent. I'm not sure from where though, maybe British? No, it was subtler. Actually, I'm not sure.” She rubbed her fingers against either side of her temples. “I'm sorry. I was so panicked that a stranger had broken into our home. That's all I was focused on.”

“That's okay,” Adams said. “Do you remember an accent, Kaitlyn?”

She shrugged. “I didn't notice.” She turned to her mother. “Can I go to school now? I'm already late.”

Beth nodded.

She jumped out of her chair and grabbed a backpack laying by the stairs.

“Hope you catch him,” she said to the detectives before she ran out the door.

*Not as much as I do*, Stephenson thought.

She had only been gone for a few seconds when the front door flung open again. She leaned her head around the door. “He said *crikey*. I just remembered.”

“And are you sure he didn't have an accent?” Stephenson asked.

“Maybe, I don't know. But I remember he said *crikey* when he dropped his phone because I thought it was a weird thing to say. Anyway, I gotta go,” she said before disappearing behind the door and pulling it shut behind her.

“I should probably be getting to work,” Beth said. “Unless there's anything else?”

Adams looked at Stephenson before he answered. “No, that's all for now. Thanks for your time.”

“Sorry we couldn't be more helpful.”

She stood from her chair and the detectives followed her to the door.

“I changed the lock on the back door and had a security system installed in the house. Do you think we're in danger of the man coming back?”

“We can't say for sure, but we don't think so.” Adams handed her his card before following Stephenson outside. “If you think of anything else, please let us know.”

“I will,” she said, closing the door behind them.

“He said *crikey*,” Stephenson said once they got in the car. “It had to be Dr. Leroy. We were so close to Kaitlyn identifying him.”

He leaned his head back against the headrest while Adams drove.

“I agree, but it still doesn't give us an arrest.”

Stephenson looked out the window. The rain had stopped, but it had been enough to leave puddles in the street. His mind went back to Dr. Leroy's arrest report from two nights before.

“Where do you think Daisy was that night when she told Dwayne she was at her sisters? Her parents said they hadn't seen her in weeks.”

“I don't know. Why?”

“What if she was with Dr. Leroy?”

Adams seemed to think about this for a moment. “You think there was something going on between them? Her phone records didn't show any contact between them.”

They still hadn't found Daisy's phone but were able to get her text and call history through her phone records. Although, having her actual phone would've been more helpful. There were some things, like photos, that couldn't be obtained through phone records.

“True. But he seemed genuinely stricken when we informed him of her death. It was different than the way he reacted when we told him about the death of his neighbor and one of his patients. Like he actually *cared*.”

“Yeah, I agree. But he did work with her every day. He could've had more of a personal relationship with her than with his neighbor and Patricia. Plus, if he killed those two, their deaths wouldn't have come as a shock.”

“Right.”

Stephenson's eyes were drawn to the oppressive gray cloud cover that hung over them as he thought about how they were going to prove the doctor's guilt. Dr. Leroy had killed three people in a matter of days. If they didn't arrest him soon, Stephenson was sure there would be more. He had to be stopped. He had an idea, but his partner wasn't going to like it. He decided not to say anything as they drove back to the Homicide Unit. He needed to talk to Sergeant McKinnon.





Stephenson could see the sergeant was in his office when they got back. He stopped at his desk to quickly check his email before he went to see the sergeant. He'd gotten an email back from the Australian police in New South Wales. The doctor's record was clean.

He forwarded the email to Adams before he closed out of his inbox, all the more intent to carry out his plan. It might be their only chance of catching Dr. Leroy.

"Can I ask you something?"

He looked to see Richards standing at the end of his desk.

"Only if you promise not to ask if anyone's ever told him he looks like Chris Pine," Adams said.

She looked confused. "What?"

"Don't mind him. He's just kidding," Stephenson said.

She smiled. "Okay. Well, since you've taken over my first homicide case, I wanted to know where you guys were at. Did you talk to his neighbor, the doctor?"

"I did."

"And? Is he your guy?"

"I think he killed Robert, yes. Unfortunately, we're still a ways off from proving it."

"Well, I'll let you get back to work then. Just wanted to get an update."

Stephenson watched Adams' eyes follow her as she walked away. He stood and headed for McKinnon's office.

Adams looked up from his desk. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I need to see McKinnon about something."

Adams waited a moment for him to elaborate. "Okay," he said, turning back to his laptop.

Stephenson felt a little guilty about going to the sergeant before telling his partner about his plan, but he didn't want to argue about it. And he felt he had no choice. It was their only option if they wanted to stop the doctor from killing anyone else.

Stephenson tried to gather his thoughts as he approached the sergeant's office. He knew what he was about to ask was against protocol and there was probably no way the sergeant would go for it. But, if anyone would see the need to break standard procedure for the sake of catching a killer, it would be McKinnon.

The glass door to McKinnon's office was closed and Stephenson could see him sitting at his desk behind his computer. He knocked against the glass enough to get the sergeant's attention. McKinnon lifted his head and motioned for him to come in. He took a deep breath as he opened the door.



Eric rose early on Thursday morning to get some writing in before work. His drunken escapade on Monday night had put him behind on his writing schedule. He took a sip from his freshly brewed black coffee and sat at his desk. He looked out his large window at the city that was still dark. It was so quiet, he felt like he was alone in the world. It was the perfect atmosphere to work his novel.

After Blondie's visit to his office on Tuesday, Eric started to think he might need to take some precautionary measures in the unlikely event they charged him with murder. He was sure he'd been careful and was confident they wouldn't find adequate evidence to arrest him. All they probably had to go on was that he knew all three of the deceased. It was certainly not proof that he killed anyone.

Even so, he needed to prepare for the worst-case scenario. He had stopped by his bank on his way home from the office the day before and withdrawn ten thousand in cash. It was safely stowed in his fireproof box under his bed where he kept his passport and other important documents. Just in case.

He still had two hours before he needed to leave for the office. He ran a Google search of Dwayne Morrison to see if there were any updates on his arrest and when he might go to trial. Eric choked on his coffee as he read the first headline that came up.

He set down his mug and coughed while he reread the headline. Surely, he'd read it wrong. But he hadn't. He clicked on the article and subconsciously shook his head as he read through it. *Unbelievable*. Starsky and Hutch really were as dumb as a box of rocks. Their incompetency was infuriating.

He looked at the time and got up to take a shower. There was no way he could work on his novel now. He needed to go have a word with his inept friends at the Seattle Homicide Unit.

• • • •

IT WAS JUST BECOMING daylight when Eric got to the Police Headquarters. He knew his way around from his visit over the weekend. After convincing the cop at the front desk that he needed to speak with the detectives regarding his secretary's murder, the officer had Eric wait while he called the homicide unit.

"The two detectives you wanted to speak to are both on the phone, but another detective will be down shortly to escort you upstairs," the officer said after making the call.

"Fine." Eric paced back and forth while he waited for the detective to bring him upstairs.

A dark-haired detective stepped off the elevator five minutes later. He introduced himself as Detective Suarez. He used his ID badge to get back into the elevator with Eric and pushed the button for the seventh floor.

"I'll take you to one of our interview rooms where you can wait to speak to Detectives Adams and Stephenson," Suarez said as they got off the elevator and entered the homicide unit.

Ignoring the detective, Eric stormed into the large open room cluttered with desks. There they were sitting across from each other. Dumb and dumber.

"How could you let him go?" he yelled.

They both looked up as Eric marched toward them.

Adams mumbled something under his breath and looked across at his partner. Eric must've heard wrong because it sounded like, *that's what I said*.

“What?” Eric asked.

Suarez caught up to Eric and pulled both of his hands behind his back.

“It’s okay,” Blondie said, signaling for Suarez to let him go.

Eric felt the detective slowly release his grip from Eric’s wrists.

Blondie rested both his elbows on his desk and leaned forward.

“We’re working on a theory that the same person who killed Daisy, also killed your client, Patricia Watts, her husband, Martin, and your neighbor, Robert.”

While Eric was happy the blond one was not as smart as he thought, he was irritated he couldn’t solve something so simple as Daisy’s murder. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“I *know* her boyfriend killed her. She was clearly afraid of him.”

“Did she ever tell you specifically that he’d hurt her? Or that she thought he might kill her?”

*No*, he thought. But he couldn’t say that. “Yes.”

They seemed to notice his hesitation. “And did you tell her to go to the police?”

This time Eric didn’t hesitate. “Well, she only told me last Thursday. I told her she should leave him. Maybe that’s what she was trying to do when he killed her.”

“Hmm.” Blondie folded his arms and sat back in his chair.

From what Eric could tell, he wasn’t taking him seriously.

He turned to Marky Mark. “If you had enough evidence to arrest him over the weekend, why in the world would you release him now?”

Marky Mark cleared his throat. “He has an alibi for the time of Daisy’s death. It was just confirmed yesterday.” Eric noted that he didn’t look happy about it.

“That has to be a mistake. I’m telling you he killed Daisy. You’ve let her killer back out on the street.”

“No one seems to know where Daisy was last Thursday night, the night before she was killed. Was she with you?” Blondie asked.

“Why? You think *I* killed her?” He pointed to his chest.

“Did you?”

“Of course not! I—” He stopped short, realizing he was about to say he loved her. He guessed maybe he did, but he couldn’t say that to these buffoons. “She was my friend.”

Blondie seemed to be taking pleasure from his outburst, which only made him more furious.

“You haven’t come across her phone, have you? Maybe she left it in your apartment?” he asked.

“No, I don’t have her phone. Maybe if you two were doing your jobs properly you’d have found it by now. Are you still even treating Dwayne as a suspect?”

“His alibi has pretty much ruled him out. He couldn’t have been in two places at once.”

“Well he couldn’t possibly have been wherever he said he was, because I’m certain he killed Daisy.”

“Sorry, doctor. I’m afraid, with a confirmed alibi, we have to accept that he’s not our guy.”

Only the jackass wasn’t sorry. Eric might’ve been imagining it, but he looked like he was trying not to smile. Eric narrowed his eyes at him before turning to Wahlberg. He couldn’t read anything from his expression.

“You’re wrong. You need to check his alibi again.”

“Do you have any other information you’re not telling us?” Blondie asked.

“No. Except that Daisy wasn’t killed by the same person who murdered Patricia, her husband, and my neighbor. Daisy was killed by Dwayne.”

“And who killed Patricia, her husband, and your neighbor?”

He was nearly tempted to confess for the sake of getting Daisy the justice she deserved. Nearly, but not quite. “That's your job to find out, not mine. You two have made a serious mistake,” Eric said before he turned and walked out of the homicide unit.

If they weren't going to make Dwayne pay for what he did to Daisy, he'd have to kill him himself.



Stephenson's desk phone rang an hour after Dr. Leroy's visit. He recognized the number from the security desk on the building's first floor.

"Stephenson."

"Hey, it's Drew from security. I've got a couple down here who want to speak with you about their son's murder. They said his name is Robert Benson."

"Tell them I'll be right down."

Stephenson stood from his desk after hanging up. Adams looked up from his computer screen.

"The Bensons are here and want to talk to us about Robert's case."

Adams nodded. "I'll see if the conference room is available."

Stephenson put his hands on his hips and stared at the floor while he waited for the elevator. It was possible the Bensons had some information that could help him solve their son's murder. But, most likely, they had come for answers. Answers he wouldn't be able to give them.

• • • •

"HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW who killed him? He lived in a secure building."

Robert's mother gripped the armrests of her chair. Her eyes searched for answers as she shifted her gaze between Adams and Stephenson.

Scott and Linda Benson looked like different people from the put-together couple Stephenson had met two days earlier. Linda's strawberry-blond hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. From the dark circles under their bloodshot eyes, Stephenson doubted they'd had any sleep since he last saw them.

"We're still processing some of the evidence from Robert's crime scene. And we have a person of interest."

"So, why don't you arrest him?" Robert's father asked, taking hold of his wife's hand.

"We don't have enough evidence to arrest anyone at this time," Adams said. "But we're doing everything we can to prove who killed him."

Scott Benson choked back tears. Stephenson slid a box of Kleenex across the conference table.

Linda pressed Stephenson. "Robert's been dead for nearly three days now. I read that if a homicide isn't solved after the first forty-eight hours the odds of solving the case go way down. Does this mean you might never catch his killer?"

Before Stephenson could answer, Scott loudly pulled a tissue from the box.

"It's true that the first forty-eight hours are critical in a homicide investigation, but we can't always make an arrest that quickly. Some cases just take longer to solve. It doesn't mean that we aren't going to solve your son's case."

"There wasn't even a mention of Robert's death in the news today. All they could talk about was that big-shot author who offed his wife before killing himself. It's like the world has forgotten him already. I want to make sure that you won't forget him."

Stephenson chose not to correct her assumptions about Martin and Patricia's deaths.

"We promise. We're doing everything we can to find your son's killer. And we won't forget him," Adams said.

"We'll let you know when we make an arrest. In the meantime, feel free to contact us if you have any questions."

Linda gave a somber nod and the couple stood from their chairs in silence.

“I’ll walk you out,” Stephenson said.

After escorting the Bensons out of the building, Stephenson rode the elevator back to the seventh floor. He hated not being able to give them closure by proving Dr. Leroy killed their son and arresting him for Robert’s murder. The elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

Stephenson took a deep breath before getting off. He could only hope his plan would work. A lot depended on what the doctor would do in response to Dwayne’s release.





Eric was still seething over Dwayne's release when he got home from work that night. He was too upset to start his evening yoga ritual and instead went about madly cleaning his apartment.

Over the years, he'd employed a few different house cleaners, but none of them ever quite matched his standards for cleanliness. He always ended up finding dust around the baseboards or an unwiped surface in the kitchen after they left, forcing him to do his own cleaning anyway. He'd let all of them go after a brief period of disappointment. It was better to simply do it right himself.

He didn't mind cleaning. In a way, he found it an effective stress releaser. Which was exactly what he needed tonight.

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced Dwayne's release was a trap. Those cops had to know Dwayne was guilty. And they must have enough evidence to prove it or they wouldn't have arrested him in the first place.

Blondie seemed to have it out for him, but he obviously couldn't prove he killed Patricia, her fat husband, and whatever his name was who lived next door. Eric's guess was that they had let Dwayne go and placed him under surveillance in the desperate hope they could catch Eric in the act of killing him. Then, if they intervened in time, they'd rearrest Dwayne when they arrested Eric. *Killing two birds with one stone*, as the saying went.

But that wasn't going to stop Eric from killing him. If they were watching Dwayne, then they were probably watching him too. He'd just have to work around it. Fortunately, Harry and Lloyd weren't that hard to outsmart.

Two hours later, he was on to his final cleaning task: the floors. He didn't have a single strand of carpet in his apartment. Carpet was disgusting, filled with dust and festering bacteria. He plugged in his vacuum and started in the living room.

When he glided it under his couch, something shiny skidded out from the other side. He picked it up and recognized the bedazzled phone cover instantly. It was Daisy's. And it had been here all along.

He tried to turn it on but it was, of course, dead. He grabbed his phone from his desk and searched for the number for the Seattle Homicide Unit. There could be evidence on it that proved Dwayne killed her.

He found the number but paused before selecting it. How would he explain that Daisy's phone had been in his apartment this whole time? What if it made him look guilty, instead of Dwayne? There was possibly nothing on her phone that would incriminate Dwayne anyway. Plus, the detectives had already let Dwayne walk when it was obvious he killed her; that gave Eric little hope that turning in her phone would make any difference. He set his phone back down on the desk instead of making the call. He had a better idea.

• • • •

A QUICK GOOGLE SEARCH told him the cops probably couldn't track Daisy's phone to his place unless he used it to make a call, but he didn't want to risk it. Plus, if Dwayne used a tracking app on her phone, it could alert him to its location the moment Eric turned it on.

He threw on his coat, grabbed his killing gloves and a pack of antibacterial wipes, and went down to his car in the parking garage. He plugged Daisy's phone into the car charger as he drove. He waited until he pulled into Discovery Park to turn it on.

Leaving his engine running, he watched her screen light up and ask for the passcode. *Crikey*. He tried to think of what it would be. *Daisy was a sweet, simple girl*. He typed E-R-I-C. *Incorrect passcode*.

He drummed his fingers against his steering wheel. *Her birthday*. She'd asked for the day off. He tried 0-1-2-4. Her phone unlocked. *Fair dinkum*.

Eric disabled her phone's location settings and went to her text messages from Dwayne. While some of his texts could be construed as controlling, Eric was disappointed not to find anything more incriminating. There were no threats, not even any hostile messages.

He searched for Dwayne's name in her email next. Nothing. He looked out the window into the night. It wasn't as he had hoped, but he could still use it to blackmail Dwayne. He was grateful he hadn't been stupid enough to turn it over to the police. It wouldn't have helped them build a case against Dwayne anyway.

Eric pulled on his gloves and cleaned Daisy's bedazzled cover and screen with one of his antibacterial wipes before stepping out into the vacant parking lot with her phone in hand. After removing the SIM card, he placed her phone on the ground behind his rear tire. He laid the SIM card on top of the phone and got back into the car. He reversed over it, hearing it crunch against the gravel parking lot. He pulled forward before driving over it once more.

He put the car in park and got out to retrieve the smashed phone and SIM card. He could see by the red glow of his tail lights that they were nicely damaged. The phone screen had shattered, and the SIM card was now broken in two. He picked them up and placed them in his cup holder before pulling out of the dark parking lot.

He hopped on Interstate 90 and headed for the nearest bridge to dispose of her phone. Twenty-five minutes later, he slowed to ten under as he crossed the middle of the floating bridge that connected Seattle to prestigious Mercer Island. With his passenger window rolled down, he grasped the phone and SIM card from his cup holder and flung them as hard as he could out the window.

He watched to make sure they made it over the side of the bridge when the blare of a horn on his left pulled him from his concentration. Eric turned his attention to the road and saw he had merged halfway into the adjacent lane. The car beside him moved as far into the shoulder as the bridge would allow to avoid being sideswiped by his BMW. Their vehicles were only inches apart. He jerked his BMW back into his lane as the car beside him sped ahead, laying on their horn another time.

Eric over-corrected and felt his front fender smash into the concrete barrier, which protected his car from going over the edge. He swerved to the left, crossing over into the passing lane once again. Only this time there was no car next to him. He slowly merged back into his lane and let out a deep breath, thinking how close he'd been to a much worse collision. That was the last thing he needed.

He leaned his head back against the headrest and tried to relax. He'd taken care of Daisy's phone and had a sure-fire plan to blackmail Dwayne. He'd work out the details of his murder later. He just hoped his car wasn't too badly damaged.

His blood pressure had nearly returned to baseline when he saw the flashing red and blue lights in his rear-view mirror. *Crikey*. He hoped the squad car would pass him in its pursuit of another vehicle, but his hope disintegrated as the lights drew closer and the wail of a siren filled the quiet void of the night. *Great*.

There was nowhere to pull over on the bridge, so he kept driving with the cop car on his ass until he found a place to stop when they reached Mercer Island. He rolled down his window and waited calmly for the egotistical patrol officer whom he was about to have the pleasure of meeting.

He squinted from the blinding light that shined in his face as the officer approached.

“Been drinking tonight?” she asked.

He wanted to demand she take that obnoxious light out of his face, but he couldn't afford to have any more unnecessary run-ins with the law when he was currently a suspect in multiple homicides.

“No, ma'am.”

“You were pretty out of control back there on the bridge. You sure you haven't consumed any alcohol this evening? Or drugs?”

“I'm sure. I looked down briefly to adjust the climate control when I drifted into the other lane. It was a stupid mistake. I'm just glad no one was hurt.”

She sighed like she'd heard it all before.

“License and registration.”

His eyes tried to adjust to the dark, but he couldn't see a thing when he opened his glove compartment. He turned on the ceiling light and easily found his registration inside his neatly organized dash. He handed it to the officer before pulling his license out of his wallet.

“I'll be back,” she said. “You sit tight.”

He waited for what felt like an hour for her to return. Had she seen him throw Daisy's phone out the window? He couldn't even be sure the phone had made it all the way to the water. If it *were* recovered from the bridge and somehow made it back to the cops, it would not help his case to get a ticket in the same location as her lost phone. That is, if they were even able to trace it back to her. Both her phone and the SIM were in pretty bad shape.

Being that he was a murder suspect, he wondered if his name would come up with some sort of flag when the officer ran his information. He was probably just being paranoid. He assumed she would, however, see his arrest from a few nights earlier. Luckily, he hadn't had anything to drink tonight.

By the time the officer finally returned with his license and registration, he concluded he had nothing to worry about. He was sure Daisy's phone had landed in the lake. Even if it didn't, it probably wouldn't end up in the cops' hands anyway.

“You willing to take a breath test?”

“Sure.”

“I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle.”

Eric did as instructed. She whipped out a mobile Breathalyzer device and held the small, plastic tube in front of his mouth.

“Blow.”

He gave one big, long breath into the device until it beeped, and she pulled it out of his mouth. She looked surprised when she checked the results. She handed him back his license and registration.

“I'm going to let you off with a warning, but only because you have a clean driving record. Next time, keep your eyes on the road.”

He couldn't believe his good luck. He thought for sure she'd been writing him a ticket. He climbed back inside his BMW, refolded his registration, and packed it away in his glove compartment as she walked back to her patrol car. It was probably his accent, he reasoned. In all the years he'd been here, it still made the American women swoon.

• • • •

ERIC WENT INTO WORK early the next morning, before his annoying new secretary came in. He rummaged through the filing cabinets behind the front desk and found what he was looking for only moments before Nurse Ratched arrived.

“Morning,” he said, stepping out from behind her desk.

“Morning.” As usual, she eyed him suspiciously. She looked down at the paper he held in his left hand.

He ignored her gaze and retreated into his office. He closed the door behind him and scanned through Daisy's employment application. Just as he had hoped, she'd listed Dwayne as her emergency contact along with his mobile phone number.

He walked outside to his car on his lunch hour and felt sick when he saw the damage he'd done to the passenger side the night before. Not quite as sick as he'd felt when he learned of Dwayne's release, but almost. The perfect black paint job on the front fender was marred with ugly gray scrapes from where he'd hit the guardrail.

He made himself look away before he got in on the driver's side, telling himself it was nothing that couldn't be fixed. He drove to the nearest gas station to buy a burner phone.

Being lunch time, the place was busy. He was fifth in line for the cashier by the time he found a phone. His eyes drifted to the TV that hung on the wall behind the register. Two news reporters, a man and a woman, sat behind a desk and speculated about Martin's death.

“There are still a lot of questions surrounding the death of bestselling author, Martin Watts. While police have confirmed that his wife Patricia's death was a homicide, they are still unable to confirm the manner of Martin Watts' death,” the woman said.

“That's right,” the man agreed. “Seems they are still trying to determine whether his death might have been a suicide rather than a homicide like his wife. It does raise questions, however, as to why the police haven't been able to determine this yet.”

The reporter continued to talk, but Eric tore his eyes away from the screen when he moved to the front of the line. Blondie had said they were treating Martin's death as a homicide. But, according to the news, he still had no clue.

He activated the phone as soon as he got back into his car. He punched in Dwayne's number. He slowly typed out a text using the old-school numbered keys. *I have Daisy's phone and I can prove you killed her.*

He sat in the gas station parking lot and waited for a response. The phone chirped less than a minute later.

*Who is this?*

He had sparked his attention. *Good.* He'd let him stew over that for a while before he messaged him again. That way, like a big, fat fish chomping on a well-baited hook, he wouldn't be able to resist when he demanded to meet with him in a few days. He pulled out of the gas station and stopped by his bank to withdraw a few thousand more in cash before he headed back to his practice. He had a homemade salad waiting for him.



“I still can't believe we let that lady-killer back out on the street,” Adams said.

“I think you mean woman-killer. A lady-killer is someone who seduces women, not kills them.” Stephenson refilled his coffee mug in the homicide unit's small break room on Friday morning.

“Whatever. You know what I meant.”

“Relax. We've got surveillance on him twenty-four-seven. He's not going to hurt anyone else and he's not getting away with anything. Hopefully, if all goes to plan, we'll be arresting him *and* the doctor soon. From the way Dr. Leroy reacted to Dwayne's release, I'm guessing he'll try to kill him before the week is over.”

“I hope you're right.”

Stephenson took a sip of the cheap, bitter brew as Detective Richards walked into the break room.

Adams stepped back from the old coffee maker and motioned toward it with his empty mug. “Ladies first.”

“Okay,” she said, looking unimpressed by the gesture.

She turned to Stephenson as she poured her coffee. She had just started to speak when Adams interrupted.

“You know, it can be hard starting out without knowing anyone in this place. It's not any easy job. So, if you ever want to pick my brain or need someone to talk to who's had a lot of experience with this job, I'm here.”

She turned back to Adams and tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. She paused for a moment before she spoke, as if unsure how to respond. “Thanks,” she finally said.

She turned back to face Stephenson. “How long have you been in homicide?”

“Coming up on two years. Once you start getting cases, you learn the job pretty quick.”

“I heard you've already solved a pretty high-profile case.”

He assumed she was referring to the Seattle Slasher killings, the case he and Rodriguez had worked together. “I guess so. You get your first homicide yet?”

“No, we're still waiting. Thanks to you.” She smiled.

“Oh, right. Sorry for taking over your first case.”

“Since you did steal my first case out from under me, maybe you could make it up by giving me some advice on the job. One rookie to another.” She took a sip from her coffee and grimaced. “This is disgusting.”

“Yeah, but it keeps you awake. You'll get used to it after a while.”

“I don't know if I'll ever get used to that. I actually have a couple tickets to the Seahawks' playoff game this Saturday and haven't found anyone to go with me yet. My brother's a backup defensive lineman and my dad has season tickets. We normally go together, but he's out of town this weekend. Would you want to go? Maybe we can talk shop in between plays.”

Stephenson nearly choked on his coffee. “The playoff game? Are you kidding me? I'd love to go. If you're sure you wouldn't rather take someone else.” Stephenson was surprised she wasn't taking one of her friends, since the two of them barely knew each other. But there was no way he would turn down a seat at a home-field playoff game.

“I'm sure.” She gave him a slight smile. She started to leave the break room but turned around when she reached the doorway. “Want to meet here and drive together to the game? I'm sure parking

will be a nightmare. I'll get your number later so we can plan what time to meet.”

Stephenson nodded. “Sounds great.”

Once they were alone, Stephenson turned to see Adams staring at him while he leaned against the linoleum counter.

“I hate you,” his partner said before stalking out of the room with his empty mug.

Stephenson lifted his coffee but stopped short of putting it to his mouth. For the first time in almost a week, he laughed.

• • • •

WHEN THEY GOT BACK to their desks, they went to work seeing what they could dig up on Dr. Leroy. Adams was going through his bank account and credit card statements but hadn't found anything of use so far. Because Dr. Leroy was only a suspect at this point, they'd only been able to get a warrant for his periodic statements, not live transactions. The latest account statements they'd received ended before Patricia and Martin were murdered. But you never knew, maybe they'd get lucky and find something useful. Otherwise, they'd have to wait for the next round of statements.

Stephenson tapped his pen against his desk as he once again read through Patricia's records that Dr. Leroy had turned over to them. From the way Martin's treatment of his wife was described, it did seem plausible for him to have killed her.

“What if Dr. Leroy falsified information in Patricia's chart before he gave it to us? I mean, how do we know any of it is true? I get that it's hard to know what goes on behind closed doors, but this description of their relationship doesn't match what their friends and family said. Maybe the doctor changed her records to make it look like Martin was controlling and emotionally abusive to try and substantiate their deaths as a murder-suicide.”

“I suppose it's possible. Those medical records were all electronic, right?”

“Yeah. I'll have to contact the software company Dr. Leroy uses and see if there's a way to tell if the records have been altered.”

Stephenson's phone vibrated against the top of his desk. He lifted it and saw it was Serena. It was the first time she'd called him since the day he'd planned to propose. He stared at the screen, debating whether to answer it before hitting *Ignore* and setting the phone back down on his desk.

“You need to take that?” Adams asked.

“No.”

Adams gave him a knowing look. “Okay.”

Despite having some weak moments, he'd refrained from calling her since that horrible day. Now, he was glad he hadn't. He had nothing to say to her and didn't want to hear whatever she wanted to say to him. She could never undo what she'd done.

“Excuse me, detectives.”

Sandra, the receptionist for the homicide unit, stood between their desks. Her short auburn hair flipped out on the sides and her bangs were overly-curved to the point of distraction. Stephenson saw she had the same hair in her ID badge photo that was taken over twenty years before.

“Yeah?” Stephenson asked.

“I have a woman on the line who wants to speak with one of you about her brother-in-law, Eric Leroy. She's in Australia but said she saw on the news that his front office assistant was murdered. She says it's important.”

“I'll take it,” Stephenson said.

“All right. I'll transfer her.”



"Thanks," he said before she walked away.

"That's interesting," Adams said. "Wonder what she's got to say."

"We'll find out."

A moment later, his phone rang. He picked up immediately.

"This is Detective Stephenson."

"Hello, my name is Maggie Flemming. I live in Australia, but I saw on the news that a woman was recently murdered who worked for my brother-in-law, Dr. Eric Leroy."

Stephenson recognized her accent immediately. It sounded like Dr. Leroy's, only more distinct.

"Yes, that's correct."

"I read you made an arrest initially but have since let the man go. I think my brother-in-law may have killed her. I wanted to make sure you're investigating him."

"And what makes you think he killed her?"

Adams' head perked up at Stephenson's question.

"Well, her body was never found and he was never arrested, but Eric Leroy killed my sister. I'm sure of it. My parents and I filed a missing person's report twenty years ago, but nothing's ever come of it. I know she's dead and he killed her. He must've disposed of her body, which is why he got away with it. He immigrated to Seattle shortly after."

This was huge...if what she was saying was true. It could mean that despite his clean record, Dr. Leroy had been a killer all along. Although, from the sounds of it, this would not be something easy to prove.

"He's crazy. Never even showed a trace of remorse."

*Sounds familiar*, he thought. He picked up his pen and pulled a notepad in front of him.

"What was your sister's name?"

"Stella. Stella Leroy. Her missing person's case is technically still open, even though we know they'll never find her."

The sadness in her voice was unmistakable as he jotted down her sister's name.

"Do you know the exact date the missing person's report was filed?"

"December 18, 1997," she said without hesitation.

"And in what city?"

"Nelson Bay, New South Wales."

"I'll look into it. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"Eric's been walking free for over twenty years. He hasn't had to pay a single day for what he's done. Meanwhile, my sister is dead and, without a body, we've never even been able to give her a proper funeral. Nothing will ever bring my sister back, but promise me you'll put him away for good so he'll never be able to hurt anyone again."

"I promise I'll look into your sister's case. And, if Dr. Leroy is responsible for the death of his front office assistant or anyone else, we'll do our best to catch him."

"I hope you do."

"Can I get your contact information in case I need to speak with you again?"

"Sure."

He wrote down her phone number and email address before ending the call.

"Who does she think he killed?" Adams asked as soon as Stephenson got off the phone.

"Her sister."

Stephenson repeated their conversation.

"Wow."

“Yeah. But even if he did kill her, it sounds like it would be nearly impossible to prove. I’ll have to request the missing person’s report from Australia.”

“Let me know when it comes through.”

Stephenson got on his computer and checked what time it was in Nelson Bay. It was five thirty in the morning, but he decided to call anyway. Someone should be at the station.

“Nelson Bay police, how can I help you?”

The man sounded as if the call had woken him from a nap.

“Good morning. This is Detective Stephenson from Seattle Homicide. I’m after a copy of a missing person’s report that was filed at your station on December 18, 1997. Would you have that on file at your station?”

“Seattle, huh? I’ve been to Seattle once. Rained the entire week I was there. We should have the report still on file. It’d be a paper case file, so it might take me a little while to find it. What was the name of the missing person?”

“Stella Leroy.”

“Oh, yeah. I know that case. It’s a bit of a legend around here. Did you know she was a professional surfer?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Born and raised here in Nelson Bay. She was becoming pretty famous before she disappeared. I wasn’t working here at the time, but it made the national news.

“There were a few theories surrounding her disappearance. One was that a shark took her while she surfed the huge waves during an evening storm. Her family all claimed her husband killed her, but her body was never found. The case is still unsolved. Can I ask why you’re interested in that case?”

“Eric Leroy, Stella’s husband, is a suspect in some recent murder cases of ours. Her sister called and told me about Stella.”

“Crikey. Well, if he did kill her, I hope you get him.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll need you to fax me an official request for that case file, and I’ll send it to you as soon as I find it.”

“Sure thing,” Stephenson said.

“You know, it was all over the news here when it happened. I’m pretty sure Stella’s family were interviewed on national TV about their theory that Stella’s husband killed her. You could probably find some of it online.”

“Thanks, I’ll have a look.”

“Good luck with the case.”

• • • •

STEPHENSON WAS STILL waiting to receive Stella’s case file over an hour later. He thought about what the Australian cop had said about her case being on the national news and ran an online search to see what he could find. A five-minute video clip of Stella’s family being interviewed on what looked like a major Australian news station appeared at the top of the results.

Stephenson clicked on the video. The clip was dated May 1998. A couple who looked to be in their fifties sat next to a young woman who Stephenson guessed was Maggie.

“Hey, come check this out,” he said to Adams.

Adams got up and came around their desks. He stood behind Stephenson as the video continued to play.

A female reporter sat across from them wearing a dark pantsuit.

“Stella's been missing for over five months now. What makes you sure her husband killed her?”

Stella's mother spoke first. “We'd been trying to convince her to leave him for years. He was incredibly controlling. We worried about how much worse he might treat her behind closed doors when we witnessed how verbally abusive he was when we were around.” She paused and dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “A week before she went missing, she had a black eye. That's when we realized things were even worse than we'd thought. She made an excuse that she'd ran into something, but we knew he'd beat her. We begged her to leave him. She said she was thinking about it, but he must've found out and killed her before she could get away.”

She began to sob, and Stella's father took the opportunity to speak.

“Stella was last seen at her work on Friday, December 16. The detectives confirmed with the hospital that Eric had mistakenly shown up for a shift that Friday and went home after realizing he wasn't rostered that night. We believe Stella had taken the opportunity to leave him while he was at work. When he came home early, he probably found her getting ready to leave him and killed her.”

“Detectives searched the home she shared with her husband, Eric. They didn't find any blood or evidence of a struggle in the home. They've also never found her body. If he killed her, what do you think he did with her body?” the reporter asked.

Stella's mother looked too emotional to speak.

“Eric has a fishing boat. We believe he took the boat out and dumped her body in the ocean,” the father said.

“And where are the police in the investigation? Do you think they'll ever arrest her husband for murder?”

“Without a body, they are treating her case as a missing person's. Unless they find her body or some other hard evidence that she was killed, it's doubtful they'll ever be able to arrest Eric, even though we know he killed her.”

“When we tried to contact Eric for an interview, we learned he's left the country and is now living in Seattle. We were surprised he would make such a big move only a few months after his wife's disappearance. Do you see that as further proof of his guilt?”

“Yes,” her mother said. “He never showed any emotion about her disappearance. Just said that she'd left him. He didn't even care. It was disturbing to see that he had no remorse whatsoever. He fled to Seattle to start a new life, while we have to live with the fact that we'll never see our daughter again.”

The clip ended, and Stephenson turned to Adams.

“Sounds like the same story her sister told me over the phone. After we get Stella's case file from Australia, let's go pay Dr. Leroy a visit.”



Friday afternoon, Eric had an hour free between clients and was using the time to write another chapter in his novel. He was tirelessly typing away on his keyboard when he heard a tap on his door.

“Come in,” he said, assuming it was his secretary.

The door opened, but he didn't bother looking up. She probably came in to tell him something dreadfully unimportant that could've waited until the end of the day.

“I figured it would be easier for you if we came here than to ask you to come down to the station.”

Hearing Blondie's voice, Eric tore his eyes away from the screen. In his office doorway, there stood Blondie and his less than brilliant partner. Nice of his secretary to give him a heads up. *What now?*

“If you keep coming here, detective, I might have to start charging you. Are there some things you'd like to get off your chest? Your childhood perhaps?”

He frowned as his partner closed the door behind them, and Eric was filled with gratification.

“I just had a very interesting chat with your sister-in-law.”

“You mean my *ex*-sister-in-law?” Eric said.

“No, I mean your sister-in-law. Your wife has never been declared dead and you haven't gotten a divorce, right? So, legally, Stella is still your wife.”

Eric closed his laptop. “Technically, yes. But she hasn't been my wife since she left me twenty years ago. And why would you be chatting with my sister-in-law?”

“She saw your name in the news connected with our recent murder victims and thought we should be aware of your history.”

“My history?”

“She claims her sister didn't just go missing. She says she was murdered.”

He paused, apparently expecting him to respond.

When he didn't, Blondie added, “By you.”

This news didn't exactly come as a shock. Although, Eric had conceded the reason her sister made those wild accusations all those years ago was due to grief. It had probably been easier for her to believe that he'd killed her sister than to bear the truth: Stella had left them all for a life she deemed better. But he had hoped by now Maggie would've come to her senses.

He himself had considered that something terrible could've happened to Stella. The media had several theories regarding her disappearance, one of them being that she'd been taken by a shark while surfing. It was possible, but not likely. No body parts or surf board had ever been found. *And me, kill Stella?* It was preposterous.

He sighed. “I hope this wasn't the only reason you came to see me. No wonder you two have so many homicides left unsolved if this is the best you can do with your time.”

Another frown. “So, you're not even going to deny it?”

“Look, I'm sure hearing her claim I'm a murderer was like music to your ears. I don't know why, but you both seem like you're dying to arrest me for murder. Probably just so you can close your case. If I had killed her, then where is her body? And why wasn't I arrested for her murder all those years ago? Hmm? Did my lovely sister-in-law have any explanation for that?”

“Solving a homicide without a body is extremely difficult, especially in the absence of other physical evidence,” Marky Mark said.

It was the first thing he'd said since they'd come into Eric's office. It was also the first thing he'd ever said to him that actually made sense.

"She figures you dumped her sister's body in the ocean from your fishing boat," Blondie said.

"Well, she obviously doesn't remember my boat very well. You'd have to be crazy to take that boat outside the calm waters of the bay. It was much too small to handle the open ocean."

Blondie smirked. "That's funny, because *crazy* was the exact word she used to describe you."

"I'm not the one telling twenty-year-old conspiracy theories to the police."

Blondie cupped his hand and ran his thumb and index along the corners of his mouth, as if feeling for crumbs left over from his lunch. "Sounded a lot more like the truth than a conspiracy theory to me. But what do I know?"

"Apparently not enough to solve your own homicide cases."

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "We're actually pretty close to making an arrest in three of our homicides."

*Yeah right*, he thought.

"Don't leave town, doctor. I suspect we'll be speaking to you again soon."

Marky Mark opened his door and Blondie followed him out.

"Looking forward to it," Eric said before the door shut behind them.

He opened his laptop but, despite his best efforts, couldn't get back into the head space he needed to write his novel. There was no way they were close to arresting him for those murders. They had to be bluffing. But what if they weren't? What if he had somehow made a mistake along the way? He was almost certain he hadn't, but was he certain enough to bet his freedom on it? His life? He'd have to kill Dwayne sooner than he had planned. And start preparing for his escape.

He glanced at the clock on the lower right corner of his screen. Time for his next appointment. *Stupid cops*. They cost him nearly an hour of creative productivity.

• • • •

"CANCEL MY LAST APPOINTMENT for me. I've got to take care of a few things this afternoon," he said to his secretary on his way out of the office.

"Your next appointment will be here any minute. I think it's a little too late to cancel."

*Nobody asked you what you think*, he thought. He ignored her retort and continued moving toward the office doors. Remembering this was probably the last time he would ever see her, he turned around.

"And *I think* you should've given me a heads up before letting those two cops waltz into my office unannounced."

"I'm sure they had good reason to see you. Plus, I thought they might've wanted to have the element of surprise."

He stared back at her while he turned the door handle. He wished he was staying in town long enough to be able to kill her next.

"I don't pay you to think. Just to do your damn job." He let the door slam behind him and walked to his car.

He stopped at the bank one last time on his way home to make another withdrawal. Once back at his apartment, he packed a carry-on bag with basic toiletries, a few changes of clothes, his laptop for writing his novel, and twenty-two thousand in cash. He separated the ten thousand that would go through airport security and the other twelve he would use to purchase his ticket and take through on his person.

He turned off his car stereo and drove to the airport in silence. He parked in the short-term parking and dropped off his bag at the baggage storage outside of security before getting back in his car to drive home. He kept the stereo off while he sat in traffic on I-5 and finalized his plan to ensure he killed Dwayne before the weekend was over—and not get caught.

• • • •

IF ERIC WAS UNDER SURVEILLANCE, and his recent encounter with those two schmuck detectives told him he was, then he couldn't take his own car to kill Dwayne tomorrow. Fortunately, sweet old Margaret across the hall owned a Buick she hardly ever used. He'd seen her come and go in the parking garage. She had her groceries delivered every week and was too old to be driving, but she seemed to still get out and about occasionally.

She would probably have let him borrow it if he asked, but he didn't want to involve her in any of this. Plus, he didn't want her to tell the cops he had borrowed her car, in case they came looking for him before he was safely out of the country.

Eric waited until midnight and listened outside her door a few minutes to make sure the TV was off and no other noise came from inside her apartment. He pulled his trusty lock-picking kit out of his pajama pant pocket and did a quick look around the hall to make sure he was alone.

He, of course, was the only person in the silent hallway. He smiled to himself. Now that he had killed the little drummer boy, there were no tenants left on the floor to be witnesses.

The door unlocked with a click after he worked his magic with the pick. He slowly stepped inside the dark apartment. From what he could tell, the floorplan was the same as his. He'd traded his slippers for socks before coming out of his apartment, and he padded silently through the entryway toward the kitchen. Not that he needed to worry old Margaret would hear him; she was practically deaf in her old age.

Once he had reached the vicinity of the kitchen, he used the light on his phone to look for her purse. He could make out the kitchen counters now, and noticed they were neat and sparse. The way kitchen counter tops should be. But her purse was not sitting atop them like he'd hoped.

Eric drummed his fingers on the tidy kitchen workspace. He was hoping to avoid having to go in her bedroom, but it was looking like he might have no choice. He'd probably give the sweet old lady a cardiac arrest if she awoke to find a man lurking around in her room. But perhaps it was in the living room.

He used his phone to scan the adjacent room. Empty sitting chair, empty coffee table. He moved his light toward the couch and was startled by both the body lying on it and the sound that came out of Margaret. Instinctively, he shut off the light and jumped behind the couch. It sounded somewhere between a hack and cough, followed by a deep clearing of the throat.

He crouched low to the ground, motionless while he listened. He couldn't kill Margaret. If she came toward him, he would overpower her as gently as possible and race out of her apartment. Except that he still needed her car keys.

Margaret went quiet before exhaling deeply. He waited as her heavy breathing changed to a loud, even snore. He stood slowly and turned his phone light back on. He could see the outline of the old woman lying on her back as he slipped past the couch. He moved down the hall into the bedroom and shined his light on the bedside table. There sat her small black leather purse.

*Right. She sleeps in the living room but keeps her purse in her bedroom. Go figure.* He'd just opened the bag and shined his light inside when Margaret made a horrendous choking sound from the other room. The dreadful noise continued for nearly a minute. He thought how ironic it would be if

she died while he was stealing her car keys. But then she sharply cleared her throat and returned to her rhythmic snoring.

*Old people*, he thought. He went back to searching for her keys. He found them in a side pocket and crept back to his apartment before she made any more death-defying noises.





Eric got up early Saturday morning and started the day with an hour of yoga. He needed to be calm. He needed to be centered. He needed to kill Dwayne and then flee the country before his friends at Seattle Homicide realized he had gone.

Before going to bed the night before, he'd texted Dwayne using his burner phone. He told him to meet him at a cafe on Bainbridge Island that Eric sometimes frequented on the weekends. It was in walking distance from the ferry that came across the sound from downtown Seattle. But thanks to good old Margaret next door, he wouldn't be walking.

He told Dwayne to meet him at four o'clock. After a shower and two cups of coffee, he sat down at his desk to work on his novel. He was nearly halfway done. His progress was slower than he'd hoped, but once he killed Dwayne and fled the country, he would have all the time in the world to finish it.

With his laptop packed into his bag at the airport, he was forced to write on his old iPad that he hardly ever used. He felt himself relax after he typed his first three hundred words. The double-spaced page filled with his typed words was food for his soul. He needed to write like he needed to breathe. He'd once told himself he'd stop writing once he published his bestseller, but he knew now that he needed to write to survive.

Two thousand words later, it was nearly time to carry out his plan. He uploaded his new chapter onto the cloud. Satisfied that his work was saved, he turned off the iPad.

He donned his baseball cap before he pulled on his jacket and took one last look around his apartment. Although he'd always despised Seattle's long gray winters, he was struck by an overwhelming sense of nostalgia as he prepared to leave his current home for the last time. He felt the sides of his jacket to ensure he had his cellphone in one pocket and a necktie and burner phone in the other.

"Well, I guess this is good-bye," he said to his apartment.

He grabbed Margaret's keys off the kitchen counter and his iPad from his desk. He couldn't leave it behind in case the cops came to look through his stuff. He'd have to dispose of it on his way to kill Dwayne. He locked the door behind him and headed downstairs to the parking garage.

Sweet old Margaret had even parked her Buick out of view from the security cameras. *Bless her heart.* The Buick ran surprisingly well for how little she used it. He made it to the ferry dock without incident. He slowed the car and rolled down his window when he reached the ticket booth.

"Bainbridge or Bremerton?"

"Bainbridge."

"Just the car and driver?" the woman asked from inside the booth.

"Yes."

"That'll be \$18.70."

He handed her a twenty through the window.

"You'll be on the three o'clock boat," she said as she handed him his change.

"Thank you."

He pulled into the row behind other idle cars and turned off the engine. His stomach growled, breaking the silence in the car. He must've forgotten to eat lunch. With twenty-five minutes to spare, he got out and walked down the street to Ivar's.

The wait was short, and he ordered a large clam chowder. The young girl behind the counter handed him a big paper bowl covered with a plastic lid.

“Spoons are to your right,” she said.

“Could I also get a bag for this?” he asked.

“A bag?” She furrowed her brow and gave him a look that said, *What kind of weirdo carries his bowl of soup in a bag?*

He didn't find his request that odd.

She handed him a white, medium-sized paper bag with an Ivar's logo on the side.

He watched her brow furrow again as he took off the lid to his soup, tucked the bag under his arm, and ate as he walked back to the ferry.

He got back to the Buick and set his half-eaten bowl of chowder on the armrest, something he would never do in his BMW. He didn't even drink water in it, let alone clam chowder. But he was sure good old Margaret wouldn't mind. The ten-year-old Buick had seen better days. *Or had it?* he wondered.

He reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his iPad. He dropped it inside the Ivar's bag and rolled down the top, closing it in. Holding the bag from the top, he walked over to the nearest rubbish bin and tossed it inside. The ferry had just arrived. Cars and walk-on passengers had started to disembark. He hurried back to the Buick as a group of seagulls squawked overhead.

After driving onto the ferry, he turned off the car engine but didn't go upstairs to the passenger deck. The car smelled strongly of clam chowder from his near-empty bowl he'd moved over onto the passenger seat. Bored, he streamed music from his phone while he went over his plan to kill Dwayne one more time.

“Zombie” by The Cranberries started to play when they had almost reached the island. He turned up the volume and lost himself in the music. Not in a way that distracted him from what he was about to do. Instead, he became more focused. The chorus came on, and he played air drums against the steering wheel until the end of the song.

The ferry docked right as the song ended. His blood was pumping when he started the Buick's engine. He was more than ready to get Daisy the justice she deserved.

• • • •

ERIC PARALLEL PARKED across the street from the cafe on Bainbridge Island where he'd told Dwayne to meet him. He was sure he hadn't been followed but was certain the police had round-the-clock surveillance on Dwayne. Eric looked around for an unmarked cop car along the street but didn't spot any. They were here, somewhere. And they would be watching.

He walked a block to the nearest crosswalk and waited for his turn to cross the street. A minute later, he moved through the parking lot of the business next door to the cafe and approached the cafe from the rear. He'd seen some of its workers taking a smoke break out back on one of his previous visits and knew there was a door marked *Employees Only*.

He covered his hand with the end of his jacket before twisting the handle. He slipped inside the door and found himself in the cafe's back kitchen. A red-haired guy making sandwiches looked up from what he was doing.

“Excuse me, sir. This is employees only,” he said sternly.

“Oh, I'm sorry.” Eric looked around the kitchen. “I was looking for the bathroom. I must've gotten turned around.”

“From outside?”

He looked back at the door he'd come through. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure they told me it was outside and through a side door. This was the only door I could find."

He looked unconvinced by Eric's story. Nevertheless, he set down the sandwich and pointed to a door on the other side of the kitchen. "Well, they told you wrong. Go out the door and make a left."

"Thanks."

The man shook his head and went back to making the sandwich.

With the sleeve of his jacket still covering his hand, Eric let himself out of the kitchen and stood in a small, empty hallway at the back of the cafe. He turned to the left and was glad to find the door to the men's room unlocked. He went inside and closed the door behind him. The loo consisted of a single toilet and sink with a door that could lock from the inside. The small, rectangular window above the toilet was exactly as he had remembered. Just big enough for him to escape through. He checked the latch to make sure it opened. It did.

He pulled out the burner phone and texted Dwayne. *You're being watched. Meet me in the men's room.* He left the door unlocked while he waited for Dwayne to join him. The door swung open less than a minute later.

He recognized Dwayne immediately from his picture in the news. He was bigger than Eric had anticipated, however. Dwayne was only an inch or two taller than Eric, but he had the build of an out-of-shape rugby player. This was not going to be his easiest kill.

"Lock the door behind you."

Dwayne did as he was told.

"You have the phone?"

"I need to hear you say it first."

"Say what?"

"That you killed her." *You son of a bitch*, Eric wanted to add. But he needed to maintain the upper hand if he was going to kill him. He couldn't afford for Dwayne to lose his temper.

Eric realized it was already too late.

Dwayne's face reddened as he took a step toward him. "You're the psychologist she worked for."

Eric refrained from correcting him and explaining how lowly a psychologist was compared to a psychiatrist. He took a step back.

"You're the reason she didn't come home that night, aren't you?"

He didn't answer.

"What makes you think you could sleep with my woman? You think because you're a doctor you can do whatever the hell you want?" Dwayne poked the middle of his chest with his pointer finger.

Eric yearned to laugh out loud at the idea of a psychologist being referred to as a doctor. *Maybe we should award that title to chiropractors while we're at it.* But, once again, he refrained.

"Maybe I should kill *you*. After you hand over that bitch's phone." Dwayne held out his palm for Eric to give him Daisy's cell.

He'd had about enough. Time for Dwayne boy to die. "I don't have it with me."

"What? You're lying!" He put a hand below each of Eric's shoulders and shoved him backward. He fell against the sink.

"If anything happens to me, I've made sure the phone will get to the police."

Dwayne's jaw clenched and both of his hands balled into fists at his side. His eyes looked intently into Eric's as he decided whether or not Eric was telling the truth. Dwayne's eyes narrowed. He'd apparently concluded Eric was lying.

Dwayne grinned through yellow teeth. Eric couldn't imagine what Daisy had seen in him.

“Yeah right. Empty your pockets.”

Eric regained his posture and smoothed the front of his jacket. “No.”

Dwayne’s grin disappeared. He rushed forward and pushed Eric’s arm against the sink while he used his other hand to try and open Eric’s jacket pocket. The only thing in that pocket was his necktie, and Eric couldn’t let him take it. Eric made a fist with his free hand and threw a punch into the side of Dwayne’s face.

Pain resonated through his knuckles. Dwayne opened his mouth wide and stretched out his jaw. His hand fell away from Eric’s pocket as he raised it to his cheek. He snarled and brought both of his hands to Eric’s neck. He clamped his grip tightly around Eric’s throat. *Just like he'd done to Daisy.*

Dwayne’s hands were crushing Eric’s trachea, and his entire throat felt as though it were about to shoot out through his mouth. But the thought of Daisy brought him back to focus. She deserved more than justice. She deserved revenge.

Using every ounce of strength he had, Eric brought his hands to Dwayne’s face and jarred his thumbs into each of his eye sockets. Dwayne let out a pathetic cry and flung his head back. His grip loosened around Eric’s neck and Eric threw another punch into his Adam’s apple. Dwayne gagged as his hands fell away.

This was his moment. Eric pulled the tie out of his pocket and wrapped each end around his hands. Dwayne had rebounded from the blow to his windpipe. He saw the tie just before Eric looped it around the back of his neck. He crossed it in front of his throat and pulled it taut. Dwayne reached up and grabbed the ends of the tie, but it was no use. Eric pulled tighter. They were face-to-face, but, unlike Patricia, this time it didn’t bother him.

Dwayne ripped off his hat and hurled his forehead into his. Stunned from the hit, Eric’s feet wavered. He fell back onto the bathroom floor, pulling Dwayne’s massive weight on top of him. The air escaped his lungs when Dwayne’s body landed on him. His grip on the tie had loosened during the fall.

Eric scrambled to retain his hold and managed to pull it tight again across Dwayne’s throat. Dwayne’s face was only an inch from his and he watched his veins protrude out of his skin from the pressure of the noose. Eric struggled to fill his lungs with air against the crushing force on his chest. For a second, he worried he might suffocate before Dwayne did. But he told himself that was ridiculous. He just needed to concentrate.

Dwayne pushed himself up from the floor and slammed his fist into Eric’s left temple. Eric lost his grip on the tie when Dwayne delivered another punch. His knuckles felt like a sledgehammer when they struck his cheekbone. Eric’s hands fell to the floor as he lay stunned from the blow.

He felt Dwayne’s enormous weight lift off him and knew he had to act fast if he was going to be the one who walked away from this fight. Dwayne got to his knees and raised his fist in the air. Using all his strength and then some, Eric drew back his knee and kicked Dwayne in the gut before his arm came forward for another hit.

He fell backward, and Eric grabbed the tie off the floor. Dwayne turned toward him on his hands and knees as Eric flung the tie around his throat and climbed onto his back. Dwayne brought a hand up to the tie as Eric crossed it behind his neck and pulled with all his might. Dwayne moved onto his knees. He swayed from side to side in a wild motion, trying to loosen the noose around his neck. Eric strained to pull the ends of the tie against his chest.

His arms trembled as Dwayne’s movements gradually slowed. The next minute felt more like sixty. Dwayne’s body went slack and Eric moved with him, landing atop his back as Dwayne hit the

floor. Eric kept the noose tight for another minute longer before he rolled off him and let his arms collapse at his sides. He lay next to him on the bathroom floor, finally able to take in a deep breath.

A sharp knock sounded at the door and Eric lifted his head. It could be the cops who were watching Dwayne. Crikey. Maybe they were suspicious of what was taking him so long. Or maybe they heard something from outside. Were they loud? He had no idea.

He needed to get out of there. He pulled the tie from Dwayne's discolored, swollen neck and tucked it inside his jacket pocket. He rushed to the window and opened the latch when he remembered Dwayne had knocked off his hat. There was another loud knock at the door. He turned and swiped his hat off the ground.

Eric hoisted himself through the window but only managed to make it out halfway. His legs dangled inside the bathroom as he tried unsuccessfully to pull himself through the small opening. There were three sharp bangs on the bathroom door.

“Dwayne! It's Seattle Police. We know you're in there,” called a male voice. “You've got five seconds to open this door or we're coming in!”

His pulse quickened. He pressed his palms against the building's exterior but his lower half didn't budge. The bathroom door shook against its frame as a sharp thud resounded from the other side. The cops must've been trying to kick the door in.

Eric grunted as he sucked in his stomach and pushed against the outer wall one last time. Astoundingly, his lower body slid through the window frame and he fell to the ground. He'd no sooner landed on the pavement when he heard the door to the bathroom bust open. He crawled past the edge of the window before he got to his feet.

“Call an ambulance!” He heard the male voice yell from inside.

*It's much too late for that,* Eric thought with a smile before he broke into a run.



Richards told him during their walk to CenturyLink Field that they'd have pretty good seats. When Stephenson saw where they were sitting, he realized she'd lied. Their seats were incredible, only ten rows up from the fifty-yard line. You could hardly do any better.

They were nearly an hour early, but the stadium was already filling with fans sporting blue and green from head to toe. Many had their faces painted.

“Not bad, huh?” she said as they sat down.

Stephenson grinned. “Yeah, not bad. I think you might've downplayed how good these seats are. Just a little.”

“Well, I'm glad I could impress you. All the players get a few tickets for family and friends, but the seats are way up the top. My dad has had season tickets for years, so we have a close-up view when my brother plays.”

“I'm definitely impressed. You said your dad was out of town this weekend?”

She nodded. “Yeah, on business. He'll still be watching, but he was pretty bummed he couldn't be here.”

“I bet. I'm gonna grab a beer before the game, you want one?”

“Sure.” She rubbed her gloved hands together to warm them.

“I'll be right back.”

Twenty minutes later, he walked down the steps back to their seats with a beer in each hand and marveled at how he'd gotten so lucky.

Richards turned when he got to their row and reached out for her beer. “Thanks.” She took a sip from the nearly overflowing cup.

He'd been taken aback by how stunning she looked when they met at the station. Her makeup accentuated her high cheekbones and full lips. Her hair was always pulled back when he'd seen her at work, but today it framed her face and fell almost to her waist.

They chatted comfortably as the stadium continued to fill. The noise from the fans grew louder the closer it came for the game to start, and they eventually had to yell to hear one another.

They stood and cheered as the Seahawks ran onto the field. The energy from the crowd was electric.

“Which one's your brother?”

“The one in the pink shoes.” She pointed to him on the field. “Most of the players only wear them in October for breast cancer awareness month, but because we lost my mom to breast cancer, he wears them every game.”

“I'm so sorry,” he said.

“Thanks. She's been gone nearly five years now, but I still think about her every day.” She took a sip from her beer. “Anyway, it's his first year on the team, so he hasn't had a lot of playing time. Hopefully we'll get to see him out there today.”

The scores were tight from the beginning and the two teams were tied at halftime. Richards' brother came out and played for most of the third quarter, and they were both too intent on watching to engage in much small talk. At one point, he felt her hand brush against his. She smiled when he looked over at her.

The score was just as close in the second half as it had been in the first. At the end of the fourth quarter, they went into overtime. They watched, frozen in anticipation, as a coin was flipped to see



which team got the ball first. The opposing team won the toss and the Seahawks kicked off again.

In the first play, the other team's quarterback threw a long pass to their receiver. Stephenson held his breath while he watched to see if the pass would be complete. The Seahawks' star defensive back read the pass the whole way and intercepted the ball deep in their own territory. He and Richards screamed with joy as they watched him run it all the way back for a touchdown. The roar of the Seattle crowd was deafening as Richards threw her arms around his neck and he returned her embrace. It was an exhilarating end to one of the most intense games he had ever watched. Their embrace lasted a little longer than it needed to, but neither one was ready to let go right away.

Celebratory fans began to leave their seats, and they followed the slow-moving crowd toward the exit. Their arms touched as they climbed the stairs amid the mass of people leaving the stadium. Stephenson couldn't deny he liked the feel of her close to him.

“My brother invited us to an after-party for family and friends here at the stadium. The players won't be there for a little bit, but we can head down there now. Would you mind if we stopped by before we go?”

“Are you kidding me? Of course I wouldn't mind. That'd be awesome. I'll try not to embarrass you by acting starstruck in front of some of the greatest NFL players in the world.”

She laughed. “You better not. Especially not in front of my brother. He already thinks he's hot stuff as it is.”

It took them awhile to move through the crowded stadium. Stephenson's phone rang as they reached the entrance to the party. It was Adams. He probably wanted to talk about the game and give him a hard time for going with Richards.

“Sorry,” Stephenson said. “It's Adams. I'll tell him I'll call him later.”

“No problem.” She stopped in front of the door and waited for him to take the call.

“Hey. I hate to rub it in, but we're about to go say hi to Richards' brother at the team's after-party, so I'll give you a call back in a bit.”

“We have a problem.” Adams' tone was serious. It sounded like he was driving. “Dwayne's dead.”

“What?”

The door in front of them opened, and Stephenson recognized the team's star tight end, who emerged into the hall. He said hello to Richards while Stephenson turned away to talk to Adams.

“How did that happen?”

“He was at a cafe on Bainbridge Island. He got up to use the bathroom and the two officers assigned on his surveillance got distracted by the end of the Seahawks game that was playing on TV at the cafe. He'd been gone for about ten minutes before one of them went to check on him and found him on the floor of the bathroom. Strangled. They did CPR but it was too late.

“The bathroom's window was open. They said it was big enough for someone Dr. Leroy's size to squeeze through. They never saw him, but one of the cooks said a man fitting his description came into the kitchen from the back alley saying he was looking for the bathroom right before the time Dwayne was killed. They're canvassing the area for him now.”

Stephenson rubbed his head. This was bad. He couldn't believe Dwayne was killed by Dr. Leroy while he'd been under police surveillance. McKinnon was going to be pissed. The sergeant did him a favor by allowing him to release Dwayne in the hope of being able to arrest Dr. Leroy. And he'd trusted him to carry out his plan. Dwayne shouldn't have been in any danger of the doctor getting to him without the surveillance team knowing.

“Did they show the cook a photo of Dr. Leroy?”

“They did, but he wasn't able to give a positive ID. Said he was wearing a hat and he didn't get a good enough look at his face.”

“Do they have any surveillance video?”

“None. It's a small, locally-owned cafe.”

“How could Leroy have *possibly* killed Dwayne and escaped unnoticed when he was under our surveillance?”

Richards walked over to where he stood and raised her eyebrows. He realized he was yelling.

“Those officers will have to answer for that,” said Adams.

*And so will I*, thought Stephenson.

“The cafe is within walking distance to the downtown Seattle ferry. It's just left for the city. It's possible Dr. Leroy is on it. I'm on my way to the ferry dock now. Can you meet me?” Adams asked.

The stadium was only a short walk from the ferry. “I'm on my way. I'll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“I've already requested to have a couple patrol officers to assist with the search. We'll start by searching the vehicles as they get off the ferry, and I'll have them hold the walk-on passengers for you to check when you get there.”

“Okay, see you there.”

“What was that about?” Richards asked as Stephenson zipped his phone back into his coat pocket.

“Dwayne's dead and it looks like Dr. Leroy killed him. I have to go.”

“I thought Dwayne was under twenty-four-hour surveillance so you could catch the doctor in the act? Before he killed him, I mean.”

“He was. I'll explain later. Sorry.”

“It's fine. Go.”

“Thanks for an amazing day. Tell your brother congratulations,” he said as he backed down the hall.

“I will.”

He saw her wave before he reached the exit at the end of the hall. He picked up his pace. *What a horrible end to such a perfect afternoon.*



When Eric got back to the street, he could see the Seattle ferry docked at the bottom of the hill. They'd almost finished loading cars for its journey back to the city, but if he hurried he could make it as a walk-on passenger. He walked as briskly as he could without drawing attention to himself. The wind came in strong off the water, blowing the rain into his face as he went. He put his hand on top of his head to keep his hat from flying away.

His blood was pumping when he reached the gangway. The last car had just been loaded onto the ferry as Eric jogged toward the boat. Thankfully, he didn't have to stop to buy a ticket. Walk-on passengers only had to pay when getting on in Seattle. Out of breath, he made it to the ferry right before a ferry worker closed the gate behind him.

"You just made it," he said.

Ignoring his comment, Eric let out a sigh of relief and casually strolled onto the upper deck. He went inside and glanced around at the tables near the windows, which were already mostly filled. Still flooded with adrenaline, he decided to go back outside despite the storm. The door flung back from the force of the wind when he opened it. He pulled his hood over his head as he felt the rain blow sideways against his face. The boat dipped down and then up again as he made his way to the edge of the stern.

A small group of preteens were leaning over the edge of the railing on the other side. They were trying to be bad-asses, but in reality just being idiots. A few of them were lifting their legs off the ground as they leaned forward onto the railing, seeing who could lean over the farthest without falling.

Eric turned away and grabbed hold of the railing. He looked at the rough water below. The whitecaps on the choppy water seemed to remind him of something in his distant past, the details of which he couldn't come to remember. The ferry picked up speed as more and more water separated them from the island.

A seagull struggled to hover above the boat, getting tossed about by gusts of wind. Eric turned around at the sound of kids screaming. He watched the middle-schoolers fall back onto the deck as ocean spray came over the side. It was apparently more than they could handle, and they took off as a group toward the doors that led inside.

Alone on the ferry deck, he took out his phone. After removing the SIM card from the back, he tossed them both into the Sound. He watched them disappear into the gray-blue water almost instantly.

He stayed outside despite the weather, admiring the evergreen-covered island as it faded from his view. All these years he'd hated the dreariness of Seattle. He hardly even allowed himself to enjoy its summers, knowing they would be over all too soon. He seemed to be appreciating its beauty for the first time, now that he might never see it again.

He leaned against the railing, filled with a sense of righteous indignation. Now that Dwayne was dead, he could start his new life over in peace. Even if he'd been wrong to kill Patricia, her husband, and his twit of a neighbor, surely he'd redeemed himself through the act of removing such a disgusting human being like Dwayne from this earth.

It had been a risk to kill him while he was under surveillance. It also delayed his escape out of the country. He could already be on a plane, browsing the in-flight movie selection on his way to a new life. But he knew it had been the right choice. It had been worth it to ensure that worthless scumbag never took another breath.

Maybe Daisy would have come with him if she'd been alive. What a life they could've had.

He looked out at the sea and thought about Blondie accusing him of killing his wife. It was absurd. Stella's family was obviously still as crazy as ever. And Stephenson had been dumb enough to believe them. *He* was the one they should feel sorry for. *She was the one who left me.*

He felt an uneasiness well up inside him and he tried to think of something else. The taste of salt in his mouth and the stormy sea below gave him a sudden sense of déjà vu.

• • • •

ERIC WAS A FOURTH-YEAR medical student and arrived at the teaching hospital for his night shift in the emergency room. It was the start of summer, and he'd watched a colony of flying foxes soar overhead during the drive. When he got there, however, he realized he had looked at the schedule wrong. He wasn't due back at the hospital until the following night.

Even though the hospital was an hour south of where they lived, he was happy to go home and spend the rest of the evening with Stella. Throughout the drive, he made plans in his head of how he and Stella might enjoy his unexpected night off. He pictured them cuddling on the couch while they watched a movie or sharing a bottle of wine on the back porch while they gazed at the stars and listened to the ocean waves crash on the beach. In both scenarios, of course, they ended up in bed, making love well into the night.

But he couldn't have been more wrong.

When he got to the small home he and Stella shared in Anna Bay, he unlocked the front door and called out to his wife. Seeing she wasn't in the kitchen, he called out to her again and continued to their master bedroom. He stopped in the doorway to their room.

"Stella?"

A suitcase lay open on the bed, piled high with clothes. Stella stared at him with her emerald eyes. Her mouth gaped open, obviously frazzled by his presence. More than frazzled. She looked terrified.

"What are you doing?" Eric asked.

She took a deep breath and slammed the suitcase closed. "I'm sorry, Eric. I didn't want it to be this way. It's not exactly what it looks like. I think we need some time apart. I'm going to stay with my parents."

"You're leaving me?"

"I just think we need to take a break."

He took a step toward her. Her eyes widened, and she moved back.

"Why? Did your parents talk you into this?"

"No, this has nothing to do with my parents. You know why. You're starting to scare me with your mood swings and your temper. After you hit me the other night, I don't think it's safe for me to be here anymore."

Now she had insulted him. "Hit you? That was an accident!"

He watched her demeanor change, and she no longer looked afraid. She was angry.

"It wasn't an accident and you know it!" she yelled. She moved forward, bringing her face within an inch of his. "And I'm not going to stick around and let that happen again."

There was a look in her eyes he had never seen before: hatred. She leaned over and zipped the suitcase shut. She started to pull it off the bed, and Eric realized he couldn't let her go. She would probably never come back. He loved her too much to lose her.

He didn't mean for it to end the way it did. She was just so...stubborn. He grabbed the suitcase and pulled it out of her hands.

"No. You're not leaving. I'm your husband. Your home is with me. You're not going anywhere."

He was trying to be understanding, but that's when she pushed him over the edge.

"Oh, yeah? What are you going to do? Hit me again?"

She had never used that tone of voice with him, and Eric knew there was no way he was going to win this argument with words. She grabbed his arm and tried to tear it away from the suitcase.

"You can't make me stay. I'm leaving and there's nothing you can do about it. Let me go or I'll call my parents to come get me!"

She pushed him away, and that's when he lost it. He grabbed her by the throat with both hands and shoved her against the wall. She kicked and thrashed her arms at him before trying to pry his hands away from her neck. This only made him squeeze harder. She slowly stopped fighting him, but, because of his rage, Eric held tight for another few minutes.

When he finally let go, she fell to the floor and Eric knew she was dead. He hadn't meant to kill her. She just wouldn't listen.

When his emotions calmed, it became clear he needed to get rid of her body. He paced their bedroom floor, trying to think of where he could leave her so no one would find her. Then he heard the sound of the waves pounding against the sand. *What better than the ocean?*

Lightning flashed outside their window. Eric remembered hearing on the radio that a severe thunderstorm was predicted for during the night. He couldn't risk leaving her body at their house any longer. If her parents had been expecting her, they might come looking for her when she didn't show. He would have to brave the storm.

He and Stella owned a small fishing boat they mainly used inside the bay. The water could be rough outside the headlands, and it made Stella nervous to venture into the open waters on anything but a flat calm day. He looked down at her body on the hardwood floor. *Sorry, Stella. Tonight we are going to have to risk it.*

He couldn't just throw her overboard. He needed to make sure she would never wash up on shore. He pulled out all the frozen meat from their freezer and went into the garage to grab some rope. He used a knife to cut a hole in the middle of every steak and chicken breast. He strung them all onto the rope and tied it three times around her waist. He made sure the knot would hold before carrying her body to the garage. Even now, he was amazed at his quick thinking.

Eric threw her into the boat before running back inside to find his four heaviest dumbbells. He brought them into the garage, grabbed another long piece of rope, and hopped into the boat alongside his wife. He cut the rope into four pieces and tied each dumbbell to one of her limbs. Fortunately, he had a tarp in the garage and used it to cover her body. He placed the dumbbells on top of its edges to hold it down.

After hitching the boat to the back of his car, he drove fifteen minutes to the boat launch at Little Beach. Eric was happy to see the parking lot was empty and he was the only one there. It was silly to think he wouldn't be. No one else was desperate enough to be launching their boat at ten o'clock at night in the middle of a storm.

It was raining by the time he pulled the boat away from the pier. The roaring thunder and lightning flashes became more frequent as he pushed the throttle forward and steered toward the headlands. The water was choppy inside the bay, and Eric knew it would be much worse once he got outside the port. The visibility was terrible, even with his outer lights on. Somehow, he managed to pass safely through the headlands into the open ocean.

The boat rocked up and down on their way to the outer waters as he rode over the waves coming in with the tide. He checked to make sure Stella was still in the boat. He couldn't see a thing through the blur of the rain as he powered farther out. There were islands staggered throughout these waters, and he could only hope he didn't run into any of their limestone shores.

The area also had an outer reef that was popular with scuba divers, so he kept cruising until the ocean depth reached 150 meters. Eric pulled back on the throttle and put the boat into neutral. A wave crashed into the boat as he turned to grab Stella. He fell forward, his foot slipping on the wet tarp under his feet. His armpits landed on the side of the boat, which dipped into the rough sea from the weight of his body. His arms and top of his head went into the water, and, for a moment, Eric thought he was a goner.

He reached back and clasped one of his hands around the side of the boat. As it tilted upward from the force of another wave, Eric threw himself backward on top of Stella's body. He lay on the tarp and caught his breath while the boat thrashed around in the wild sea.

One by one, he slid each dumbbell that was tied to Stella's arms and legs off the top of the tarp. He grabbed her arms and pulled them over the side of the boat first. The boat rocked so violently he had to be careful not to get too close to the edge or he would go with her. Eric sat down and grabbed her waist on either side. He pushed her top half overboard, but her legs were still in the vessel, weighted down by his heavy dumbbells.

Thankful Stella hadn't been very big, he lifted her calves up and over the side. The dumbbells clunked against the side of the boat as she sank beneath the surface. Eric felt a rise in emotion when she disappeared into the deep, but he forced himself to stay calm. Now he had to get home.

With the aid of his compass and an incredible amount of luck, he succeeded in getting back inside the headlands of Port Stephens safe and sound with minimal damage to his boat. Eric would've felt like a hero if he hadn't just disposed of his wife's body.

When he got home, there was no sign of his in-laws. Stella must have not told them she was leaving him tonight. Eric knew they were partly to blame for her trying to leave him. They'd been planting the seed inside her head for years.

He parked the boat in the garage and went inside to take a warm shower. When he crawled into their empty bed, he tried not to think about the fact she was gone.

• • • •

ERIC WENT BACK TO THE hospital the next night as usual. He didn't want to appear suspicious by calling in sick, plus it helped take his mind off things.

A couple of Stella's friends came by their house over the next few days wanting to know where she was. He told them she'd left him and had gone to stay with her parents. When Stella's parents and sister heard this, they were furious. They accused him of all kinds of horrible things and said they were filing a missing person's report with the local police. He told them to go right ahead, but they were wasting their time. If she wasn't staying with them like she'd said, she obviously didn't want to be found. But they were adamant he had done something to her and knew where she was.

As time went on, her family became convinced Eric had killed her, and they tried to sell the police on this as well. They even went on national television and shared their story. Through tear-soaked eyes, they pleaded with Eric to confess what he had done to their daughter. But he never did. And the police never had enough evidence to arrest him. What was it Marky Mark had said? *It's extremely difficult to solve a homicide without a body.*





Eric moved to the front of the ferry as they got closer to Seattle. It didn't take long to see he had a problem. He'd underestimated the local law enforcement. A squad car and an unmarked vehicle were parked on either side of the ramp at the ferry dock. Two uniformed officers stood between the vehicles, ready to inspect every car as it got off the boat. The unmarked car likely belonged to Beavis and Butthead, who were probably waiting for him inside the walk-on passenger terminal.

Eric hurried back inside and down the nearest stairwell before most of the passengers returned to their cars. Once on the lower car deck, he moved toward the back of the boat. Fortunately, the setting sun would work to his advantage. He braced himself for what he had to do as the foamy water came into view.

He stopped when he reached the chain that had been pulled across the rear of the last car. A ferry worker stood at one end of the chain, waiting to remove the blocks from tires of the cars last in line once they docked. *Crikey*. It wouldn't exactly help his escape to jump off right in front of this bloke. He eyed Eric curiously while Eric planned his next move.

"You all right, sir?"

"Fine, thanks," Eric replied as he turned toward the stairwell. It was full of passengers coming down to get back into their cars as he made his way up. Hopefully, that would mean there would be no witnesses on the rear upper deck. Keeping his head down, Eric bumped shoulders with more than one as he ascended the stairs two at a time.

Once upstairs, he dodged through more passengers heading back down to their vehicles. When he got close to the rear deck, he could see it was empty. *Good*. He was accosted by wind and rain when he opened the door and stepped outside. He grabbed hold of the railing and looked over the edge at the choppy waves that had grown darker with the setting sun. He realized the weather he was enduring on the upper deck was nothing compared to what he was about to do.

Eric took a quick look around to make sure no one was watching, glad he'd had the foresight to wear black. Seeing no one, he climbed over the railing, took a deep breath, and dove into the deep.

It took everything in him to not inhale from the shock of the cold the second he became submerged in the Sound. The rumbling of the ferry engine filled his senses and sent a vibration through his body. Eric forced himself to take a few strokes underwater before coming up for air. There was already good distance between him and the ferry.

He hyperventilated and forced himself to keep moving through the frigid water toward the shore. A wave came over his face and he inadvertently drank in salt water. He swam to the left as the ferry veered right. Eric focused on a pier down away from the ferry dock. At least he didn't have to worry about sharks in these waters like he would in Sydney, but he'd happily take his chances with them now to be free from this hypothermia.

Eric swam as fast as he could for the next few minutes but was dismayed to see the pier didn't look any closer. His body seemed to be slowing down. He may have underestimated the distance to the shore. Despite being out of breath, he concentrated on making one stroke after another, hoping his slow, continual progress would get him to the pier before his body shut down completely from the cold.



“He's not here,” Stephenson said after the last walk-on passenger had disembarked the ferry.

He had tried calling the doctor's cell on his way to the ferry, but, not surprisingly, the doctor's phone was off. He held his phone to his ear and peered over the railing at Adams who stood in the waiting bay below.

“I just checked the last car to leave the ferry. He wasn't in any of the vehicles. And none of the passengers recognized him from his driver's license photo.”

“Same here,” Stephenson said. “Let's see if any of the crew spotted him.” He flashed his badge to the ferry worker on the upper deck and stepped onto the boat. “I'm on the ferry. I want to do a search of the inside in case he's hiding somewhere on the ship.”

• • • •

THEY GOT OFF THE FERRY and walked through the terminal after their search of the boat yielded nothing. None of the crew had recognized the doctor from his photo either. However, one of the workers did report seeing a man dressed in black and a black baseball cap acting strangely near the back of the boat shortly before they docked. Although the worker was unable to ID him from the doctor's license photo, the vague description he gave to the detectives sounded like it could've been Dr. Leroy.

“You think it was him?” Adams asked.

“It'd be my best guess. Since we didn't see anyone who matched that description leave the ferry, he could've jumped off before the boat docked.”

“You want to notify the Coast Guard?”

Stephenson shook his head. “No. It's dark out and the ferry's been docked for an hour. If he's still in the water, he'd be unconscious from hypothermia and likely drowned by now. But he could've made it to shore, and our priority is the safety of the public.” Stephenson wished they could put out a bulletin with Dr. Leroy's photo to the local police. However, since no witnesses could ID Dr. Leroy from his driver's license photo, they had insufficient grounds to bring him in. “Let's send one of our sketch artists over to meet with the cook from the café. Maybe the artist can get more details out of him. Then, let's use the composite to put out a bulletin to Seattle PD.”

“You know,” Adams said as Stephenson pulled out his phone, “I hate to say *I told you so* but we should've never let Dwayne out of custody to use as bait for Dr. Leroy. It would've made a lot more sense if we could've justified putting the doctor under surveillance too.”

Stephenson shot a sideways glance at his partner. “That's exactly why we needed Dwayne. We needed his release to provoke the doctor, which it obviously did. Only we should have him in custody right now and Dwayne should be alive. If those two surveillance officers had paid a little more attention to Dwayne and a little less to the Seahawk game, none of this would've happened.”

“Maybe. I'm just glad it's your ass on the line and not mine. This is all you and Sergeant McKinnon. I never wanted to release that dirtbag.”

“Yeah, well you can let me worry about that. For now, let's find the doctor.”



Exhausted, Eric finally made it to the end of the pier. It had nearly grown dark in the time it took him to reach it, and he could only hope he'd managed to cross the distance unnoticed. He looked at the pillar that held up the end of pier. The pier stood about two meters above the water, and there was no way he'd be able to climb the barnacle and algae-covered post to the top.

He spotted a ladder about ten meters ahead. It hung down from the side of the pier and almost reached the water. It took every bit of willpower he had left to swim toward it. It felt like an eternity until he reached it. Triumphant, he encircled his hand around one of the rusted, metal bars and slowly pulled himself onto the pier.

Eric collapsed on the wooden structure and looked over at the ferry landing. His body shivered uncontrollably as he took in slow, shallow breaths. The two police vehicles were still there, stopping every car as it drove off the boat. Hopefully, that meant Eric had escaped the ferry unnoticed.

When his breathing returned to normal, he stood up. He trembled from the cold and walked down the empty pier toward the city. He needed to get out of here, away from downtown. He needed to get to the airport. But first, he needed some dry clothes.

Eric felt for the burner phone in his pocket and realized it probably no longer worked after his swim. Nevertheless, he held up the wet device and attempted to turn it on. Nothing.

As he neared the street, a man and woman holding hands under a shared umbrella stopped and stared at him. Eric's shoes squished with each step from the water inside. Sopping wet, he smiled at the gawking couple.

"Good evening," Eric said with a nod of his head.

The woman's mouth fell open and she continued to stare. Eric broke their gaze and turned left onto the sidewalk.

"Good evening," he heard the man say.

Eric shoved the useless phone back into his pocket and ducked inside the first gift shop he saw. An old man sat behind the register reading a novel.

"Hello," the man said, not bothering to look up from his book.

Eric headed straight for a rack of hooded sweatshirts with a picture of the space needle on the front. He grabbed a pair of matching sweatpants on his way to the dressing room. His lips were purple when he saw his reflection in the dressing room mirror. His left cheekbone had already started to bruise in the shape of Dwayne's fist.

He threw off his wet clothes and retrieved his burner phone and wallet from his jacket pocket. He felt warmer almost immediately after putting on the dry sweats. He stepped back into his wet shoes. Eric took the extra minute to fold his clothes into a neat pile in the corner of the dressing room.

The old man looked up from his book when Eric approached the register. He carefully bookmarked his page before setting the book aside. Eric rolled his eyes when he spotted the author's name on the cover. *Martin Watts*. Martin was so overrated, it was maddening.

"I'll take this sweatshirt and sweatpants," Eric said.

"Couldn't wait to wear them, huh?"

"It's a wet one out there today. My clothes got soaked by the rain." Eric pulled a saturated hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and laid it on the counter.

The man gawked at the bill before looking up at Eric.

“You drop your wallet in the Sound?” He took in Eric’s appearance for the first time since he’d entered the store. “From the color of your lips, you look like you jumped in after it.”

“Like I said, it’s coming down hard out there. Keep the change,” Eric said before walking out of the store.

Eric stopped at the nearest bus stop only a block away. It was time to get off the street.

The bus arrived after only a few minutes. He rode it to Pioneer Square, where he got off and jumped on the light rail that would take him all the way to the airport. Eric took the last seat in the carriage, not bothering to get up for the old man with a cane who got on at the next stop.

Eric leaned his head against the window for the rest of the way. He continued to warm up from his swim and felt himself relax when they reached the airport. He was going to make it. A few more hours and he'd be on a plane out of the country, ready to start his new life.

He picked up his bag from the luggage storage kiosk, thankful for his preemptive planning of a change of clothes and cash. He found a bathroom outside security and changed into jeans and a t-shirt. He left twelve thousand in cash in his carry-on bag. Two thousand for the airline ticket and ten thousand to declare through customs. He hid the other ten thousand on his person. He carefully placed five thousand inside the bottom of each of his socks before getting in line for the ticket counter at Air Canada.

It felt strange to be fleeing the country he had once fled to. It was right after Stella's parents went on TV that he moved to America. Even though he was never arrested for Stella's murder, people in their small town started to look at him differently. Especially after her family went on TV.

His parents eventually sided with Stella's family. He was crushed to learn they too believed he had killed her. Even though he had. During his shifts at the hospital he would get the question, *Hey, aren't you that bloke who was on TV for killing his wife?*

He even felt like an unwelcome outsider at his local grocery store. It began to wear on him. He didn't want to live with a stigma like that for the rest of his life. The final blow had been when his parents told him they never wanted to see him again. It was then that he knew he needed a fresh start. Being born a dual-citizen made America an easy choice.

“Can I help you, sir?”

The voice of the ticket agent brought him out of his thoughts, and he realized he was standing at the front of the line for the ticket counter.

“Um, yes. I need to buy a ticket for the next flight available to Australia. Sydney, preferably, but I'll go to Melbourne or Brisbane if you can get me there today.”

“Okay, let me see what I have available for tonight.” Her long, acrylic nails tapped loudly on the keyboard. “I can get you on the red-eye flight to Sydney out of Vancouver. I've got seats on the seven o'clock flight to Vancouver, which will put you there in plenty of time. It'll be 2200 dollars.”

He let out a sigh of relief at his good luck.

“Great, I'll pay cash.”

He set the money on the counter and waited to see if she found this unusual. She took the money and counted it out without blinking an eye, and he realized he was being paranoid. After all, she didn't know he'd killed anyone.

“Could I have your passport and I'll check you in?”

“Sure.” He placed his passport on the counter.

A minute later, she handed it back to him along with his tickets. He flashed her a grateful smile.

“Thank you,” he said as he picked up his bag. She'd just made his day.

He got to the front of the line at security and realized there was a problem with his plan. He watched as most travelers were made to walk through the full-body scanner. He placed his shoes and bag on the conveyer belt of the x-ray machine, aware of the stacks of cash under his feet. Surely, they would see the cash if he went through the scanner.

He held his breath as the woman in front of him was told to go through the full-body scanner. The TSA agent held up his hand for Eric to wait. *How could I have been so stupid?*

The woman exited the scanner and the agent motioned for Eric to come forward. Eric took slow steps toward the scanner, fearing his escape was about to come to a bitter end.

“Sir, this way,” the agent barked.

Eric stopped and saw the man was pointing to the metal detector.

“Come on through,” he said impatiently.

Eric’s jaw fell open. He turned away from the scanner and went through the metal detector as instructed.

“Thank you. Have a good flight.”

Eric smiled at the agent before retrieving his bag from the x-ray machine. “I will.”

Although he made it through security without a problem, he felt slightly nervous as he walked to his gate. He couldn't shake the feeling his escape was too good to be true.





Adams hung up with the surveillance officer who'd found Dwayne's body that afternoon. "They've searched the area surrounding the café, but there's no sign of the doctor or anyone else fitting his description."

"Let's stop by the homicide unit and grab that photo montage we used for the break-in at Madison Park before we go to the crime scene. I want to give the cook another chance to ID him."

"They're in the process of checking the Bainbridge Island ferry holding cameras, but so far they haven't found any trace of the doctor's car being on the island today. The officers found text messages on Dwayne's cell from someone who claimed to have Daisy's phone with evidence that Dwayne killed her. The texts threatened to turn her phone into the police unless Dwayne met them today at that cafe on the island. The texts weren't from Dr. Leroy's number, but they're sending Dwayne's phone over to TESU to be analyzed."

"Dr. Leroy knew we didn't find Daisy's phone. We never released that to the media."

"They also found part of a broken-off zipper on the ground outside the window of the bathroom. We should have the fingerprint analysis back in a few hours."

They rode together to the doctor's apartment. The sky was dark and lights had come on around the city. The traffic moved slowly from the Seahawks game. They needed to get to Dwayne's crime scene, especially since they had a witness who could possibly ID the doctor. But Dwayne's body was already being transferred to the Seattle Medical Examiner's Office, and first they wanted to find Dr. Leroy.

His car was in the parking garage when they got to his building. Stephenson guessed he probably walked to the ferry to kill Dwayne.

There was no answer when they knocked on his apartment door. Stephenson tried the doorknob. It was locked.

"We need to get in there. We might find Daisy's phone. The doctor could even be hiding out in the apartment."

Adams pulled out his phone. "I'll see if I can get a warrant in case we find anything incriminating in there."

"See if you can get one for his car, too, while you're at it."

Adams nodded.

Stephenson had put the building manager's number in his phone when they came to Robert's crime scene. He dialed her number while Adams made the call to the judge. Fortunately, she was on site and brought up a key to the doctor's apartment before Adams got off the phone.

"Thank you," Stephenson said as she handed him the key. "We'll bring it back down to you when we're done."

"You're going to search his apartment then?"

"Yes."

She bit her lip. "Has he done something wrong? Did he kill Robert?"

"We're in the process of investigating that."

She lingered uncomfortably for a moment, as if wanting to ask more but not sure of what to say. "Okay. I'll be downstairs when you're done with the key."

She walked slowly back to the elevator as Adams ended the call and walked back toward him.

"We've got it. Let's go."

He looked back at the building manager as she stepped into the elevator.

“You already got the key?”

“Yeah. I didn't see the point in waiting till you got off the phone.”

Stephenson unlocked the door and announced themselves as they cautiously entered the apartment.

“Dr. Leroy? It's Detectives Stephenson and Adams from Seattle Homicide. You home?”

The apartment was silent.

The unit was meticulously neat, just as it had been when they came to inform the doctor of his front office assistant's death. Too neat, Stephenson thought. No one he knew kept their place *that* perfect. *A sign of a sick mind*, he thought.

“I'll check the bedroom.”

“All right. I'll start out here,” Adams said, pulling a pair of gloves out of his coat pocket.

“Dr. Leroy?” Stephenson called again when he reached the bedroom door.

He donned his own gloves before reaching through the doorway and flicking on the light. The bed was made and the nightstands on either side of the bed were bare apart from a lamp. The floors were spotless.

He opened the double doors to the doctor's closet. It was filled with perfectly organized clothes. He entered the en suite bathroom and noticed the shower was empty. No shampoo, no soap, nothing. This struck him as odd, even for a neat freak like Dr. Leroy. He went through the bathroom cabinets and found they too were nearly empty. There was no toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, razors, shampoo, or soap. Despite the closet being full of clothes, he feared the doctor had already skipped town.

While they could monitor his airline travel and entry into other countries, they couldn't stop him. Not without a warrant for his arrest. And they still didn't have enough evidence to get one.

“I found something,” he heard Adams call from the other room.

Stephenson stepped out into the living room and found Adams holding up a small black leather case.

“Found a lock picking kit in the top drawer of his desk. It was sitting next to a pair of black leather gloves.” He pointed down to the opened drawer. “I already took photos of them in the drawer.” He pulled two plastic evidence bags out of one of his pockets and bagged the items.

“Can you smell paint thinner on the gloves?” Stephenson asked.

Adams pulled them out of the bag and lifted them to his nose. “It's faint, but I think so.” He pushed them back into the evidence bag. “We still don't have results back on Robert's drumsticks, but I'll make some calls when we get back to homicide and see if they can speed it up. Hopefully we'll get results as soon as tomorrow.”

Stephenson told him about the lack of toiletries in the doctor's bathroom.

“You think he's going to try and disappear?”

“Maybe. But wherever he goes, we'll find him. Even if we can't stop him from leaving the state or the country until we have an arrest warrant, we can at least monitor his travel until we get one. When we get back to the homicide unit, I'll work on getting a warrant we can serve to the airlines.” Stephenson pulled his phone out his pocket. “In the meantime, I'll call my contact at the Port of Seattle and ask him to notify us if Dr. Leroy shows up on any flight manifests out of SeaTac.”

They searched the doctor's apartment for another hour before heading back to the homicide unit. Adams made the necessary phone calls to speed up the lab analysis of Dr. Leroy's gloves while Stephenson filled out the paperwork for their warrant to monitor the airline manifests.

With Adams still on the phone, Stephenson retrieved the photo montage for their witness at the café. Other than the gloves and lock picking kit, they didn't find anything else in Dr. Leroy's apartment to help with their investigation. Stephenson found a fireproof box under the doctor's bed with the key left in it, but the box was empty. He guessed it was where the doctor would've kept his passport, and he now worried he might be planning to leave the country, not just the state.

There was no computer or laptop and they didn't find Daisy's phone. Until they got the lab analysis back on the doctor's gloves and Robert's drumsticks, they needed more evidence to arrest him.

Stephenson logged into his email when he returned to his desk and saw he had a new message from his contact at the Port of Seattle. He swore under his breath when the doctor's name came up on his screen in an international passenger manifest.

"What is it?" Adams asked as he hung up his desk phone.

"Dr. Leroy is on a flight to Vancouver, B.C. It took off ten minutes ago. He's booked on a connecting flight from there to Sydney, Australia."

"Well, that makes things a bit more complicated."

Stephenson gritted his teeth as he stared at his screen. He was beyond frustrated they didn't have enough on the doctor to arrest him before he fled the country. Now, when they finally got what they needed to arrest him, they'd have to go through the process of extradition.

"Yeah, just a bit."

• • • •

IT WAS LATE WHEN STEPHENSON got home. He retrieved a beer from the fridge on his way to the couch, glad he'd remembered to put some in there that morning. After the day he'd had, he needed one.

He collapsed on the couch and dialed Richards. It was after ten, but he figured she'd still be awake. She answered on the second ring.

"Hi. You arrest Dwayne's killer already?"

He felt himself relax at the sound of her voice. "I wish. But no. I wanted to thank you for taking me to the game today. I had a great time."

"You're welcome. I had a good time too. Plus, it didn't hurt that we won."

"I'm sorry I had to leave so quick."

"That's okay. You only missed meeting my brother. Oh, and Russell Wilson. It was the first time I'd met him. He was super nice. Came over and talked with us for like ten minutes."

"That makes me feel a lot better about rushing out."

Hearing her laugh on the other end of the call, he smiled.

"Did you get back to your car okay?"

"Yeah, my brother gave me a ride back to the station. I'm leaving his place now. He had a small party at his house. Have you eaten anything tonight?"

It was the first time he'd thought about food since he'd left the stadium. Now that she mentioned it, he realized he was starving.

"No, we were too busy to think about food."

"I'm actually at Northgate, isn't that close to where you live? Want me to bring over some take out?"

"That sounds great, but you don't have to do that." He glanced at his work laptop sitting on his coffee table. "Plus, I've got some work to do tonight, so I probably wouldn't be that great of

company.”

“I don't mind. Maybe I could help you.”

“I'd love that, but only if you're sure that's how you want to spend your Saturday night.”

“I'm sure.”

• • • •

TWENTY MINUTES LATER he heard a knock at his door. He got up and opened the door to let her in. She looked as beautiful as she had earlier that day, maybe even more so.

“Mexican okay?” She held up a large paper bag.

“Perfect. Come on in.”

She followed him into the living room and took a seat next to him on the couch. He was already halfway through his burrito by the time she took her first bite.

“Good thing I bought you two,” she said, watching him inhale the second half of his burrito.

“Thank you.” He wiped his hands on a paper napkin. “I didn't realize how hungry I was.”

“So where are you at on Dwayne's murder case?”

“A cook at the café saw a man matching Dr. Leroy's description in the kitchen right before Dwayne was found dead. Unfortunately, he was wearing a baseball hat, so the cook was unable to positively ID him in a photo montage.”

He sighed and pulled another burrito out of the bag, irritated that Dr. Leroy's average looks and baseball cap had kept him from being positively ID'd twice in their investigation.

“We found threatening text messages on Dwayne's cell from someone saying they had Daisy's phone and could prove Dwayne killed her. They told him to meet them at the cafe where he was killed. Problem is, the texts were sent from an untraceable burner phone. There was no other communication between him and Dr. Leroy.

“We visited the crime scene, but there wasn't much to see. We did, however, get a partial fingerprint match to Dr. Leroy from a piece of a zipper that was found outside the bathroom's window, which is how we think he fled the scene.”

“That's great! I mean, that's huge isn't it? Does that give you enough for his arrest?”

He shook his head as he swallowed the last bite of his second burrito. He crumpled its paper wrapper before tossing it back inside the empty take-out bag.

“No. Well, we might've been able to justify an arrest warrant with that, but we could've used more to strengthen our case.”

She leaned back against the couch while he went on.

“But Dr. Leroy is now on a flight to Australia. Since we didn't get the fingerprint analysis back until after he'd left the country, there was nothing we could do to stop him.”

Her eyes grew wide. “So, what? You'll have to extradite him?”

He nodded. “Yes, when we have enough evidence. The partial on the zipper might've been enough for a warrant while he was still in the country, but it may not be enough to make a case for extradition, which will be a drawn-out, complicated process. But I'm going to do whatever's necessary to bring him back and charge him with murder.”

“I'm sure you will.”

Their eyes met. He wanted to lean over and kiss her but wondered if maybe it was too soon. Instead, he cleared his throat and told her about the call he got from Dr. Leroy's sister-in-law.

“Wow. So, you think he killed his wife and has gotten away with it for twenty years?”

“Personally, yes. But I don't think we'll ever be able to prove it. Unless he confesses.”

“Well, he must think you have something on him if he's fleeing to Australia. Maybe it means he screwed up somehow.”

The same thought had already crossed his mind. “I hope so.”

He looked into her blue eyes and was suddenly overcome by how stunning she was. He wondered if he was boring her with all the details of his case, but she didn't seem bored. She looked intrigued.

“I hope I'm not ruining your Saturday night with all this shop talk,” he said.

She smiled, and he felt his heart rate quicken.

“Not at all. It's fascinating. Plus, I'm enjoying being with you.”

“Me too.”

“I actually had a bit of a crush on you when we were at the police academy.”

That would've been six years ago, but he didn't remember her being at the academy when he was there. He was sure he would've remembered her.

“You were in my class?”

“Well, no. I was in the class below yours, but I used to see you around at the training center. I never worked up the nerve to introduce myself.”

“I wish you would have.”

His urge to kiss her grew even stronger. He might've imagined it, but she seemed to be sitting closer to him on the couch than she had a minute ago. He leaned forward slowly, bringing his mouth to hers. Her lips moved against his as she returned his kiss.

Her fingers intertwined with his. They reclined on the couch and continued to talk between kisses. After walking her to her car an hour later, he didn't think about Dr. Leroy again for the rest of the night.



Eric boarded both flights without a problem. He had a window seat on the leg to Sydney, and he leaned forward to take in the view of his homeland as they descended.

Rugged sandstone cliffs dropped into the bright sapphire water along the outer shores of Sydney's coastline. The view of Sydney Harbour was breathtaking as they flew over the Opera House and Harbour Bridge. He suddenly realized how much he had missed this beautiful, diverse country.

After clearing customs without a hitch, Eric relaxed even more. He stepped outside into the warm, morning air. He drew in a deep breath as he squinted in the bright sunlight. Seeing the palm trees that lined the street immediately lifted his spirits.

He knew without a doubt he hadn't left Australia because he wanted to. He'd left because he felt like there was no other option. He pulled out the sunglasses he'd bought in the airport gift shop while killing time in Vancouver.

After nearly twenty years, it was good to be home.





On Monday morning, Stephenson sat next to Sergeant McKinnon and looked across at Lieutenant Greyson, who frowned from behind his large desk. The wall behind him was covered with plaques and certificates of what looked to be every achievement and award the lieutenant had ever been given. They confirmed to Stephenson that Greyson had always been more interested in ass-kissing and moving his way up the department's ladder than he had ever been in solving crimes.

Stephenson had felt like a kid getting called into the principal's office by the way the lieutenant had summoned them into his office. Greyson seemed to enjoy exercising his authority, which made their meeting all the more painful. Stephenson couldn't help but notice the lieutenant's hair was significantly thinner than the last time he saw him.

"So, let me get this straight. You released Dwayne Morrison, a known killer, for the purpose of using him as bait to catch a supposed serial killer who you couldn't justify putting under surveillance."

"Well, actually—"

McKinnon raised his left hand in front of Stephenson's chest, signaling he'd do the talking.

"Not as bait. We released him and placed him under twenty-four-hour police surveillance in the hope of using any communication or interaction he had with Dr. Leroy as something we could use to prove Dr. Leroy was responsible for a string of recent murders. If the doctor threatened Dwayne, or the officers felt Dwayne was in danger at any point, they were ordered to intervene and arrest the doctor."

"So, as I said, you released him and used him as bait. You not only risked his life but also posed a risk to the community by letting a killer back on the streets."

Stephenson heard McKinnon let out a sigh. As he looked back and forth between his two superiors, he thought they couldn't have been more different. Not only in appearance, but also in personality. Even sitting down, one could see that Greyson was small in stature. His pale complexion gave him a washed-out look, especially in the middle of winter. And he was all about upholding policies and procedures. A man who lived for the rule book.

McKinnon was a couple inches taller than himself. Stephenson guessed he was about six three. And, much to Greyson's disapproval, McKinnon felt that in extreme circumstances rules sometimes needed to be bent, if not broken, to get the job done.

"Being under round-the-clock surveillance, Dwayne should never have been in any danger nor been allowed to harm anyone else. Prior to his release, we also had received a confirmation of Dwayne's alibi for the time around Daisy's death. Without a more precise time of death for Daisy Colbert, we couldn't be certain Dwayne was her killer."

Stephenson knew McKinnon was stretching the truth a bit but hoped it would pacify the lieutenant. Since they only had an approximate time of death for Daisy, it was *possible* she was killed right after Dwayne got to his friends' house. But his alibi also left plenty of time for him to kill her within the window of her time of death, so it wouldn't have given them cause to release him.

The lieutenant stared back and forth between them as if deciding what to do next.

McKinnon took the opportunity to continue in their defense. "We aren't responsible for the actions, or lack thereof, of the two officers who were watching Dwayne at the time of his death. Plus, he wasn't in police custody when he was killed. We didn't owe him any protection. Their job was to see what we could learn from any interaction Dwayne had with the doctor."

This seemed to appease the lieutenant, at least for the moment. He turned his focus to Stephenson.

“And where are you in the investigation of Dwayne's death and your recent strangulation cases, including Martin and Patricia Watts?”

“Our prime suspect is Dr. Eric Leroy, but we're still working on compiling enough evidence for his arrest.”

He didn't add that they would be closing Daisy's case by attributing her death to Dwayne. Or that the doctor was now in Australia and they'd have to extradite him once they could make a strong enough case. McKinnon sat silently next to him, and Stephenson was thankful he didn't bring up either of those things either.

They found Daisy's fingerprints in the passenger side of the doctor's BMW when they processed his car over the weekend. It made Stephenson wonder what sort of relationship the two of them had, even though there was no record of any calls or texts made between them. If Dwayne had suspected there was something going on between them, his jealousy could've been part of his motive for killing her.

Greyson leaned over and pulled that morning's edition of *The Seattle Times* from his desk drawer. “I take it you've seen this?”

Stephenson tried not to cringe when he read the front-page headline. Adams had told him there was an article but not the extent of what it had said.

### *MURDER-SUICIDE OR KILLER WALKING FREE? COPS STILL HAVE NO ANSWERS IN DEATH OF MARTIN WATTS AND WIFE PATRICIA*

“We're very close to getting an arrest warrant for Eric Leroy.”

Greyson tossed the paper onto his desk. “I want to see those cases solved. And soon.”

*Like I don't?* Stephenson thought. “Yes, sir,” he said.

McKinnon stood, taking the cue they'd been dismissed and Stephenson followed suit. Stephenson shut the door to Greyson's office behind him.

“Thanks for having my back in there,” he said.

“You're welcome. Just find a way to bring the doctor back and put him away for good.”

“I will.”

The sergeant gave him a firm pat on the back before heading to his office. Stephenson walked back to his desk and tried to believe his own words.

He checked his email when he sat down and saw he had a new message from Patricia's health insurance company. Before he'd left on Friday, he called the software company Dr. Leroy used for his medical records. They confirmed Patricia's medical documents had, in fact, been edited by Dr. Leroy a few days before she was killed. However, when they tried to look up the previous versions of her records in their system, they found they'd all been deleted by Dr. Leroy.

He'd contacted her insurance company before his meeting with the lieutenant to request a list of other doctors she'd seen in the past couple years. He hoped maybe one of them had been sent her records from Dr. Leroy and he could compare them to the file the doctor had given them.

He scanned through the list of specialist doctors and stopped when he read she'd seen another psychiatrist three months earlier. That'd be his best bet for receiving a copy of her records from Dr. Leroy's office. He saw their address was in Madison Park, not far from where Patricia had lived. He dialed the number and spoke briefly with the receptionist.

She looked up Patricia in their database and verified she'd been seen once by their office three months before. She said their psychiatrist had agreed to cover for Dr. Leroy by seeing his patients while he was on vacation. She confirmed they'd received Patricia's entire file from Dr. Leroy at the time of her visit. It was exactly what he'd hoped for. He stressed the importance of them receiving her file and promised to fax over a warrant within a couple of hours.

It was late afternoon when Patricia's medical records came over their fax machine. Her file was lengthy. Stephenson and Adams worked together for over an hour comparing the file to what Dr. Leroy had given them.

Stephenson set down his highlighter when he reached the last page. "He completely falsified all the verbally abusive and controlling behaviors of Patricia's husband."

"Yeah, looks like she complained about him a lot, but there's nothing in this file that would suggest he was any sort of danger to her. Dr. Leroy obviously wanted us to think Martin killed his wife. Falsifying her medical records should give us enough to start his extradition process. Plus, we have his prints on the zipper from Dwayne's crime scene."

Stephenson picked up his highlighter and tapped it against the desk. "It's a start, but the medical records aren't enough to prove he killed Martin and Patricia. I think we need to find more before we request his extradition. With double jeopardy, we only have one shot to get him convicted of Dwayne's murder. I want to bring him back on solid murder charges, not just this."

"Blake?"

He turned and was shocked to see Serena. Unlike the last time he'd seen her, her hair was dry and she wore a tight black skirt that stopped above her knees and a button up shirt.

"What are you doing here? Who brought you up?" he asked.

"Suarez. I told him it was really important that I speak to you. I got off work early, and I figured you'd still be here."

Her demeanor was serious, and Stephenson wondered what she'd possibly want to speak to him about. He couldn't imagine she'd come all the way here to say sorry for cheating on him. He had no desire to speak to her again; there was nothing to say.

Adams looked nearly as shocked to see her as Stephenson did. He glanced back and forth between the two of them, waiting for his partner's response.

"Okay. Go ahead." Stephenson leaned back in his chair. "But make it quick, because I need to get back to work."

She looked over at Adams before turning back to him. "Could we go somewhere private for a few minutes?"

Stephenson debated for a moment before answering. "Fine. We can talk in the break room." He reluctantly got out of his chair. "I won't be long," he said to Adams as he led the way to the small room down the hall from the large, open area where they worked.

He stepped aside and motioned for Serena to enter first. He followed behind, leaving the door open behind him. She turned to face him. He crossed his arms and waited for her to speak.

"So, how are you?" she asked.

The look of concern on her face was almost laughable. *Seriously?* he thought.

"I'm fine. I hope that's not what you came all the way down here to ask me."

She took a step toward him and looked up with her big brown eyes, now brimmed with tears. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry. I made a huge mistake."

A tear spilled onto her cheek, but Stephenson made no effort to comfort her. If she wanted sympathy, she'd come to the wrong person.

“I don't know what I was thinking. Things seemed to be getting so serious between us I guess I... got scared, you know?”

“No, I don't.”

She put her hand on his arm. “I want you to know I'm not seeing Shawn anymore.”

“I don't care.”

Another tear slid down her face. “I was wrong. It was stupid, and I hope someday you can forgive me. I love you, Blake.”

Before he could pull away she reached her hand behind his neck and put her mouth to his. The familiar feel of her lips against his left him frozen in shock.

“Guess who got their first homicide? Oh—sorry.”

He tore his mouth away from Serena's at the sound of Richards' startled voice in the doorway. Their eyes met for only a second before she turned away down the hall. He swore and pulled Serena's hand away from his neck.

“Tess, wait!”

He hurried after her down the hall.

“That wasn't what it looked like,” he said as he closed the distance between them.

He could see the hurt in her eyes when she whipped around to face him.

“It looked like you were making out with your ex-girlfriend. Or is she even your ex?”

“There's nothing going on between us. I—”

She put her hand in the air to silence him. “I have to go. We're about to leave for the crime scene. I was just coming to tell you I'd gotten my first case.”

She turned and marched back toward her desk. He started to follow her, then realized they were in a room filled with other detectives working their cases. Not exactly the time or place for him to try and explain what she just saw.

“You ready?” her partner asked, putting on his coat.

She glanced back in Stephenson's direction. “Yeah. Let's go.”

He watched them leave before he returned to his desk. Even though he'd only known Tess a short time, the thought of losing her made him feel sick. He was about to sit down when Serena appeared at the end of the hallway. It was obvious she'd been crying. Her eyes were red and her dark eye makeup was now smudged underneath them.

It was embarrassing for her to come to his workplace and act like this. He took a deep breath and tried to suppress his anger toward her before he went to where she stood.

“You need to leave, *now*,” he said in a lowered voice. “It's completely inappropriate for you to be coming here like this.”

She nodded and started to leave. Stephenson let out a sigh of relief when she didn't cause more of a scene. She turned when she was only a few feet away and he held his breath for what she might say in front of his coworkers.

“Call me if you ever want to talk. I miss you.”

“Goodbye, Serena.”

He went back to his desk without looking back. He ran his hand through his hair after sitting down.

“Sorry, man. Richards came over and asked where you were, and I told her you were in the break room and you'd be back in a minute. I thought she'd wait here for you to come back. When she headed back there, I wasn't sure how to explain you were talking privately with Serena.”

“It's okay. It's not your fault.”

“She didn't look too happy when she came back down the hall. Everything okay between you two?”

“No. She walked in on Serena trying to stick her tongue down my throat.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I'm sure you can explain to her what really happened.”

“I don't know. I hope so. But I'm sure what she saw didn't look good.”

• • • •

STEPHENSON WAITED UNTIL the end of the day to try talking to Richards again. When he saw her pack up her laptop, he followed her out of the homicide unit and down the stairwell.

“Tess, wait!”

His footsteps echoed in the stairway as he hurried after her.

She was three flights down before she paused on the landing half a flight below him and looked up. Her expression was both weary and annoyed.

“There is *nothing* going on between me and Serena. I know what it looked like, but believe me —”

“Stop. I don't want to hear it.”

He stopped two stairs up from where she stood. “It's not what you think.”

“It's best if we just keep things professional between us, okay? Getting involved with someone at work was obviously a bad idea. I need to focus on the job for right now.”

He longed to move closer to her but could see she needed her space.

“There's nothing you can say to change my mind. It's better this way. I'll see you tomorrow,” she said before continuing down the stairs.

He slumped down onto the steps when he heard the door open and shut at the bottom of the stairwell.





ERIC TOOK THE TRAIN from the airport to Newcastle and caught a bus from there to Nelson Bay. He would've hired a car, but the rental companies required too much personal information. Like a driver's license. It was information he couldn't afford to give.

The fact that he'd made it all the way to Sydney was a great sign. The cops must've not had enough evidence to arrest him. If that remained the case, they wouldn't have enough evidence to extradite him.

They might've not even realized he had gone yet. Eric knew they'd eventually figure out he fled to Australia, but he clung to the hope they wouldn't be able to do anything about it. He didn't want to take any unnecessary chances.

He rented a one-bedroom unit downtown, close to the beach. He paid cash for one week. In the meantime, he'd look for something more permanent. The weather was glorious in Nelson Bay in February. He awoke early to the bright morning sun and the sound of kookaburras laughing in the trees outside his window. He spent the morning at the beach, where he sat on the white sand and basked in summer sun. When he felt overheated, he waded into the clear blue water and watched as juvenile whiting swam past his legs.

After stopping for gelato at the marina on his way back to the apartment, he worked on his novel for the rest of the afternoon. In the evening, before sunset, he headed back down to the marina and walked along the break wall. It was alive with people this time of year. The area was home to over twenty inland and coastal beaches, making it a popular holiday destination, especially in summer.

There was a mix of both locals and tourists, fisherman, couples holding hands, and a few young families. Pelicans hovered on the rocks near the fishermen, waiting for handouts. Dolphins often surfaced along the wall during their evening feed.

Eric climbed down the rocks and admired the small reef fish swimming in the shallow waters. His father used to take him fishing along this break wall as a kid. He remembered seeing the occasional penguin swim by in the winter and sea turtles in the summer. Growing up, this magical place had seemed ordinary to him. Well, maybe not ordinary. He knew it was a great place to live, but it had also seemed normal. It was the only home he had ever known. He promised himself he would never take this paradise for granted again. After dusk, he went back to his unit and wrote late into the night.

He wrote tirelessly during that first week back in Australia. Being home gave him a new energy and he felt free to unleash his unfiltered creative genius. He even wrote a scene where he recreated Stella's murder. He figured since she was already dead, some good might as well come out of it. By the time Eric moved into his new apartment where he intended to stay as a long-term tenant, his manuscript was complete. He had a bit of editing to do, but the end was in sight.

He'd found an ad for a furnished granny flat close to downtown that was for rent by owner. It was a one-bedroom, standalone unit situated at the rear of the larger home's property. He contacted the owners, a retired couple looking to bring in a little extra cash. They hit it off right away. When he offered to pay for three months up front, they were happy to let him move in the next day.

In another week he had completely edited his manuscript. He emailed it to a dozen top literary agents in New York. Now all he could do was wait.

Eric kept up his same routine, minus the writing. He didn't stop writing intentionally, he just didn't have any ideas yet for the next novel. He walked everywhere. He even found a scenic bushwalk that ran through the natural habitat behind his granny flat. He jogged it in the early morning on days he felt especially ambitious, before the summer heat became too intense.

This town brought back so many memories for him. As he strolled down the quaint downtown enjoying his gelato, he felt like he was reliving the past.

Eric walked past his parents' house not far from the town center. He had checked the phone listings to see if they still lived there. It was the house he had grown up in. His heart ached for the family he no longer knew as he stood in the street in front of the house. He could see that his mum still kept the yard in exceptional condition. She had always taken great pride in her garden. The hedges were trimmed to symmetrical perfection, the front lawn a lush green despite the hot weather, and there wasn't a single weed in sight.

He longed to knock on the front door and tell them he was home. He fantasized about them throwing their arms around him, their eyes glistening with tears of joy. In this fantasy, they would tell him how much they'd missed him and how happy they were that their only son was finally home.

Eric snapped back to reality, knowing that would never happen. They had made themselves clear: he was dead to them. Nearly twenty years later, the words still stung.

He pushed his sunglasses farther up the brim of his nose and blinked back his tears. He took one last look at the house before turning around and heading back to his granny flat.

• • • •

ERIC CHECKED HIS EMAIL fanatically over the next few days. Six of the literary agents had replied to him with rejection letters, one had requested his full manuscript for review, and five had yet to respond. He clung to the hope that the agent to whom he'd sent his book would fall in love with his writing and offer him representation. It nearly killed him having to wait for her decision.

He was at the local grocery store one morning picking out a perfectly ripe avocado for that night's dinner when he caught a woman, a little older than himself, staring at him from across the produce table. She was not just staring but gawking at him with a look of horror, as if he were a zombie looking for a fresh human to devour in the middle of a supermarket.

She continued staring, the whites of her eyes growing bigger by the second. It dawned on him that she didn't think he was a zombie. She thought he was the man who'd killed her sister.

She hadn't aged well. The smooth face he remembered was now marked with deep lines. She'd also gained a good sixty pounds since the last time Eric saw her. But there was no mistaking who she was. He was standing less than a meter away from Maggie, Stella's older sister.

When Maggie's shock faded, a look of anger washed over her face. She dropped the tomato she was holding and pointed her finger toward his face.

"You! You killed my sister!"

He pulled down the brim of his straw hat as he watched her become even more enraged.

"How dare you come back here!"

She was screaming now. People around them stared. A mother put her arm around her small child and pulled him away from the scene.

"I'm afraid you must have me confused with someone else," Eric said.

Her dark brown eyes seemed to pierce through him, as though she could read his thoughts.

"Don't lie to me. I know exactly who you are. You killed Stella! You killed her!"

She was shaking with anger. Her finger remained pointed at his face.



Eric set down his avocado and put both of his hands in the air.

“It's all right. I'll just go.”

He left his cart and backed away.

“It will never be all right. Stella's dead!”

Now she was sobbing.

Eric turned around to face a store clerk who stared at him with a gaping mouth.

“It's okay,” he said to the young man.

Eric felt surprisingly unaffected by the encounter with Stella's sister as he walked back to his place in the morning sun. It was crazy to think he wouldn't run into one of her family members sooner or later; Nelson Bay was just too small. But he hadn't considered what would happen if he did.

She couldn't prove anything, so he knew he didn't have to worry. He supposed it was possible, however, that she would let his friends at Seattle Homicide know where he was. But he doubted those detectives would be able to do anything about it. He figured if they had enough evidence to extradite him, they would have found him already.



Stephenson awoke to darkness at the sound of his alarm. He moaned, seeing the time on his phone. Four thirty. He shut off his alarm, rubbed his eyes, and got out of bed. He walked to the kitchen and was glad to see that his coffee maker had already brewed a full pot of coffee.

It had been more than two weeks since the doctor had escaped to Australia. They were tracking the IP address of the doctor's laptop and could see he was staying in Nelson Bay, New South Wales. A few days after Dwayne's murder, Dr. Leroy's ninety-year-old neighbor had reported her Buick stolen. They'd found the car parked across the street from the cafe where Dwayne was killed with the doctor's fingerprints all over the steering wheel and driver's side door. His prints were also on a plastic spoon from a half-eaten bowl of chowder left on the passenger seat. They'd started the process for his extradition from Australia but were waiting for all the paperwork to go through.

Right now, they were only able to charge him with falsifying Patricia's medical records and the murder of Dwayne Morrison. But, it was enough to bring him back into the country. Stephenson was trying to find a way to prove he killed Martin, Patricia, and Robert. It drove Stephenson mad to think the doctor was lying on a sunny beach when he should be serving time for his crimes, but that would change soon enough. Although, he was beginning to worry they might never have enough to charge him with the three other murders.

It had been weeks since he'd gone for a run before work. His ankle was still sore from the plane incident, but he needed to clear his head. After downing a cup of coffee, Stephenson got dressed and wrapped his ankle to avoid further injury. He stopped in his entry way to put on his running shoes when he realized they weren't there. He opened his small coat closet, but they weren't in there either.

He thought of the last time he'd worn them and remembered where they were. He swore as he went back to his bedroom to get his phone. He sat on the side of his bed and hesitated before sending the text. *It would be easier to buy new shoes.* Except, he loved those shoes. *Screw Serena,* he thought. He wasn't going to let her stand between him and his favorite shoes.

He sent the text and was surprised when she responded immediately despite the early hour. *I'll be home tonight between 4:30 and 5. You can come over then.*

He typed a quick reply. *I'll probably still be working. Can I come over later?*

Her response came as quick as the first. *Sorry, I'll be showing homes for the rest of the night.*

He rubbed the back of his head while he thought of what to do. He doubted she would be showing homes for *the rest of the night* and was probably just being difficult because of what happened between them at the station. It meant he would have to leave work to go to her house during rush hour before turning around to go back to station. *Fine,* he typed. He tossed his phone onto his bed before getting into the shower.

• • • •

NOTICING THE TIME, Stephenson stood from his desk and threw on his coat.

Having hours of work still to do on their case, Adams looked inquisitively at him from across their desks.

"I'll be back. I just have something personal to take care of."

Adams waited for more details before responding. "Okay."

"I'll be back in just over an hour."

Stephenson rang the doorbell at Serena's home in Shoreline. With traffic, it had taken him forty-five minutes to get to her house.

The door swung open. Serena was dressed to the hilt in a form-fitting black dress and platform heels. She greeted him with a straight face.

"Come in," she said.

Stephenson shook his head. "That's okay. I have to get back to work. Would you mind getting my shoes? I thought I left them by the door anyway." He looked around at the bare floor of her entry way.

"I think they got moved," she said. "Sorry, I haven't had time to look for them. I just got home. I have to leave soon, so why don't you just come in?"

"Fine."

She held the door as he came inside.

"Would you mind taking off your coat? It's soaked from the rain, and I don't want you to drip all over my floors."

He pursed his lips. "I'm not going to drip on your floors. And I'm not staying. I just need my shoes."

A buzzer sounded from her kitchen.

"I need to check on dinner. Why don't you take a look upstairs? I think that's where I saw them last." She turned before scurrying down the hall in her tight dress and four-inch heels.

"You never cook."

"And seriously, can you take off your coat before you go up there?" she called from the kitchen.

"Sure," he muttered. He shook it off and hung it on the bottom of the banister before going upstairs.

He entered her bedroom and found his shoes on top of her perfectly made bed.

"What the—" He swiped them off her comforter and turned for the door. "Whatever."

He heard his phone ring from inside his jacket pocket when he stepped into the hall.

"Hello?" he heard Serena say.

*There's no way she would answer my phone.* He hurried to the top of the stairwell. His jaw dropped at the sight of her standing over his coat, holding his phone to her ear.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He flew down the steps.

"Yes, he's right here. Just a moment."

Stephenson ripped the phone from Serena's hand.

"This is Detective Stephenson."

"Umm, hi. It's Tess. I just wanted to run something by you about a case I'm working on, but you're obviously busy. I'll ask Adams."

He glared at Serena who gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence.

"No, I'm not busy. Go ahead." The phone was silent. "Are you still there?" More silence.

Stephenson checked his screen. *Call ended.*

He brought the phone to his side. His eyes narrowed at his ex-girlfriend.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me! And you don't have to yell."

"I'm not yelling."

She raised her eyebrows and gave him a look that said, *Yes, you are.* "I figured you wouldn't want to miss a call that could be important. Sorry for trying to help you."

He opened his mouth to respond when Shawn walked in through her front door. Shawn looked as shocked to see Stephenson as he did to see Shawn.

“So, that’s why you’re cooking,” he said to Serena.

“Blake, I know this looks bad. But you made it very clear that you didn’t want to get back together.”

“And you made it very clear that you’d stopped seeing Shawn.”

“I did.” She put her hand on his arm. “But after what you said at the homicide unit, I thought I’d give Shawn another chance.”

He pulled away and threw his coat over his arm. “You’re unbelievable.”

He moved to the doorway, coming face-to-face with Shawn. He looked dumbfounded by Stephenson’s presence. Stephenson got halfway out the door before he turned around. Serena remained still at the base of the stairs.

“I hope you ate before you came,” he said to Shawn.

“Why?”

“You’ll see.” He stepped outside into the heavy rain and walked to his car without looking back.



Adams was on the phone for nearly ten minutes after Stephenson got back to his desk. He looked across at his partner with excitement after he hung up.

“Who was that?” Stephenson asked.

“A literary agent in New York. Apparently, our friend Dr. Leroy has written a novel. He's titled it *Inspired By Murder*. He sent the manuscript to this agent, and when she Googled him, she saw his name had come up in connection with some recent murders in the news. She started reading his manuscript and says the murders in the novel are all strangulations and have striking similarities to the murders in the Seattle news articles. She's forwarding me the email from him with his full manuscript.”

“That's kind of bizarre. But I'll take whatever we can get. How come we haven't already seen that email?”

“We can't view his email activity live, and he only sent it a couple days ago. We'll be getting a report tomorrow for his email activity over the last forty-eight hours.”

“Forward it to me when you get it,” Stephenson said. Let's hope it's something we can use.”

• • • •

STEPHENSON STARTED reading from the beginning and Adams from the middle so they could get through the manuscript as quickly as possible. They remained at their desks as their cohorts from the morning shift all went home for the day and were replaced by the afternoon squad.

Stephenson looked across at his partner after he finished chapter eleven of the doctor's manuscript.

“I think he peed on the floor,” he said.

“What?” Adams' forehead creased between his eyebrows as he glanced up from his computer.

“At Martin and Patricia's. I think he peed on the floor. It's something he wrote in chapter eleven. CSI took a sample of Patricia's blood from the bathroom floor, right?”

“Yeah.”

Stephenson picked up his desk phone. “I'll call CSI and have them test it for Dr. Leroy's DNA. The bacteria in the urine has probably degraded the DNA by now, but if it's been refrigerated, we might still be able to get his DNA from it. It's worth a shot.”

A few minutes later, he hung up with the forensic technician who'd agreed to test Patricia's blood sample for the presence of the doctor's urine. Now all they could do was wait for the results.

He went back to reading the doctor's novel. He finished reading the first half at nearly the same time as Adams got to the end.

“That asshole put us in the book.”

“I know.” Adams grinned. “You think I look like Mark Wahlberg?”

“No.”

Stephenson watched his partner's grin fade. “Really? Because I could see how you'd be mistaken for Debbie Harry.”

Adams contained a laugh, seeing the unamused look on his partner's face.

“He was obviously recreating murder scenes from his own kills,” Stephenson said. “There were details about Martin, Patricia, and Robert's murders in the first half of the book that would've been

impossible for the doctor to know unless he killed them. It explains a lot, especially how he killed Martin and Patricia.”

“Yeah, it's the same in the second half. He's clearly recounting Dwayne's death. The killer buys a burner phone on his lunch break from a gas station close to his work. I'll work on getting the security footage from the gas stations near Dr. Leroy's practice the week before Dwayne's death. There's also a chapter where a man strangles his wife and dumps her body in the ocean out of his small fishing boat. I wonder if that's what he did to Stella.”

Stephenson sat back in his chair, growing more impatient every hour the doctor was still at large.

Later that afternoon, Stephenson and Adams began the slow process of going through the surveillance footage from the four gas stations closest to Dr. Leroy's office.

“Have you patched things up with Richards yet?”

Stephenson shook his head. “I couldn't convince her there was nothing going on between me and Serena. I guess it seemed hard to believe after what she saw in the break room. Anyway, she's made it clear she doesn't want anything more than a professional relationship with me.”

“Well, give her some time. I'm sure she'll eventually see you were telling the truth.”

He went back to work on his laptop and Stephenson tried to do the same but found he couldn't concentrate. And not because of the whole Serena-Tess situation. Something had been bothering him, and, after reading the doctor's novel, it was nagging at him even more.

“Do you still have all the traffic cam footage from around Discovery Park the night of Daisy's murder?” he asked Adams sitting across from him at his desk.

“Yeah, why?”

“We need to look through it again. I think we may have missed something.”





Stephenson and Adams had been knocking on doors for over an hour at Dwayne and Daisy's Lynnwood apartment building. They'd split up to make the most of their time. They had waited until five thirty to go to the apartment complex, hoping that most of residents would be home from work. So far, none of the neighbors recognized Dr. Leroy from his driver's license photo. The temperature had dropped after the sun went down, and Stephenson was starting to think this was a waste of time as he knocked on a second-story apartment door.

A skinny, thirtysomething guy wearing a dress shirt and slacks opened the door.

"Good evening," Stephenson said. "I'm Detective Stephenson from the Seattle Homicide Unit. I'm investigating the death of Daisy Colbert. She was a resident of this apartment building. I'd like to ask you some questions about what you remember about the night of January 19, and if you saw anything suspicious."

Like most of the other residents he'd talked to, the man looked surprised by the news and slightly uncomfortable at being questioned by the police.

"Okay, sure," he said.

Stephenson held up the picture of Dr. Leroy on the well-lit porch. "Have you ever seen this man?"

His eyes narrowed as he studied the picture. "Yeah," he said. "He was here a few weeks ago."

Stephenson raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I remember because it was snowing when I saw him on my way to my mailbox."

"And what time was this?"

The man rubbed the back of his head with his hand. "A little after ten I think. I'd just gotten my mail and was walking back to my apartment when he pulled up in a BMW. I noticed it was a nice car. Then, he hurried toward one of the ground floor apartments and bumped into me hard enough that I dropped my mail. He didn't even have the decency to say sorry."

"Do you remember what color his BMW was?"

He thought for moment. "Like a blueish-gray."

"And did you see what apartment he went in to?"

"I'm not sure if he went inside, but I watched him bang on the door until a blonde woman opened it. Then I came back to my apartment. I don't remember the unit number, but I can show you which one it was if you want."

"Yes, that'd be great."

Stephenson waited for the man to get his coat before they descended the stairs and walked across the apartment complex. Stephenson spotted Adams walking along the sidewalk. He motioned for his partner to join them.

The man stopped in front of Daisy's apartment and pointed to her front door. "That's the one."



It was a few days after seeing Maggie at the grocery store when Eric got an email from the literary agent who'd requested his full manuscript. He hovered his cursor over her name in his inbox, holding his breath until he got up the nerve to open her email. Being that she'd had his manuscript for less than a week, her email could only mean one of two things: either she hated it and stopped reading right away, or she loved it so much she couldn't put it down.

Eric clicked on the email and braced himself for the news he was about to receive as her response filled the screen.

*Dear Eric,*

*Thank you for sending me your full manuscript of Inspired By Murder. As a whole, I really enjoyed your story. I think with a few minor revisions I would be able to sell your novel to a major publishing house and would like to offer you representation as a literary agent. Please respond by signing the attached contract if you wish to accept this offer and we can get started on making the necessary revisions to get your novel ready to sell.*

*Sincerely,*

*Elizabeth Stone*

Eric stood from his chair and raised his arms above his head as if he'd just crossed the finish line after a marathon. It was the news he'd been waiting for. He was over the moon.

He unplugged his laptop and rushed outside. He crossed the lawn and knocked on his elderly landlords' back door. They were kind enough to let him use their printer and scanner so he could get his signed contract back to the agent as soon as possible.

Even though it was now evening in New York, his agent replied immediately saying she received his contract. She added that she was confident she could sell his book to a major publishing house within the next couple of months.

Finally, the world would receive his gift. He'd always known his creative genius was likened to the great Stephen King, but it still felt surreal.

To celebrate, that night he treated himself to a three-course dinner at the most expensive waterfront restaurant in Nelson Bay. He couldn't remember food ever tasting so good. He sat outside at the busy restaurant overlooking the bay. The surface of the water was perfectly still. He finished off a bottle of wine as he watched a paddle boarder glide across the calm sea. A pod of dolphins surfaced near the shore as the sun began to set. It was a night completely opposite to the one all those years ago when he'd taken Stella's body out to its final resting place.

He enjoyed the view until it grew dark. When he got up to leave, a pretty, dark-haired woman sitting alone at a table caught his eye. He guessed she was in her early-thirties. Although she wasn't exactly his type, he felt an instant attraction to her. Their eyes met as he walked by her table and he stopped next to the empty chair across from her.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." She gave him a pleasant smile. "Are you here on holidays?"

"No, I've just moved back here. I grew up in Nelson Bay but spent the last twenty years in America."

Her blue eyes grew wide with fascination. "I've always wanted to do something like that."

“Do you live here?”

She nodded. “I’m from Sydney, but my family used to holiday here when I was a kid. I took a job here about five years ago. It’s a beautiful place, but it can be a little too quiet. Especially in winter.”

“Do you mind?” He pointed to the chair across from her.

“No, go ahead.”

He pulled the chair back away the table and took a seat. “You miss the city?”

She looked into his eyes before shaking her head. “No, but I think I’m just bored with my mundane life. I’m ready for an adventure.” She smiled. “Maybe I should go live in America for twenty years.”

“It’s exciting to move to a new country, but after a while, you start to miss home.”

She played with the stem of her empty wine glass. “How long have you been back?”

“A couple weeks.”

“And did you move with your family?”

“No, it’s just me.”

From the twinkle in her eyes, it seemed that was the answer she was hoping for.

“I’m Talia, by the way.”

“I’m Eric.”

“So, what do you do for work?”

“I’m a psychiatrist.”

She laughed. “Oh, so are you psychoanalyzing me right now?”

He grinned. “No, I’m actually trying to get up the nerve to ask you back to my place for another drink.”

She turned serious. “Oh. I probably shouldn’t. I’ve just had two weeks off, but I have to be at work early tomorrow.”

“I live only a few blocks from here. How about just one drink?”

“I live just a few blocks away too.” She bit her lip before giving him a half smile. “Okay, let’s go.”

He put his arm on the small of her back and led her out of the bar. They made small talk on the short walk back to his place. They strolled slowly along the water, enjoying the calm evening air.

He flicked on the lights when they got to his granny flat. As usual, his place was meticulously clean. She looked around the small space before setting her purse down on his kitchen table.

“This is nice,” she said.

“Thanks. Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“Sure.”

“White or red?”

“White, thank you. Mind if I use your bathroom?” she asked as he pulled a glass out of his kitchen cabinet.

“Not at all. It’s there on the left.” He pointed to the far corner of the room.

She went into the bathroom as he poured her a large glass. He set it down next to her purse. Her wallet protruded out the top of her bag, and, out of curiosity, he picked it up. When he pulled it out, he inadvertently removed a square, black leather object that fell to the floor with a thud. His jaw dropped when he bent down, seeing that it was a Nelson Bay Police ID badge. Was she an undercover cop sent to spy on him? No wonder she’d been so eager to come back with him to his place.

Hearing the toilet flush, he stuffed her wallet and badge back into her purse before he rushed to his bedroom closet. He hurriedly pulled the shoelace out of his running shoe and slid it into his shorts’

pocket. He returned to the main living area the same time Nancy Drew emerged from the loo. With his most charming smile, he handed her the large glass of wine. He'd be a gentleman and let her finish it before he choked the living daylights out of her.



ERIC WALKED BACK FROM the beach the next morning and stopped in at his landlords' place to borrow *The Port Stephens Examiner*, as was his routine every Wednesday. The husband invited Eric in for a cup of tea and he obliged. Now that his manuscript was finished, he had all the time in the world. He led Eric to a small sitting room at the front of the house while his wife went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. His landlord sat in a worn-out armchair and motioned for Eric to take a seat on a two-seater lounge.

They had started to chat about the weather when they heard a loud rap against the front door. The old man excused himself before he got up to answer it. When he did, Eric immediately recognized Blondie's horrible American accent. He cocked his head to see him for his own eyes.

He was almost as shocked as if Stella had been standing on the doorstep. The detective was the last person on earth Eric wanted to see. His blond hair looked almost white in the Australian sunlight. A grim-faced U.S. Marshall stood behind him.

Blondie looked pleased with himself at the sight of Eric. That was not a good sign. *This can't be happening*, Eric thought. Not when he had just landed an agent and was on the brink of a publishing contract. He wanted to kill him.

Stephenson flashed his badge to Eric's landlord and ordered for him to step aside. He sauntered into the sitting room, the U.S. Marshall following behind along with a meaty Australian officer. He looked down at Eric with a look of smug gratification.

"You've come quite a long way just to tell me you finally figured out who killed Daisy," Eric said. "Let me guess, he's already dead."

"I did figure out who killed Daisy. But I'm afraid he's not dead. In fact, I'm looking at him right now."

Eric scoffed at his accusation. "You've got your facts wrong, and I hope the Seattle PD didn't pay you to fly halfway around the world based on that misinformation."

"It's not misinformation, and I actually paid for my flight myself. I wanted to see the look on your face when I arrest you for murder. Plus, I've always wanted to come to Australia. So, it was a win-win."

"Arrest me for murder?" There was no way Blondie had enough on him to arrest him. "And where's your partner?"

"He didn't think you were worth the airfare." Blondie shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say I blame him. I enjoyed your book by the way."

"My book?"

"Yes, *Inspired By Murder*. Not bad for a work of fiction. Problem is, it's not really fiction is it? You killed Stella, Patricia, Martin, Robert, and Dwayne and made them fictional characters in your book. You carried out their murders in the *exact* same way on paper as you had in real life. You killed Daisy too, but I'm not sure why you chose to leave her out of your novel."

"You haven't read my book."

"Oh, but I have. Elizabeth Stone sent it to me." He took off his sunglasses and folded them into his shirt pocket. "I'm afraid she didn't get a chance to read your full manuscript. After she saw your connection to the recent murders in the news that shared a striking resemblance to the killings in your

book, she got concerned and forwarded your manuscript to my partner. But, if it makes you feel better, we quite enjoyed it.

“Anyway, in addition to the evidence we'd already compiled, we used the details from your book to find your DNA at Martin and Patricia's crime scenes and security footage of you buying the burner phone you used to text Dwayne. We'd already found your fingerprints at his crime scene and your neighbor's stolen car parked across the street from the cafe with your prints inside. We also have footage of you driving to Discovery Park where you dumped Daisy's body. When we examined the trunk of your car more closely, we found fibers that matched the sweater Daisy wore when she died. We also found small amounts of acetone and mineral spirits on your gloves matching the paint thinner you used to wipe off Robert's drumsticks after you killed him. Altogether, it's practically a confession.”

His landlord's wife came into the sitting room holding two steaming mugs. She looked startled at the sight of the officers. Her wide eyes gawked between them and Eric. Stephenson ignored her presence and continued.

“We were tracking your IP address and confirmed your Australian address from the contact info you sent to Elizabeth. I also got a call from your sister-in-law saying she ran into you at her local grocery store.

Sorry that you actually don't have a literary agent. But, congratulations, you are under arrest for the murders of Martin and Patricia Watts, Daisy Colbert, Robert Benson, and Dwayne Morrison and are being extradited to the United States.”

When the wife bent over the side table to Eric's right to set down his tea, Eric took the opportunity for a way out. He stood and pulled her into a choke hold. She let out a weak cry. Stephenson drew his firearm and Eric made sure her body shielded his own from the officers. Her husband looked on in silent horror from the front doorway.

“Let her go!” Blondie ordered, his gun aimed at Eric's head.

Eric tucked his head behind hers and squeezed his arm tighter around her neck. He backed into the kitchen, dragging her resistant weight with him. The U.S. Marshall also drew his weapon and aimed it at Eric. Stephenson moved with them into the kitchen, followed by the U.S. Marshall.

Eric swiped a butcher knife from the knife block on the counter. The woman began to sob as he held it to her throat.

“Drop the knife, Eric! I don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to.” Blondie kept his gun fixed at Eric's head.

But he couldn't kill him. Not with the woman's head blocking Dr. Leroy's. There was no way he could get a clean shot. With the knife pressed to her throat, Eric retreated to the door behind him that led to the backyard.

“It's over—there's nowhere to go. Don't make me shoot you.”

The woman's sobs grew louder, and Eric could hardly hear himself think.

“Shut up!” he yelled into her ear.

Eric quickly considered his options. He didn't have many. He decided it wouldn't do him any good to kill her. Instead, he shoved her toward Blondie's aimed gun and ran out the door. He jumped over the back-porch steps, his feet landing hard on the lawn.

He looked beyond the yard to the undeveloped bush. That's where he would have to make his run for it. He sprinted across the lawn. He'd only made it halfway when he spotted the Australian officer out the corner of his eye. The officer came at him at full speed. Eric pushed to widen the distance between them.

He heard Blondie jump off the deck and make a what sounded like a rough landing onto the grass. He knew he wouldn't be far behind. Luckily, Eric was in good shape from all his recent exercise.

He reached the bush trail and forced himself to run faster. Eric knew he had the advantage now since the bush was familiar to him. He maneuvered easily through the dips and curves of the terrain. He could hear the heavy footsteps of the officers on his tail but managed to keep the distance between them until the trail came to an end.

Eric ran to the open field and couldn't believe his good luck. The scenic flight helicopter that was usually parked in the field during his morning runs was in mid-takeoff, only a foot off the ground. He dashed toward it at lightning speed.

Eric ran against the wind force created by its rotor blades. Knife in hand, he grasped the door handle before it lifted out of his reach and leapt onto the landing skid. He slid the door open before he threw himself into the empty seat next to the pilot. The pilot looked so startled when he turned to him, Eric was afraid he might lose control of the chopper. In his desperation for a safe escape, Eric thrust the knife against his throat like he'd done to his landlord.

The rhythmic pulsation from the spinning blades overhead muted the screams from the couple in the backseat.

Eric brought his face closer to the pilot's. "Go!" he yelled.

The pilot broke Eric's stare to look out the windshield as he lifted the lever in his left hand. Keeping the knife against his throat, Eric let out a sigh and leaned back in his seat as the pilot did what he was told.

Eric felt two hands clamp around his left ankle that dangled out the side of the helicopter. He grabbed the inside of the open doorframe to stable himself and carefully leaned his head over the side. They were nearly ten feet off the ground. Blondie hung in the air, all his weight suspended from Eric's lower leg. *What a showoff.*

Eric pressed his hand against the wall of the helicopter and fought to stay inside the aircraft while he shook his foot as violently as he could against Blondie's weight. One of the detective's hands fell away from Eric's leg. Blondie grabbed onto the landing skid before reaching back for his leg. Eric looked frantically for his seatbelt but couldn't risk taking the knife away from the pilot's throat or his hand away from the doorframe to buckle it.

The Australian officer stood in the field looking up at them. Blondie hollered something to him that Eric couldn't make out through the noise from the rotor blades.

His foot was numb from Blondie's tight grip around his ankle. Eric watched Stephenson shake his legs above the officer's head.

"We need more weight!" he heard Blondie yell.

Eric watched in horror as the hefty officer jumped and grabbed onto one of Stephenson's legs with both arms. Eric pulled his head inside the helicopter as it dipped to the side.

Eric spotted the pilot's elbow a second before it slammed into his temple. He lost his grip on the doorframe and fell toward the open door. He was searching for something to grab hold of when the pilot shoved his torso. Eric toppled out of the aircraft. His hand skimmed Blondie's pant leg on the way to the ground.

He landed flat on his back against the grass, air leaving his lungs upon impact. He had a déjà vu of landing at the bottom of Patricia's staircase next to Martin's still-warm corpse. Only instead of a chandelier crashing down on him, he was almost crushed by Blondie and his Australian sidekick. Fortunately, both landed a few feet away.



Despite the pain from the fall, Eric got to his feet as fast as he could. He dashed toward the motorway across from the field. He'd only made it a few steps when he was tackled from the side. They went down hard before skidding to a stop on the lawn.

Eric felt a knee dig into his back as he tried to get up. The officer wrenched Eric's hands behind him and placed them in handcuffs. Eric recognized Blondie's legs come to a stop in front of him on the lawn. Eric could see his smug look of satisfaction had returned when the Australian officer pulled him to his feet.

They were eye to eye and, for a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Let's go," Blondie finally said, grabbing him by the arm.

Eric felt like crying as he read him his Miranda rights. *No literary agent? How could that be?* It wasn't fair. He was destined to be a bestselling author. As Blondie led him through the bush trail, Eric decided he wasn't going to spend the rest of his life in an American prison. They might even give him the death penalty. Australia had done away with capital punishment a long time ago. Plus, this was his home. He'd wasted twenty years living in America, and there was no way he was going to let Blondie take him back now.

"I have to confess something," Eric said.

Stephenson stopped in the middle of the trail. "What?"

"I killed someone."

"You killed several someones. We can stop at the Nelson Bay Police Department if you want to tell me what happened."

"No. I killed a cop. Last night."



Stephenson moved in front of Eric and looked him in the eyes.

“What did you say?”

On their way to arrest Eric, the Nelson Bay detective had told Stephenson that one of his colleagues hadn't shown up for work that morning and they hadn't been able to get ahold of her.

“Her name was Talia,” Eric said without emotion.

The detective who'd come to help them arrest Eric grabbed Eric's shoulder from behind and swung him around.

“You're lying!”

Stephenson watched the detective's face turn red with anger.

“I buried her in the bush right over there.” He pointed to a clearing about ten feet from the trail.

The detective ran toward the clearing and used his hands to dig through the recently disturbed native grass. Stephenson left Eric with the U.S. Marshall and ran after the Australian detective. The U.S. Marshall grabbed Eric by the arm and pulled him toward the clearing.

“Stop! We need to wait for the forensic team. You might disturb the evidence if she's actually buried here,” Stephenson said.

“She might still be alive!” he yelled and continued to dig through the sandy ground with his hands.

Stephenson put his hand on the front of the large detective's shoulder. “She won't be alive if what Eric said is true. Don't risk contaminating her crime scene if he's telling the truth.”

“A little to the left,” Eric said when he and U.S. Marshall approached the site.

The detective shook Stephenson's hand away and, per Eric's instructions, clawed into the soil to the left of where he'd been digging. Stephenson felt a knot form in his stomach as he watched him dig an even deeper hole with his bare hands. An image of his late partner's dead body ran through his head. No matter how much he tried, it was something he could never erase. Even though Rodriguez had been gone over a year, the memory of finding her the morning after she'd been killed was fresh in his mind.

“Talia!”

The detective's shout brought Stephenson out of his thoughts. A pale, cyanotic hand lay exposed in the dirt at the bottom of the two-foot hole.

“I'll call it in,” the U.S. Marshall said, pulling out his phone as the detective worked frantically to unearth her body.

“I know this is hard, but I think we should wait for forensics,” Stephenson said, knowing she was beyond saving.

Ignoring Stephenson, the detective removed enough dirt to expose her face. Recognizing her dead face, he sank back on his heels and brought the back of his hand to his mouth.

“It's her,” he choked.

Stephenson looked down solemnly at the woman's face, enraged by her death and the memory of Rodriguez.

“You son of a bitch!” he heard the detective yell.

Stephenson turned to Eric, who wore a slight smirk as he overlooked the scene. The detective jumped to his feet and charged him. The U.S. Marshall quickly stepped in between them. Stephenson rushed toward the detective and gave him a shove in the opposite direction of Eric and the U.S.

Marshall who blocked him. Although Dr. Leroy would've deserved it, Stephenson and the U.S. Marshall struggled to block the infuriated detective from delivering any blows.

"I'm afraid this is going to halt his extradition to America," the U.S. Marshall said to Stephenson once the Australian detective had calmed down. "The Australian government won't release him until after he goes to trial. If he's convicted, we won't be able to extradite until he's completed his sentence here in Australia."

"New South Wales has a mandatory life sentence without parole for killing a cop," the Australian detective added.

"But no death penalty." Eric flashed a disgusting smile at Stephenson.

Stephenson knew he wouldn't have faced it anyway. The Australian government had requested the death penalty not be used in Eric's sentencing upon extradition, and Washington State had agreed to those terms. But he was too repulsed to offer any rebuttal to the sadistic doctor.

The four of them remained in the clearing by Talia's dead body and waited in silence for the forensic team to arrive.



An hour later, Stephenson and the U.S. Marshall led Eric to the front of the house where their borrowed squad car waited to take Eric to the Nelson Bay Police Station. The Australian detective had stayed behind to continue processing the scene with the forensic team. A handful of journalists stood by their vehicle when they approached. Their cameras flashed as they captured Eric being led to the car in handcuffs. When they got closer, the reporters all shouted questions at once.

“Is it true you killed your wife in Nelson Bay twenty years ago?”

“How many people have you murdered?”

“What do you want to say to Stella Flemming's family?”

“Does your family know you're here?”

“That's enough,” Blondie said. “Give us some space.”

He pushed him into the car and buckled his seatbelt. The press continued to spout questions and take pictures from outside. Eric sank back into his seat. He couldn't believe he'd been duped by some idiot cop into thinking that he had gotten an agent. It was an even bigger blow than getting arrested.

Eric took one last look at his hometown through the backseat window as they drove through Nelson Bay's town center. They passed a bookstore that displayed a bestselling hardcover in its front window and his heart ached. That should've been his book.

Then it dawned on him. He was an international fugitive. A media sensation. He felt a smile surface when the car pulled out onto the gumtree-lined motor way, knowing the headlines of his arrest would ensure his book a number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list.



ERIC REMAINED LOST in thought for the rest of the short drive. Later that afternoon, he sat alone in an interview room at the Nelson Bay Police Department. He couldn't believe they were arresting him for Daisy's murder on top of all the others. He knew Blondie and Marky Mark weren't exactly Seattle homicide's best and brightest. At least not Marky Mark. But even a child could've figured out that Dwayne killed Daisy. Eric shuddered at the thought of beautiful Daisy ever being with such a lowlife.

Maybe he should've handed her phone over to them instead of destroying it. He didn't think he was in jeopardy of being arrested for a murder he had nothing to do with. He'd do the time for the murders he was guilty of, but he refused to go down for something he didn't do.

If only he had gone to her address that night after she left his practice for the last time. Maybe he could've rescued her from that pathetic loser. He suddenly had a strange recollection that he'd tried. On his way home from killing Patricia. She was alone, Dwayne wasn't even there. But she refused to come with him. She actually chose Dwayne over him.

She told him she'd only stayed the night at his apartment because she didn't want to go home to Dwayne. It had nothing to do with Eric. She told him she was leaving Dwayne, but that didn't mean she'd be desperate enough to jump into another relationship with someone his age. *His age*. That's when he lost it.

An image of his secretary's final moments came to his mind. She'd looked so peaceful when he finally pulled his hands away from her delicate neck. So peaceful, it had almost made him feel as though she were still alive.



Stephenson pulled a beer out of the fridge, wishing he had someone to celebrate with. It was Friday night, and he'd only been back from Australia for twenty-four hours. Adams was out of town for the weekend. He had tried explaining to Tess again before he left for Australia that there was nothing going on between him and Serena, but she was adamant she wanted to be nothing more than coworkers.

Dr. Leroy had given his full confession to the Nelson Bay Police for the murder of Talia Palamo. The doctor was being held at Cessnock Correctional Centre, a large maximum-security prison an hour inland of Nelson Bay, while he waited to go to trial for her murder. He would probably never be tried for the murders of Stella, Martin, Patricia, Robert, Daisy, and Dwayne, but at least their families would have the reassurance he was no longer living as a free man. Although, Stephenson felt he'd let them down by not bringing the doctor back to be convicted for the killings of their loved ones.

The only good thing about the trip was that the pursuit had served as a distraction from the emptiness he felt from losing Richards so soon after falling for her. Even though he'd only known her a short while, he felt they had an instant connection, as if he'd known her a lot longer. Now that it was over, she kept finding a way back into his thoughts.

He took a swig of his beer as he walked into his living room. He was about to turn on the TV, for lack of anything better to do, when he heard a soft knock at his door. He opened it to find Tess standing on his front porch in the pouring rain.

"Mind if I come in?" she asked.

He opened the door wider. "Of course not."

She stepped inside and pulled down the fur-lined hood of her down jacket, exposing her long, blonde hair. There was an awkward silence between them. Stephenson wondered if he should invite her into the living room to sit down. She spoke before he could ask.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry I didn't believe you when you told me there was nothing going on between you and Serena."

"What made you change your mind that I was telling the truth?"

"Adams. While you were in Australia, he told me the whole story. How you caught her cheating on you and then what happened that day she came to see you at the precinct. He also said you want nothing to do with her and are head over heels for me. Is that true?"

Adams never ceased to surprise him. Despite their differences at times, his partner always had his back. "Yes, it's true."

A slight smile surfaced on her lips, and he moved toward her.

"Why don't we start over? Maybe I take you to dinner over the weekend?"

"That sounds nice. How about after you watch the Super Bowl with me?"

"You have tickets?" he asked, taking a small step back.

She let out a laugh. "Sorry, no. My brother is having a Super Bowl party, even though they didn't make it. A bunch of his teammates will be there. Want to come?"

"Love to."

He moved toward her and placed a hand gently on either side of her face. He felt her hand on the lower part of his back, pulling him closer. Their lips met, and he didn't think about Dr. Leroy again for the rest of the night.

The End



## WANT MORE?

Detectives Blake Stephenson and Tess Richards return in the next Emerald City Thriller. It was the perfect summer job—until it turned into her worst nightmare.

[Click Here To Get The Summer Nanny](#)



AUDREY J. COLE IS A registered nurse and a USA Today bestselling author of thrillers set in Seattle. Audrey lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two children.

Get your FREE bonus content and deleted scenes, including an ALTERNATE ENDING to INSPIRED BY MURDER at [AUDREYJCOLE.COM/sign-up](http://AUDREYJCOLE.COM/sign-up).

**Fractured** is a limited time set. We hope you enjoyed this collection of Thirteen Medical and Psychological Thrillers.

If you haven't read all the stories, [go back to the beginning](#) and pick up another story.



# THANK YOU FOR READING OUR BOOKS!

---

**J**UDITH LUCCI, FIONA QUINN, NICK THACKER, BRETT BATTLES, JENIFER RUFF,  
DAN ALATORRE, SUZANNE JENKINS, TAMARA FERGUSON, CHRIS PATCHELL,  
A.J. SCUDIERE, EDWIN DASSO, ROBERT I. KATZ, and AUDREY J. COLE.

• • • •

**Would you recommend this boxset to a friend?**